



Literatures of the Contact Zone

Hans Keilson, Nico Rost, Albert Vigoleis Thelen, and the Literary Spaces of the Late 1940s and Early 1950s

Carl Niekerk, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Abstract: 1959, the year in which Böll, Grass, and Johnson all published major novels, is often associated with the breakthrough of a new generation of German authors and a new canon in German literature. But such a view of postwar German literary history ignores the work of many other authors who were active before 1959 and produced innovative and critically acclaimed texts that still deserve our attention today. The following essay offers readings of texts by three authors (Nico Rost, Albert Vigoleis Thelen, and Hans Keilson) who were part of both German and Dutch literary and cultural discourse and whose works were successful at the time, but whose texts are also indicative of a different profile German literature could have developed—not towards a national literary canon, but rather in the direction of openness towards other linguistic and cultural communities. These authors envisioned a literature ‘outside the nation.’ The essay focuses in particular on the spaces that function as settings for the texts discussed, and argues that these spaces are contact zones, where people with different linguistic, national, and cultural backgrounds meet, sometimes clash, but also may engage in a dialogue with each other.

Keywords: Hans Keilson – Nico Rost – Albert Vigoleis Thelen – post-war German literature / naorlogse Duitse literatuur – heterogeneity / heterogeniteit

In conventional terms, the history of German literature in the late 1940s and the 1950s has two clear temporal markers. In 1949 Theodor W. Adorno gave a speech in which he famously declared that poetry, representative for literature more broadly, would no longer be able to play any meaningful role after the Holocaust. His statement ‘Nach Auschwitz ein Gedicht zu schreiben, ist barbarisch’¹ would shape the literary efforts of many German authors, directly or indirectly, during the 1950s. By the end of the decade, however, a new generation of German-language authors had broken through, a phenomenon often associated with the year 1959. That year saw the publication of Günter Grass’s *Die Blechtrommel*, Uwe Johnson’s *Mutmassungen über Jakob*, and Heinrich Böll’s *Billard um halb zehn*. German literature had regained its voice and Adorno’s dark musings seemed part of a distant past. The importance of Adorno’s speech had been that it articulated something which many critical Germans after 1945 were thinking: How would German literature and culture be able to survive the linguistic onslaught of the Third Reich and its instrumental use of the German literary tradition for its highly intolerant ideological agenda? Adorno’s answer was bleak, but it also contained a number of rather questionable suppositions. It was a highly prescriptive statement: not only did it refer to the expectation that it was up to literature, and therefore high culture, as Adorno understood it, to work through Germany’s recent past, but more specifically that it was in the domain of *German-language* culture that the battle of the legacies of Auschwitz would (have to) take place. Adorno’s statement led to a strong controversy, which in turn led Adorno to revisit and add nuances to his statement (without ever fully withdrawing or rescinding it). By 1959, however, German literature appeared to have found the language to engage with the Third Reich, not only in novels by Böll, Grass, and Johnson, but also in the poetry of Bachmann and Celan.

But was German literature of the immediate post-war era indeed so focused on its own national tradition alone? In his history of post-war Europe, Tony Judt has pointed to the dominant position of French authors and intellectuals during these immediate post-war years: ‘French culture became once again the centre of international attention: French intellectuals acquired a special international significance as spokesmen for the age [...]. Once more—and for the last time—Paris was the capital of Europe’.² It is difficult to overestimate the impact of author-intellectuals such as Albert Camus, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Simone de Beauvoir on German literature of the immediate post-war period. They, in turn, were strongly influenced by German thinkers such as Nietzsche, Husserl, and Heidegger. And yet the picture sketched here is not complete. One could easily make the mistake of assuming that, once again, European culture was dominated by a French-German axis—the battles and temporary alliances of two cultural titans, soon, together with Italy, to be the core of a new economic alliance (the *European Coal and Steel Community*)—that, supposedly, was in a position of shaping European culture as a whole.³ Of

¹ Theodor W. Adorno, ‘Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft’, p. 30, in: *Prismen. Gesammelte Schriften*, Bd. 10.1 (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1997), pp. 11–30. The essay was written in 1949, but not published until 1951.

² Tony Judt, *Postwar: A History of Europe since 1945* (New York: Penguin, 2005), p. 210. Scholarship on German literature between 1945 and 1960 until now has paid little attention to the impact of these authors. The ‘[o]nce more’ in Judt’s observation refers to the fact that Paris had long functioned as a center of world letters; see Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, translated by M.B. DeBevoise (Cambridge, MA / London, UK: Harvard UP, 2004), pp. 23–34.

³ It is noteworthy in this context that in the years after 1945 a lively intellectual debate about Europe took place (with Ernst Jünger, Hans Werner Richter, Frank Thieß, Werner Bergengruen, and Klaus Mann as prominent participants).

course, such an image does not do justice to the many other cultural and intellectual centres that were active in the immediate post-war period and need to be taken into account as well. In order to do justice to German literature of the period immediately after 1945 we need to work with models of cultural borrowing, intellectual appropriation, and transculturation which acknowledge the impact of such authors on German culture.

It is my aim in this paper to show that something more complex is going on. I wish to argue that the period around 1950 shows the emergence of a form of writing that deliberately positions itself—to borrow a phrase from Azade Seyhan—‘outside the nation’, or, to be more precise, sees itself as part of a border or contact zone characterized by mobility, confrontation, translation, and negotiation.⁴ One consequence of the collapse of the Third Reich is a tendency to (at least temporarily) question the usefulness of a language- and nation-centred notion of culture. In a variety of ways, authors who had resisted the Third Reich had been confronted with widely varying modes of writing and thinking, something that led some of them to rethink their own national and cultural backgrounds. After 1945, a group of authors (at least momentarily) gains visibility who conceive of their texts not primarily as contributions to a national tradition, but rather as situated in-between national traditions.⁵

Adorno was motivated by a desire to save German culture without needing to question his own concept of culture (which remained elitist, linear, and more focused on form than content). The authors who interest me in this paper take a different route. Hans Keilson (1909–2011), Albert Vigoleis Thelen (1903–1989), and Nico Rost (1896–1967) each spent time in the Netherlands, but, in their own way, sought to contribute to German culture as well and, in doing so, also attempted to redefine it. German culture is their primary frame of reference; Keilson and Thelen deliberately chose to write in German (even though writing in Dutch would have been an

These pro-European voices have in common that they emphasized Europe’s unity, not its diversity (see Paul Michael Lützeler, *Die Schriftsteller und Europa. Von der Romantik bis zur Gegenwart* [Munich: Piper, 1992], pp. 402–421).

