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“Nostalgia, Memory, and the Postmodern Crisis of Masculinity: Robert Menasse’s *Selige Zeiten, brüchige Welt*”

Robert Menasse’s *Selige Zeiten, brüchige Welt* (1991), the first novel of the *Trilogie der Entgeisterung*, begins with the report of a man who has destroyed a Rubens painting in Munich’s Alter Pinakothek as an ostensibly political act: “Er habe dieses eine Kunstwerk ‘opfern’ müssen, um alle anderen Kunstleistungen der Menschheit, ja um die Menschheit selbst zu retten” (7). In fact, the “Attentäter” plans to use the trial as a kind of stage where he will present his groundbreaking philosophy. However, the vandal/philosopher is given no stage time, and is promptly forgotten. The canonical work of art is sacrificed for the sake of scandal and little more. The postmodern world that consumes this information is interested neither in artworks nor lengthy theories. Genius, either in the form of the work of art or radical philosophy, has no place in postmodern Vienna.

The Rubens anecdote can be seen as an allegory for the crisis of genius and masculinity in Menasse’s novel. Leo Singer functions as a sort of anti-hero, a passive aesthete out of place in 1960s Vienna. A would-be genius, Singer is nostalgic for those Viennese moments preceding World War II and his own Jewish family’s exile from the city. For Leo, political action is futile and uninteresting. Instead, the production of a philosophical work of art functions as the center of Leo’s existence, the realization of his potential for genius. This book, however, can neither be created nor read in post-war Vienna and is only finished in Sao Paolo, Brazil. The inability to produce is a reflection of the nostalgia for a Vienna never known, the mythological fin-de-siècle world of aestheticism—a world itself in crisis. Leo’s paralysis is a result of his blindness to the historical break of World War II and the nostalgic attempt to locate continuity in a postmodern vacuum, and this attempt fails on a number of levels. In his desire for genius, Singer’s plight recalls that of the infamous fin-de-siècle figure Otto Weininger. As a reaction to fragmenting notions of identity and gender, Weininger attempted to produce his own work of genius, *Geschlecht und Charakter* (1903). For the desperate Weininger, genius is defined in Kantian terms, as originating from nature, a product of autonomous thought. Such autonomy is a product of masculinity and inaccessible to those defined as “feminine.” This crisis of masculinity is reenacted as false memory by Leo Singer in *Selige Zeiten, brüchige Welt*. Singer’s desire to turn Hegel on his head, not as Marx had done, but in order to illustrate the devolution of culture, is both grandiose and anticlimactic. He attempts to revive modernist notions of genius and masculinity—those very notions that were in crisis at the turn of the century—, yet his project fails in a decidedly anticlimactic manner. Leo Singer’s philosophical attempt to turn the notion of time on its head is, finally, created accidentally and vicariously via the female figure, Judith, whom he attempts to locate as his “muse.” Standing in for the ubiquitous femme fatale of Viennese Modernism, a figure who served as a nodal point for the crisis of masculinity, Menasse’s Judith represents a parody of this historical projection. As Leo’s love object, she ostensibly inspires him to work, and, after her supposed death, this idealized figure is meant to provide the impetus for the work of genius. Judith proves, however, to be still alive, and she consistently undermines all attempts on Leo’s part to functionalize her as traditional companion for the modernist crisis of masculinity. Singer’s work of genius is finally produced through the

“muse,” but in a manner which reveals the ludicrous nature of the traditional crisis of identity and masculinity. In her cocaine-induced scribbles on Lawrence Sterne, Judith had reproduced the monologues given by Leo in the Austrian bar in Brazil, “Bar jeder Hoffnung.” In order to take possession of these marginal notes and complete his manuscript, Leo kills his muse. That is, Leo borrows the “Original-Kopie” from the female counterpart to his genius. In this way, his own genius is removed once more from Judith’s supposedly derivative writings, reducing the final work to a product at least three times removed from the original ideas. Through its ironic play with the historical crisis of masculinity of fin de siècle Vienna, Menasse’s novel parodies a form of nostalgia that looks to Viennese Modernism in the attempt to reinvest the postmodern with a semblance of real crisis.