PROJECT MUSE®

Tsunami: A Report from Phi Phi Island by Josef Haslinger
(review)

Laura McLary

Journal of Austrian Studies, Volume 46, Number 1, Spring 2013, pp.
124-126 (Review)

Published by University of Nebraska Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/oas.2013.0007>

➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/501670>

Josef Haslinger, *Tsunami: A Report from Phi Phi Island*.

Translated by Thomas S. Hansen and Abby J. Hansen. Riverside:
Ariadne Press, 2011. 151 pp

Austrian novelist and essayist Josef Haslinger is probably best known for his novel *Opernball* (1995), which was later made into a television movie. The political thriller criticizes the ready accessibility of mediated images of suffering in contemporary culture, especially the opening scenes, in which the main character, a journalist from the United States, watches on tv as his son and many thousands of guests are killed by a terrorist attack during the opening night of Vienna's Opera Ball.

It is difficult to read Haslinger's account of his experience surviving the December 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami with his family without seeing a chilling parallel to his fictional account of death and destruction. In the initial aftermath of the tsunami, which hit the small Thai island where Haslinger and his family were spending the Christmas holidays, he and his wife Edith were unsure if their two teenaged children, twins Sophie and Elias, had survived. After all four returned to Vienna after the disaster, Haslinger struggled to make sense of the traumatic experience. The media was full of images from the tsunami, and Haslinger was asked for interviews to describe how he and his family had survived. But, as Haslinger explains in the opening pages of the book, it took him some time to get over the idea that he should be simply happy to have survived with his entire family intact and that a book about the experience was therefore unnecessary: "you survived, and you didn't lose any family. why not just be happy and keep your mouth shut? then the conversation would turn to the tsunami, and i realized i needed to talk about it" (1).

What follows is Haslinger's reconstruction of memories. Most of the account is written from his first-person perspective, patched together from his own memories and from those of others they met before and after the tsunami, but he includes several pages written by each of his children; these perspectives are quite different, since he and Edith were separated from them as they struggled to survive the first tidal wave and make their way back to their parents. Haslinger intersperses his narrative of the Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami with memories of the year of recovery after returning to Austria as well as of a second trip to Phi Phi Island with Edith a year later to revisit the site of the trauma.

The subtitle of the English translation by Thomas Hansen and Abby Hansen, "A Report from Phi Phi Island" (German subtitle: "Ein Bericht"), gives the reader an idea of the numb, distanced style of Haslinger's account. The inventory of his wounds—a head injury and severed tendons in his right hand—does follow as soon as they occur, rather later, much like his actual experience of his injuries. The "report," written entirely in lower-case letters because of (or in memory of) Haslinger's serious hand injury, is divided into 37 sections, most of them about three to six pages long, but the chronology of events unfolds in pieces, consistent with the way one reconstructs memories of a traumatic event. In part eight, for example, Haslinger describes his initial impression of the beach from the swimming pool terrace of his hotel as the tide receded in the immediate aftermath of the unfelt earthquake and the ensuing wave, quickly engulfing the beach and all the people in its wake. Haslinger returns to describing their vacation the day before the tsunami in part nine, but his description of a walk up a mountain only reminds him again of the disaster because this is where many survivors fled to escape the water. In part ten, Haslinger describes returning to the Phi Phi Island a year later to discover a landscape scoured clean of any identifying landmarks relative to his memories of the place before the tsunami. Part eleven details Haslinger's surreal experience of looking at photos from the aftermath of the tsunami, including ones of himself. In his descriptions, Haslinger provides an inventory of small details, some of them based on the photographs he received after the disaster, such as the green T-shirt with the logo of the Iowa International Writing Program he was wearing at the time the tidal wave struck. But other details he reconstructs from memory, latching onto small things in the midst of the trauma, such as the small personal objects in piles of debris: "a swim fin, a portable radio, a notebook case, a credit card, a sneaker, a t-shirt, a rivet-studded belt, identification papers, a woman's sandal, a lipstick, a watch" (66). While these small items are in themselves unremarkable, they take on unexplainable meaning for Haslinger. For the reader, the meaning is clear: These are objects once owned by victims, and their poignancy is all the greater when they are simply named in a list. Haslinger might be simply reporting, but the tragedy of the event is contained in the many reconstructed details.

Thomas Hansen and Abby Hansen follow their seamless English translation of Haslinger's report with an afterword by Thomas Hansen, which provides a brief biography of the author and a short analysis of *Tsunami*. For Hansen, the deceptively simple form of the account transcends its purported

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