⁴ See Azade Seyhan, *Writing Outside the Nation* (Princeton/Oxford: Princeton UP, 2001), for instance p. 115. In an earlier paper on Keilson, Rost, and Thelen I take Seyhan’s terminology as the starting point for an analysis of the ways in which these authors position themselves in relation to German culture (‘Schreiben außerhalb der Nation und der niederländisch-deutsche Kontext: Hans Keilson, Nico Rost und Albert Vigoleis Thelen’, forthcoming in *Im Abseits der Gruppe 47: Albert Vigoleis Thelen und andere 'Unzeitgemäße' im Literaturbetrieb der 1950er und 60er Jahre*, ed. by Heinz Eickmans, Jürgen Pütz, and Werner Jung, Düsseldorf: Universitätsverlag Rhein-Ruhr). In my current paper, I am interested in offering systematic readings of specific texts by these authors, showing that these texts can be read as attempts to negotiate between different perspectives and expectations.

⁵ For a theoretical legitimation of an approach that is interested in situating writing in between nations and cultures, see Seyhan, *Writing outside the Nation*, for instance pp. 5, 8–9, 15, 19. The (indeed somewhat fashionable) rhetoric of ‘in-betweenness’ has been criticized, intelligently, from the perspective of translation studies; see Maria Tymoczko, ‘Ideology and the Position of the Translator: In what Sense is the Translator “in between”?’ in *Apropos of Ideology: Translation Studies on Ideology – Ideologies in Translation Studies*, ed. by Maria Calzada Pérez (Manchester, UK: St. Jerome Publishing, 2003), pp. 181–202. Tymoczko’s argument that there is no space ‘in between’ in translation is predicated on the assumption that languages are systems (an idea introduced by her on page 195 and quite decisive for her argument). But of course, many aspects of language use and development are not systematic (one could think, for instance, of the ways in which the vocabularies of different languages impact each other). Tymoczko’s view that anthropology and ethnography have adopted a systematic view of cultures (pp. 195–196) is reductive and in need of clarification as well. Because Tymoczko looks at language and cultural communities as closed entities (systems), any ‘in between’ in her view needs to be outside of these entities; but borders between linguistic and cultural communities are often fluid and in fact often hard to demarcate (see Seyhan, p. 15) and therefore open to each other, which does create the possibility of a space ‘in between’.

option too), and Nico Rost had lived in Germany before the war (1923–1933) and moved to (East) Germany in the immediate post-war period. In spite of their different national backgrounds—Rost was a Dutch citizen; Thelen and Keilson were born in Germany—and although they don't appear to have interacted with each other, they did participate in a common discourse. Each of these authors in his own writings reimagines what German culture is and how it functions; their familiarity with Dutch language and culture not only shaped their view of German culture, but also functioned as a conduit to other cultural traditions. As such, they are figures of the contact zone. The focus of their books concerns multiple national and cultural contexts; German culture is shown in interaction with other cultural traditions. They thought about their readership as German, but certainly not just German. Keilson, Thelen, and Rost each were successful in their own way; they wrote books that may not have been bestsellers, but did attract substantial attention at the time of their publication, and even though they never became part of the literary canon, their books are reprinted every now and then. One could argue that these authors and their works stand for a different trajectory German culture could have taken. While 1959 for many may stand for a reestablishment of the German literary tradition, it could also be read as a moment of loss and closure.

In the following I will offer a series of three case studies on texts published around 1950 (Hans Keilson's *Komödie in Moll*, Albert Vigoleis Thelen's *Die Insel des zweiten Gesichts*, and Nico Rost's *Goethe in Dachau*) by authors with connections to both German- and Dutch-language culture. I am not interested in showing how they (intend to) contribute to a specific canon or literary tradition. My intention is rather to show how these texts focus on the negotiation and, to some extent also, mediation of diverging perspectives—perspectives informed by their authors' national backgrounds and cultural preferences, but also by their individual life stories. In the following readings, my point of departure are the spaces used as settings by the texts I discuss. Precisely in their thematization of space these texts tell us something about their cultural agenda. Through an analytical focus on space we learn about how these texts want to communicate with their audiences. Space functions as a form of 'contact zone'—a place where different languages, cultures, and life stories meet.

Hans Keilson's *Komödie in Moll* [*Comedy in a Minor Key*] (1947) is set during the German occupation of the Netherlands and tells the story of a Jewish man, Nico, who dies while in hiding with a well-meaning, but in some respects also naïve couple, Wim and Marie. Most of *Komödie in Moll* takes place in a very small space that is described in great detail: Wim and Marie's house in the suburbs of a Dutch city.⁶ But precisely because the space is so limited, intersubjective contact becomes unavoidable. Through its focus on everyday events in this space, the novel offers a counter point to far more heroic stories of Dutch resistance against the Nazis that would dominate the public imagination of the Dutch after the war (even though there are other literary texts of the immediate post-war period that question the Dutch self-image of a nation that

⁶ For a previous spatial analysis of Hans Keilson's work (in particular his autobiography *Da steht mein Haus*), see Marie-Christin Bugelnig, "Schreiben, das ist für mich eine andere Möglichkeit spazieren zu gehen, in der Welt": Topografien der Erinnerung. Zu Hans Keilsons Erinnerungsbuch *Da steht mein Haus*, in: *Die vergangene Zeit bleibt die erlittene Zeit. Untersuchungen zum Werk von Hans Keilson*, ed. by Simone Schröder, Ulrike Weymann, and Andreas Martin Widmann (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2013), pp. 239–253.

