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Anyone Can Say "I": Tales from the End of the Post-war Era
by Robert Menasse (review)

Carl E. Findley III

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need simply to report the events of the Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami and becomes a work of creative nonfiction: “This form of writing exists between the purely fictional realm of the imagination and the journalistic world of attempted objectivity” (150). Finally, Hansen understands Haslinger’s account in terms of the author’s need to “cure the effects of the trauma he memorializes” (151).

Laura McLary
University of Portland

Robert Menasse, *Anyone Can Say “I”: Tales from the End of the Post-war Era*. Translated by Thomas S. Hansen and Abby J. Hansen. Riverside: Ariadne, 2011. 170 pp.

Robert Menasse is one of Austria’s most respected contemporary writers and representative of a literary tradition that blurs the lines dividing writer, academic, journalist, essayist, and political analyst—a distinguished Viennese convention that brings to mind figures such as Karl Kraus and Robert Musil. Although a regular voice in European academic and literary circles, American readers will probably be familiar with Menasse through his novel, *Don Juan de la Mancha* (2009), the story of a fragmented hero whose inability to connect meaningfully with a diverse phalanx of women renders him, ironically, neither a particularly successful lover nor an especially humorous Quixote. Menasse’s titles themselves are masterfully ironic. His most recent collection, *Anyone Can Say “I,”* is no different.

Menasse is a talented postwar Jewish writer, who, like his fellow countryman, the prewar writer Robert Musil, from whom Menasse satirically takes the title of his essay collection, *Das Land ohne Eigenschaften* (1995), constantly plays with the curious concept, as Musil describes it, of “how dubious a thing it is these days to be a self.” If there is a consistent theme that runs through the fourteen short stories that make up *Anyone Can Say “I,”* with its diverse narrator identities, it is just how tenuous and fragile modern subjectivity can be. To be an “I,” it turns out, is more difficult than we might think. The first story in the collection, “Getting Started,” underscores this theme of the unreliable narrator, or unstable “I,” who is defined by a feckless inability to make a definitive start to his own tale—an erratic narrator who simply cannot decide what to say or how to say it. This theme of an unstable self continues in “Long

Time No See,” where the psychologically insecure narrator is a ticking time bomb who can turn off emotionally without warning. In “The Blue Volumes,” Menasse portrays a narcissistic, self-indulgent bookshop owner who purges his bookshop of all autobiographies, for, as he says, we tell nothing but “lies” about ourselves, a grandiloquent gesture that makes the narrator seem absurd, unstable. Readers interested in Schorskean theatricality and cityscape will delight in “The Chronicle of Girardigasse” (an actual street just beyond the Opernring). Here, Menasse shifts his sight from the unstable self to the unstable city, depicting Vienna itself as a theater, one defined by “lovely illusion, blurred reality” (59). Although Menasse unfortunately falls into a staid trope when he describes Vienna as a city of “sleazy, impotent perpetrators” living in an aesthetic “prison,” all “appearance without reality,” this idea of an artificial urban facade cleverly reinforces Menasse’s contention that the citizen outside may himself only be a plaster shell (59, 64).

All of Menasse’s narrators in this collection are more at home in destruction and pain than in the dubious realm of felicity. Against a bleak, existentially vacuous world stage, Menasse’s narrators must create a sense of identity: the narrator in “Romantic Blunders,” for instance, eats himself sick if only “to give meaning to what is meaningless” (115). One cannot escape the feeling of gloom that hangs over this collection: “Defeats, divorce, loneliness, mockery—life is all one great quagmire” (77); although each of these narrators are ostensibly responding to some misery in their lives, it is precisely out of this “fallen” world of ever-shifting stimuli and chance encounters that Menasse’s modern subject, this mysterious “I,” must fashion himself. And yet the lives of Menasse’s diverse narrators are so prosaic and so ordinary that, as readers, we question whether their misery is real or simply manufactured to dispel, as it were, our modern *ennui*.

The collection ends with Thomas Hansen’s wonderfully readable afterword, in which he provides a helpful, albeit brief, biography of Menasse—the translation, a joint effort by Thomas and Abby Hansen, is expertly done, and yet Menasse’s dry, subtle humor is somehow more enjoyable in German than in English. Although as Hansen correctly observes, “The ‘I’ in each story is forever distanced from momentous events,” Hansen is overly generous in his description of Menasse’s collection as “a world of shifting identities and personae, all of which convincingly say ‘I’” (168). Nothing, in fact, could be further from the truth. There is not a single convincing “I” among the litany of unhappy, fragmented narrators in the entire collection, all of whom comi-

cally, half-heartedly challenge their fate and, far from heroic, seem perfectly content to accept their dim lot.

The philosophical-psychological position that Menasse explores so brilliantly, this strange inability to say the first-person singular personal pronoun “I” with any degree of certainty, can at times, however, strike the reader as an elaborately private philosophical puzzle. And one cannot help feeling that Menasse is covering the same territory in this collection, the same problem of subjectivity and self-distancing that haunts Menasse’s hero in *Don Juan de la Mancha* who cannot form meaningful relationships with the various women in his life because he simply does not know who *he* is. Even in his dreams, he says, “I came across to myself as peculiarly alien—because ‘I’ was so objective that I saw myself plainly as ‘another.’ Hard to explain. I wasn’t ‘I,’ but rather the character ‘I’” (*Don Juan* 82). One has the feeling in Menasse’s fiction that the narrator, whoever he is, is playing an elaborate mind game of self-avoidance, while maintaining the pretext of self-reflection. Although Menasse’s fiction has points of contact with the chillingly fragmented economy of Herta Müller—the beautifully disjointed and guttural *Nadirs*, for instance—and occasional forays into the erotic territory that Michel Houellebecq has made into a genre of his own, Menasse, a Viennese writer, straddles the fence with his ironic pen in hand, deconstructing the modern subject so convincingly that, in the end, we are left with the feeling that not everyone can say “I.”

Carl E. Findley III
Mercer University