heroically resisted the Germans⁷). *Komödie in Moll* refuses a happy ending: not only does the Jewish protagonist die; the man and woman who were hiding him have to go themselves into hiding as well, temporarily. They unintentionally left a label with a specific number—the so-called ‘Wäschenummer’ (1, 320),⁸ meant to help the Laundromat they are using identify them as the clothes’ owners—in the clothes in which the mortal remains of the Jewish man are dressed and left in a park (they cannot think of another way of getting rid of the body). In the end their concerns turn out to be unfounded: a friendly police man has removed the label before it could be noticed by others (1, 334).⁹

The text situates itself between national and cultural horizons: it begins and ends with reminiscences by the protagonists about the bombers—the ‘Nachtbomber’ (1, 251)—flying over the Netherlands to bomb targets in Germany (I, 251, 255–56, 355). The sound fills Wim and Marie with ‘Angst und Trauer’ (1, 251), highly ambivalent emotions that point to concern but also empathy in the form of an ability to feel and reflect on what these bombers are going to do on the other side of the border.

Empathy, as a concept, can help us understand other scenes of the short novel as well. *Komödie in Moll* documents the erasure of Jewish life in a physical sense, a Jewish man dies under difficult circumstances, but also in a cultural sense: In spite of their good intentions and self-effacing attitude, Wim and Marie have little awareness of their guest’s background, as they themselves admit. In fact, they are inclined to stay away from cultural (or racial) stereotypes altogether; they are not in the habit ‘über *die* Juden zu sprechen’ (1, 318; italics in the original).¹⁰ An entire chapter is dedicated to the ‘Geheimnis’ the person they are hiding and the life he leads represent to them (1, 305–311). In it Marie reflects about race and cultural difference as a form of ‘Geheimnis’:

War es seine Rasse, die Geschichte seines Volkes? Ja, auch das, wer wollte es leugnen, aber nur zum Teil. Denn dieses konnten sie irgendwie verstehen, sie konnten sich einfühlen und es so mit ihm teilen. Das andere, das Fremde, das, was wir nicht selbst sind, ist unserem Begriff eher zugänglich. Aber das Entscheidende blieb ungeklärt. Der Funke in ihm, die Absplitterung des großen Feuers, das in der Welt brannte und Leben

⁷ See for instance Simon Vestdijk, *Pastorale 1943* (first published 1948) or Willem Frederik Hermans’s *De donkere kamer van Damokles* (1958), both known for their rather critical portrayal of the Dutch resistance.

⁸ In the following, all parenthetical references refer to the following edition: Hans Keilson, *Werke*. 2 vols, ed. by Heinrich Detering and Gerhard Kurz (Frankfurt a.M.: S. Fischer, 2005). The first number indicates the volume number; the second number the page number.

⁹ Hans Keilson’s *Tagebuch 1944* (Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer, [2014]) documents Keilson’s writing of *Komödie in Moll* (55ff.). The text is based on a real event that took place briefly before Keilson started writing: someone in hiding died because of malnourishment; two members of the resistance disposed of the body in an area close to a park (*ibid.*, 156). When the short novel was published in 1947 by Querido in German, and soon thereafter in a Dutch translation, public interest in the Netherlands was very limited (Els Andringa, *Deutsche Exilliteratur im niederländisch-deutschen Beziehungsgeflecht. Eine Geschichte der Kommunikation und Rezeption 1933–2013* [Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014], p. 296).

¹⁰ This resistance against generalizations is constitutive for Keilson’s thinking, and also applies to Germans: ‘Ich gehöre nicht zu denen, die sagen: Deutsche sind schlechter als andere Menschen. Das werden Sie von mir nicht hören – auch wenn die Nazis Dinge vollbracht haben, die einzigartig sind in ihrer Schlechtigkeit ‘(‘Unschuld? Nebbich! Hans Keilson im Gespräch mit Jörn Jakob Rohwer’, in *Neue Rundschau, Special Issue Hans Keilson* [100], 120.4 [2009], pp. 9–40, here p. 13).

genannt wurde, geheimnisvoll, einsam, in jedem Menschen neu Gestalt gewinnend und sich offenbarend nur in Bruchteilen einer Sekunde, in den erhellten Augenblicken die Brandmauern der Körper durchbrechend, und dann ein Leuchten, ein Zeichen der Verbindung, der Gemeinschaft, aber auch darin einsam und voller Geheimnis unzerstörbar. (1, 310)

What is interesting about this (almost mystical) passage is that the cultural element is seen as only a minor obstacle in understanding another person—something that can easily be overcome. The passage relatively quickly moves from a reflection about cultural alterity to deliberations about human difference as an existential condition—what is decisive about another person (‘das Entscheidende’) will always remain unclear. But all humans are both part of a community (‘Gemeinschaft’) and lonely (‘einsam’) in their individuality. The passage alludes to empathy as a duty—a form of empathy that is based on a sense of commonality, but that is also respectful of individuality and the fundamental inability to really know any person.

Eventually Marie does ask Nico directly about his Jewishness; she wants to know how important it is to him, and why, since he is not practicing, he has not converted to the protestant church (1, 318–319). Nico points out that even if he had converted, it would no longer matter, the implication being that the Nazis persecute Jews for racial reasons and not because of their religious affiliation; his main reason not to convert is that this would have disappointed his father (1, 319). When Marie reports on this conversation to Wim, the latter responds by saying that he can understand that. Empathy here is the result of a dialogue—it is the product of Marie speaking with, rather than about, Nico. This communicative act then results in empathy.

In their very first conversation, just after Nico has moved into the house, when Wim remarks that in Nico’s interest he hopes the war will be over soon, the latter counters this by saying that there are many in his position and that they are not just Jews (‘Und das sind nicht nur Juden’) (1, 269). Marie remembers this comment later, after Nico’s death, and is aware that she liked to hear him say that, making the case for a ‘Bruderschaft aller Leidtragenden’ (1, 317). But she is also aware that the statement was meant as a friendly gesture from his side and did not contain ‘the full truth’ (‘die volle Wahrheit’) (1, 317). Empathy among those who are suffering emerges here as a model of intersubjective solidarity, but it is also clear that such a model has its limits. Wim and Marie themselves experience what it means to have to live in hiding after they discover that they left the Laundromat label in Nico’s clothes and need to leave their house themselves. The text emphasizes that this brings them closer to their former guest: ‘Die Rollen waren verändert. Der Abstand zwischen ihnen war geringer geworden. Jetzt hätte er sie bevatern können. Und sie begriffen ihn besser’ (1, 331). Their experience has made the distance between them and Nico smaller, without however abolishing it. One can argue that this scene illustrates what the text as a whole wants to accomplish for its readers: to make the reader aware of what it meant to live as a Jew in hiding in an occupied country, but without suggesting that this form of empathy with the other comes easily or even that the distance with someone in a position like Nico can be bridged.

Like Keilson’s *Komödie in Moll*, Albert Vigoleis Thelen’s first major prose text, the novel *Die Insel des zweiten Gesichts* [*The Island of Second Sight*] (1953) too focuses predominantly on scenes from everyday life. *Die Insel des zweiten Gesichts* is a fictional, and in many respects highly satirical, semi-autobiographical report of the author’s and his partner (and later wife) Beatrice’s stay on the Spanish island Mallorca between 1931 and 1936 when Franco’s takeover

made a further stay impossible; it is a ‘Zeitroman’, but can also be read in the tradition of the ‘Schelmenromane’.¹¹ Thelen’s novel, in ways similar to Keilson’s *Komödie*, also de-glamorizes the existence of those fleeing and hiding from the Nazis. Descriptions of space are important in *Die Insel* as well, although in this case space is conceptualized more broadly and encompasses all of the island of Mallorca. Mallorca functions as a hybrid space whose inhabitants include a mostly poor local population; representatives of the Spanish nobility; well-off foreign tourists including more or less permanent residents, among them the Irish author Robert Graves (Robert von Ranke Graves, 1895–1985) and Count Harry Kessler (1868–1937), who both make use of Thelen for secretarial work; a few official representatives of the German government and German spies, and a wide variety of exiles and refugees, of whom it is not always clear why they are fleeing Nazi-Germany or what their relationship to the new German regime is. The spaces Vigoleis and Beatrice inhabit on Mallorca include a variety of apartments (the first one belonging to Beatrice’s brother), a hotel, and a rat-infested castle, the Torre del Eloi [Turm der Uhr] that doubles as a brothel, bandits’ lair, opium smuggling den, and shelter for the homeless and those down on their luck.

In *Die Insel des zweiten Gesichts* too, the material conditions of those living away from home are important topics: the lack of money (‘Immer das verfluchte Geld!’; 331¹²), the difficulties of procuring food, and the often primitive living conditions. In particular, the protagonists’ dire housing leads the narrator Vigoleis, shortly after their arrival at the Torre del Eloi, to reflect on conventional and less conventional modes of fictionality: ‘Wie leicht wäre es für mich, dem Gang der Ereignisse ein wenig nachzuhelfen ins schönere Schicksal hinauf. Statt nun in Beatricens unfallverhütender Umarmung auf einer schäbigen Lastermatratze zu liegen, könnte ich mich schlafen lassen in einem der Paläste auf Mallorca, deren Tore Beatricens Musik und des Vigoleis dann nicht zweifelhafte Literatur hätten überwältigen sollen’ (209). The experience of living away from one’s home country in the case of Thelen leads to a more or less continuous reflection on the literary strategies needed to represent a mobile life, and the realization that traditional narrative means may not suffice. The passage I just quoted indicates a clear willingness of the narrator to step outside of literary convention in order to come to terms with the realities of life in exile, while simultaneously taking into account that potential audiences for his narrative may not appreciate this. For the narrator, the questioning of the value of his own story telling and writing vis-à-vis existing literary codes is constitutive for his poetic practice. In order to be valuable, his writing needs to engage with real-life issues. From the reader the narrator expects that s/he will overcome fear, moral scruples [‘sittliche Hemmungen’], and a fear of microbes [‘Mikrobenangst’]; s/he is invited to spend time with Vigoleis and Beatrice under the same roof (210). Ideally, narrator and reader inhabit the same space; what the narrator demands from his readers in return is empathy for what he and Beatrice themselves have to go through. Repeatedly the reader is admonished to carefully consider whether s/he wants to continue reading or would rather read another book (e.g., 152, 210, 371).

¹¹ See Gabriele von Arnim, ‘Unter Schindkracken und Stechschrittwalküren. Ein Überlebender: Albert Vigoleis Thelen und sein genialer Zeitroman *Die Insel des zweiten Gesichts*’, in *Albert Vigoleis Thelen. Erzwelt schmerzler und Sprachschwelger. Eine Bildbiographie*. Ed. by Jürgen Pütz (Bremerhaven: edition die horen, 2003), pp.47–56, in particular p.47.

¹² In the following all parenthetical references refer to this edition: Albert Vigoleis Thelen, *Die Insel des zweiten Gesichts. Aus den angewandten Erinnerungen des Vigoleis* (Berlin: List, 2014).

One of the leading principles that structure the narrative of *Die Insel des zweiten Gesichts* is the idea that traveling leads to the creation of an alternate identity in the form of a *doppelgänger*. S/he who travels ends up playing roles. In particular, the island Mallorca lends itself for this phenomenon, but the roots of it Thelen's narrator identifies in Amsterdam, with the help of an anecdote about an event that took place just before his and Beatrice's trip to Mallorca. On a Saturday afternoon, Vigoleis, living in an upstairs apartment in Amsterdam's Nicolaas Beetsstraat from the top of the stairs opens the door for a female friend of his landlady (who is absent). The friend thinks she recognizes her former fiancé, a naval officer, who had broken off contact and, she assumes erroneously, now is living with her friend; she slams the door shut, flees, and, it turns out later, out of desperation because of her discovery commits suicide (24–28; see also 11). Our identity, the anecdote makes clear, is always something that is also constructed by others, and may be constructed by others rather differently from the way we perceive ourselves. Thelen's narrator is fascinated by this phenomenon, and, in spite of the rather dark ending of this anecdote, is intrigued by the idea of being perceived as a Dutch naval officer (28). The incident sets into motion a series of attempts to reinvent his own identity often as a response to the dilemmas he faces as a traveller.

But this principle of developing multiple identities does not remain limited to the narrator. *Die Insel des zweiten Gesichts* contains many examples of characters who develop an alternate side of their personality in the form of a role they play, often provoked to do so by specific circumstances, and the narrator Vigoleis is thankful for his figures' ability 'sich mir im Doppelbewußtsein ihrer Persönlichkeit zur Verfügung [zu] stellen' (211).¹³ The specific person he has in mind in this passage, to illustrate his point, is a woman he calls 'Kathrinchen'. She is the wife of an industrialist from Essen; while her husband is recovering from a nervous breakdown on Mallorca, she leads a second life as a prostitute in the Torre del Eloi and later in the novel it will turn out that she is also spying for the Nazis (211, 314–315, 750–751). By that time, she is working as a nude dancer under her artist's name Eva, her 'second face' ('ihr zweites Gesicht'; 750). She easily moves from one role to another, something that remains seemingly unnoticed by her contemporaries (with the noticeable exception of the narrator and Beatrice).

¹³ Jürgen Pütz interprets Thelen's theory of the 'zweites Gesicht' as a narratological strategy that allows the narrator to speak as a subject and as an object (see Jürgen Pütz, *Doppelgänger seiner selbst. Der Erzähler Albert Vigoleis Thelen* [Wiesbaden: Deutscher Universitätsverlag, 1990], pp.174–176). In 1935, Thelen's friend Menno ter Braak published a collection of essays under the title *Het tweede gezicht* ['The second face/sight'] (Arno Piechorowski, 'Thelen und die niederländische Kultur', in *Albert Vigoleis Thelen. Erzweiltschmerzler und Sprachschwelger. Eine Bildbiographie*, ed. by Jürgen Pütz [Bremerhaven: edition die horen, 2003], pp.95–106, here p. 105; Andringa 154). Ter Braak discusses the phenomenon of the 'tweede gezicht' first in an essay on Vergin and Spengler from 1932, 'Een studie in schaduw' ['A Study in Shades'], the second essay of the collection. Like Thelen (cf. 27), Ter Braak rejects a mystical interpretation of the phenomenon (Het tweede gezicht VI). For ter Braak the 'second face' serves to unmask an author or intellectual's official identity or mask, even though it is also intertwined with it ('samengegroeid') (VII). Few people are able to distinguish such 'second faces' (6). Behind a 'second face' there may very well be a third or fourth or a tenth (10, 20). Like Thelen, ter Braak associates the search for 'second faces' with the search for other names (6, 8). A person's 'second face' will always remain in the shade (8)—it evades detection. Regarding Thelen and ter Braak, see also Lut Missinne, "Es wird schon schief gehen." Albert Vigoleis Thelen und sein Blick auf die niederländische Literatur', in *Albert Vigoleis Thelen. Mittler zwischen den Kulturen*, ed. by Heinz Eickmans and Lut Missinne (Münster: Waxmann, 2005), pp. 93–108, esp. p. 98; Jaap Grave, 'Albert Vigoleis Thelen und Menno ter Braak in *Het Vaderland*', *ibid.* pp. 109–120, esp. pp. 115, and Léon Hanssen, "Einem größeren Antipoden bin ich in der Literatur noch selten begegnet." Ter Braak – Thelen – Pascoaes', *ibid.* pp. 137–145, esp. pp.137–141.

The woman named Kathrinchen survives on Mallorca by consciously remaining an outsider (and opportunistically using opportunities when she sees them). But for many in *Die Insel des zweiten Gesichts*, the ability to develop into one's own doppelgänger stands for the capacity to adapt to the country and its culture to such an extent that the person in question is no longer perceived as an outsider. A prime example of this is Beatrice's youngest brother, going by the name 'Zwingli', who like Beatrice herself is a Swiss citizen, and for that reason is called 'Don Helvecio' by the inhabitants of Mallorca (32). One sign of his successful integration into Mallorca's society is the one-and-a-half centimetres long nail on the little finger of his right hand, an attribute meant to indicate his high standing and authority in society (33). The narrator notes that Zwingli, who like Beatrice combines Swiss and South-American heritage, in terms of his physical appearance cannot easily be assigned to a specific race or landscape ('nicht mehr ohne Mühe einrassig einer Landschaft zugeordnet werden konnte'; 34). Such a comment is without a doubt to be understood in the context of the Third Reich's racial theories and, in one sentence, demonstrates how nonsensical such theories are. More important to the narrator than superficial physiognomic similarities is Zwingli's empathic ability to adapt to Mallorca linguistically and culturally:

Ein an das Phänomenale rührendes Vermögen, sich ganz in die Denkart des Landes einzuleben, in dem er gerade weilte, brachte eine Angleichung zuwege, die ihn auf spanischem Boden zum waschechten Spanier hatte werden lassen, bis in einen Grad, der es zuweilen nötig machte, seine Nationalität an Hand des Passes nachzuweisen. (34)

Even Zwingli's own partner, a Spanish woman living on Mallorca and listening to the name Pilar, believes that he is in reality Spanish and has bought himself a Swiss pass rather than that he received it by birth (34). Zwingli's ability to move among cultures and languages, and to seemingly effortlessly bridge their differences, raises the question how meaningful not only the assumed biological, but also cultural differences really are. This too is to be read as criticism of the Third Reich, which built its ideology precisely around such differences.

That *Die Insel des zweiten Gesicht's* narrator takes morally dubious figures like Kathrinchen and Zwingli/Don Helvecio as his models to illustrate his ideal of transcultural versatility, is not without irony, and is certainly to be interpreted as another sign of Thelen's willingness to step outside established frames of expectation on behalf of his literary project. The novel's narrator, Vigoleis, himself makes, however, choices that are quite different from those of his characters. In spite of the many hardships suffered, the novel's protagonist Vigoleis nevertheless also interprets his exile on Mallorca as a chance to expand his cultural horizons: 'Je mehr ich mit der neuen Sprache vertraut wurde, je deutlicher wurde mir, daß da ungeahnte Schätze zu heben waren. Dichter entdeckte ich, die man im Norden nicht einmal dem Namen nach kannte. [...] Wir fraßen uns im wahrsten Sinne des Wortes in die spanische Literatur hinein, indem wir weniger andere Sachen aßen' (377). His life as a voluntary exile—he already had left Germany, as he points out, before Hitler came to power (723)—is seen as a chance to get to know cultures that are little known, even if this goes on cost of his physical well-being. This is a side effect of his living away from Germany, but gradually becomes very central to him. A similar expansion of cultural horizons we will find in Nico Rost's text as well.

Vigoleis, *Die Insel*'s narrative instance, which is not to be confused with the text's author, conceives of himself as a mediator and translator, but also as a narrator, understood here in a literal sense as someone who tells stories. His friends praise him as a story teller who cannot be easily outrivalled ('nicht leicht zu übertreffender Erzähler'; 51). Vigoleis himself sees this as one of his few real talents:

Mit ein paar erklärenden Worten beginne ich, entwerfe in raschen Strichen die Situation, Land, Leute stelle ich vor [...]. Spüre ich, daß die Zuhörer in meinen Bann geraten, dann wirkt das wie eine doppelte Zündung, ich wachse aus mir heraus und in alle die Rollen hinein, die ich zu verkörpern habe, sei es ein Mädchen mit dem Ölkrug auf dem Kopf; eine Greisin in einer Wolke von Staub und Motten, die ihr den Pelzumhang einer Königin aufgefressen hatten, den sie mir zeigen wollte; oder einen Mann mit einem riesigen Hut, lächerlich gestiefelt und gespornt auf einem winzigen Esel, der ich selber war – ich meine jetzt den Mann, in einer anderen Geschichte bin ich aber wirklich der Esel [...]. (52)

In this passage, *Die Insel des zweiten Gesichts* comes closest to formulating a text-immanent poetics. While others may live their lives in between cultures, Vigoleis as the text's narrator is interested in empathy and, closely connected to this, in talking about the experience of living between cultures. His text originates in the act of narrating the stories that make up *Die Insel des zweiten Gesichts*, an art exercise ('Kunstübung'; 51) that is rapidly disappearing. The idea of the doppelgänger here turns into a poetological principle; Vigoleis's ability to be his own doppelgänger allows for an ability to identify with and impersonate other characters, based on, but not identical with, people he has encountered. The image of the girl with the oil jug on her head appear to be fairly neutral. The image of an old and grey woman in a cloud of dust and moths, however, tells a story, and it tells this story with quite a lot of empathy—it evokes the image of an old woman who proudly wants to show Vigoleis her fur coat, which in her mind makes her look like a queen, but who needs to face the fact that her coat has been eaten by moths, and that the impression she hoped to make with it therefore must remain a phantasy. The narrator here exhibits an emphatic ability that goes beyond mimicking someone's culture alone. The final image evoked by the narrator is reminiscent of Miguel de Cervantes's Sancho Panza, Don Quichote's servant, traditionally depicted with a donkey and a broad-brimmed hat; the reference makes clear that Vigoleis does not just identify with Don Quichote's unfortunate assistant, but also with his donkey.

Die Insel des zweiten Gesichts is an exercise in immersing in and understanding Mallorca's culture. The island functions as a contact zone and a place 'in-between' languages and cultures. This includes representatives of Nazi-Germany, for instance when Vigoleis is called up to serve as a tour guide for a group of visiting Germans, part of a trip organized by the Kraft durch Freude organization, who address him as 'Herr Führer' (816)—yet another alter ego for the protagonist. The trip takes place during the so-called Röhm-Putsch (30 June – 2 July 1934), supposedly an attempt by Ernst Röhm and fellow members of the SA to murder Hitler, in truth however motivated by Hitler's desire to get rid of a number of people he saw as opponents. Because of Mallorca's relative isolation, it is unclear whether Hitler has survived the assumed coup, and many of the trip's participants are concerned about this—something that leads Vigoleis to tell his

travel group that ‘Soviel wir Führer wissen, lebt er leider noch’ (816). Mallorca, as a liminal space, is a place where different languages, life stories, and cultural backgrounds are confronted with each other, and it is one of the few places where at that time the ensuing dialogue can take place. Vigoleis does not hold back his criticism of Hitler and Nazism (‘ich sah es so schwarz, wie es gekommen ist’; 817), but this also means that he has to engage in a dialogue about the Third Reich that strangely enough leads to a conversation about the barbarism of bull fights. The trip’s participants defend Hitler and defy Vigoleis’s views to attack the Spanish instead: ‘Die Konzentrationslager wurden weggeleugnet, die Juden nicht zu Tausenden abgeschlachtet, sondern mal einer irrtümlich umgelegt: aber Stierkämpfe, die blutigen Volksbelustigungen der Spanier, ob das nicht grausamer sei als die vom Führer befohlene Aufordnung?’ (817) It is not only the group’s blindness concerning the new German regime that bothers the protagonist, but also the tendency to project its violence onto Spanish culture.

Precisely because of its character as a liminal and marginal area, Mallorca functions, at least for a while, as a space where such exchanges can take place, and to some extent the island functions as a utopia for the novel’s narrator and his companion Beatrice. But that should not let us overlook the fact that *Die Insel*, in spite of its humour, is also a book about the hardships of those living as refugees. And the novel’s ending—Vigoleis and Beatrice’s forced evacuation from Mallorca—makes clear that the island’s function as a contact zone had to be temporary.

The novel’s reception in Germany mirrored a certain discomfort with *Die Insel des zweiten Gesichts*; not, however, on the basis of its content, but because of its style. At a meeting of the Gruppe 47 in Bebenhausen (Tübingen), between 16 and 18 October 1953 – after Thelen had read from his novel – Hans Werner Richter used the term ‘Emigrantendeutsch’ to characterize its style.¹⁴ Strongly implied in this comment was the suggestion that Thelen had lost touch with the German language as it was spoken at the time, and therefore produced inferior literature. Richter’s judgment was already controversial at the meeting itself. *Der Spiegel* commented on the incident at the time, made clear it received ‘wenig Zustimmung’, and used it as the point of departure for a four-page profile of Thelen and his novel.¹⁵ Other authors spoke out in favour of Thelen and his work.¹⁶

My third case study of a text documenting everyday life in the Nazi-era is Nico Rost’s *Goethe in Dachau*. Rost’s text was published first in Dutch in 1946 and appeared in German translation in the East-German zone in 1948 and in West Germany in 1949. The text is based on diary notes written on all kinds of scraps of paper (7)¹⁷ between 10 June 1944 and 30 April 1945, during Rost’s imprisonment at the Dachau concentration camp. *Goethe in Dachau* documents life in a

¹⁴ See Thelen, ‘Meine Heimat bin ich selbst’, pp. 463–364, 466).

¹⁵ Anonymous, ‘Schelmenroman / Schriftsteller. Kampf gegen die Kartoffel’, in *Der Spiegel* 02.12.1953, pp. 32–35 (quote p. 32); <http://www.spiegel.de/spiegel/print/d-25658062.html>).

¹⁶ Moritz Wagner interprets the episode in the context of a general distrust of exile authors in West Germany after the war, a distrust that is also to be understood politically (*Babylon – Mallorca. Figurationen des Komischen im deutschsprachigen Exilroman*, Stuttgart: J.B. Metzler, 2017, p. 284). Alfred Andersch, Joachim Kaiser, Wolfgang Hildesheimer, and Martin Walser were among the authors supporting Thelen (p. 284). Richter later claimed the remark was meant as a provocation for the critics who were present (p. 285).

¹⁷ In the following, all parenthetical references refer to the first Dutch edition of Nico Rost, *Goethe in Dachau. Literatuur en werkelijkheid* (Amsterdam: L.J. Veen, [1946]).

concentration camp in all its forms: illness and death, the daily struggle for food, acts of gross violence and sometimes of solidarity, and a general sense of uncertainty about one's future.

One of the book's first deliberations concerns the refusal of a Dutch doctor (H.) to bring Rost, who is being hospitalized, a German book (preferably Lessing or Goethe) from the camp's library to which Rost himself has no access. The man declines to do so, but does offer to bring Rost a French or English book—something that Rost calls very narrow-minded and incorrect ('heel bekrompen en onjuist'; 10). After all, Freud wrote in German too and, quoting Stalin, Rost remarks that figures like Hitler will come and go, but that the German people and state, and, going beyond Stalin, German classics like Lessing and Goethe will always be there (10).¹⁸ The anecdote illustrates something fundamental about Rost's book: In spite of the horrendous crimes committed in the name of Germany and its culture, Rost does believe in engaging with German culture and in maintaining a dialogic relationship with German literary, cultural, and intellectual history.¹⁹

It is easy to misunderstand Nico Rost's text as an argument to save German culture—and in particular its canon—from the damage done to it by twelve years of Nazi rule. A certain elitism, not unlike that of Adorno, is not alien to Rost. Rost, too, sees literature as the key to working through Germany's past, yet such criticism ignores the text's setting, the space where Goethe in Dachau originated. There is no attempt to integrate the space from which *Goethe in Dachau* is told, Dachau, into a narrative of a redemptive German culture. Rost's point is rather that there are many voices in German culture that deserve to be taken seriously.²⁰ The link between the Dachau concentration camp and the readings in German culture on which the book reports, is one of dissociation: it is impossible to ignore daily reality, even when engaging with literature (90). Descriptions of everyday life in a concentration camp—including the ravaging effect of typhus, the daily deaths and aggression of the camp guards, the camp inmates' difficulty of procuring food—alternate with literary reflections.

One should add to this that *Goethe in Dachau*, although it certainly contains some of Rost's own observations about literature, more often reports on his conversations ('gesprek'/'gesprekken') with other camp inmates. It is through these conversations that Rost develops his own thinking. One of the Christian Reformed pastors, Dr. G., is surprised to find the Marxist Rost reading a book on Luther, which leads to a long conversation in which Rost emphasizes his awareness of the importance of Luther, even though he sympathizes more with his opponent, Thomas Münzer (22). A conversation with the poet, psychoanalyst, and Freud student Emil Alphons Rheinhardt (1889–1945) about Bettina von Arnim corrects not only the rather negative image Rost has of Arnim, but also leads him to wonder whether the Romantics were more aware of the 'social problem' ('het sociale probleem') than he had until then assumed

¹⁸ 'Die Erfahrungen der Geschichte besagen, daß die Hitler kommen und gehen, aber das deutsche Volk, der deutsche Staat bleibt'; see J.W. Stalin, *Über den Großen Vaterländischen Krieg der Sowjetunion* (Berlin: Verlag für Fremdsprachige Literatur, 1946), p. 49; first published in Pravda, 23 February 1942; quoted in Jochen Laufer, 'Stalins Friedensziele und die Kontinuität der sowjetischen Deutschlandpolitik 1941–1953', in: Jürgen Zarusky (ed.), *Stalin und die Deutschen*, special issue of *Vierteljahreshefte für Zeitgeschichte*, 2006, pp. 131–157, here p. 138.

¹⁹ When discussing Goethe, Rost emphasizes Goethe's political dimension. It is therefore no coincidence that he is in particular interested in Goethe's *Egmont* (19–20, 30, 252–253), whom he sees as a freedom fighter (20).

²⁰ In Rost's view the authors who emigrated continued the main thread of German literature ('hebben – toen ze emigreerden – de groote lijn van de Duitsche literatuur doorgetrokken'; 27)

(39–42; here 42).²¹ In a conversation, Reinhardt makes the case to Rost that a free Austrian literature ('een vrije Oostenrijksche literatuur'),²² distinguished from German literature as a whole, could serve as a mediator between the West and South-Eastern Europe—a thesis with which Rost wholeheartedly agrees, since he envisions an important role for Eastern Europe in the future (72–73). It is Austria's position in between communities, as a margin of German culture, that, as Rost envisions it, might enable such a future mediating function. The example of Austria is less important to me here than the insight that the value of literature is defined, here, on the basis of its potential communicative role as a phenomenon of the contact zone. In that respect, for Rost Austrian literature, as he envisions it, may also function as a model for his understanding of the communicative potential of other literatures.

It is intriguing to think of Adorno's Auschwitz-speech, discussed above, as a response to Nico Rost's *Goethe in Dachau*. Both understood themselves as Marxists, but there is no evidence that Adorno read Rost's book²³ (which was published in West Germany in 1949, the same year in which Adorno wrote his speech, and sold well at the time). Adorno certainly would have cringed at Rost's already-mentioned citation from a text by Stalin at the very beginning of his book (10). Adorno revisited his statement several times during the 1950s and 1960s,²⁴ and eventually recognized the legitimacy of projects documenting the suffering that happened during the Nazi-era: 'das perennierende Leiden hat soviel Recht auf Ausdruck wie der Gemarterte zu brüllen'.²⁵ The significance of Rost's text and Adorno's speech, and the polemics surrounding these texts, have to be understood in the context of a discourse that was largely restorative of German culture. Until the mid 1950s the West German literary landscape was dominated by a mood that promoted German 'Hochkultur', assumed the existence of a 'deutscher Geist' that had survived the war unharmed, and thought about literature in religious terms.²⁶ This was no longer the case with the generation of authors who broke through in 1959 (Böll, Grass, Johnson), who engaged actively with the past and present of German culture and society in all their ambiguities and complexities, and contributed (in a major way) to the beginnings of Germany's attempt to work through its past.

But by that time something had also been lost. What German literature during the late 1940s and early 1950s experienced was an attempt to redefine how culture and literature were understood—not just by introducing new spaces (margins and border zones) into the German literary canon, but by giving new meaning to the terms 'culture' and 'literature'. The texts discussed in this essay have a move away from 'the national' in common, but they also position

²¹ Rheinhardt died in Dachau (25 February 1945). Rost had met him several times before their joint stay in Dachau (see 33–34).

²² In Rost's view, authors or scholars with leftist views are ignored in official literary histories, already before 1933 (see 92); hence such literature needs to be freed.

²³ There are no references to Rost in Adorno's collected works.

²⁴ See Robert Weninger, *Streitbare Literaten. Kontroversen und Eklats in der deutschen Literatur von Adorno bis Walser* (Munich: Beck, 2004), pp. 33–41, and Moshe Zuckermann, 'Zum Begriff der Lyrik bei Adorno', in: Stephan Braese (ed.), *In der Sprache der Täter. Neue Lektüren deutschsprachiger Nachkriegs- und Gegenwartsliteratur* (Opladen/Wiesbaden: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1998), pp. 31–41.

²⁵ Adorno, *Negative Dialektik. Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 6, p. 355; see also Weninger, p. 39 and Zuckerman, p. 31.

²⁶ See Helmut Böttiger, *Die Gruppe 47. Als die deutsche Literatur Geschichte schrieb* (Munich: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 2012), p. 13.

themselves beyond the national. They do not understand culture and literature monolithically as the expression of one nation, but heterogeneously as contact and border zones, as places where people with diverse national and cultural backgrounds and a variety of real-life experiences meet and engage in a dialogue. This is most obvious when we look at the spatial organization of the texts discussed in this essay. It is somewhat symptomatic that debates about ‘inner emigration’ and exile literature, relatively quickly after the end of the war, were about the question who represented Germany better: those calling themselves ‘inner emigrants’ or those who had gone into exile.²⁷ The authors I have discussed did not produce exile literature in the conventional sense of the word (Keilson and Thelen did not publish about their experiences in exile until after the war). But precisely the fact that their texts defied and defy categorization is constitutive for what is appealing about them. They do not understand themselves as belonging to one national or cultural tradition. In fact, they demonstrate the opposite by documenting that cultures are not monolithic. It is not only the case that cultures are the product of a variety of traditions and perspectives, but the texts I have discussed themselves contain a dialogue among these traditions and perspectives as well. They promote a concept of culture that is fundamentally open and borderless, and in that, they remind their readers today of a past that is still relevant for us today.

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²⁷ In an exemplary way this is illustrated by the debate between Thomas Mann and Frank Thieß in 1945; see Weninger, pp. 14–31; Böttiger, pp. 28–30.

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About the author

Carl Niekerk is Professor of German, with affiliate appointments in Comparative and World Literature, European Studies, French, and Jewish Studies at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. He is currently managing editor of the *German Quarterly* and the *Lessing Yearbook*. He most recently edited *The Radical Enlightenment in Germany: A Cultural Perspective* (Brill/Rodopi, 2018), and together with Cori Crane *Approaches to Kurban Said's 'Ali and Nino': Love, Identity, and Intercultural Conflict* (Camden House 2017). His research interests include comparative Dutch Studies. He has published essays on Pramoedya Ananta Toer, colonial photography in Louis Couperus, Mahler and Rembrandt, Masochism in Multatuli and Freud, and Casanova in Amsterdam.