

ARTICLE – RETHINKING MINOR LITERATURES

The Identity Politics of Uncertainty: Eva Menasse's *Quasikristalle* (2013)

Myrto Aspioti

University of Oxford, GB
myrto.aspioti@sjc.ox.ac.uk

This article argues, through a close reading of Eva Menasse's *Quasikristalle* [*Quasicrystals*] (2013), that Menasse can be more productively viewed as a *minority* author, rather than as a *minor* author. The concept of minority authorship proposed here with reference to Menasse is in dialogue with but departs significantly from the conception of minor literature that Deleuze and Guattari adapted from Kafka's writings on the literatures of smaller nations and communities. More specifically, this article proposes that we understand the notion of "minority" in contemporary literature as a contextual feature relating to authors' public identities, that is, the ways in which authors represent themselves, are marketed and received, rather than an innate political and linguistic feature of literary texts. By reading Menasse's feminist op-eds and her essays on the cultural differences between (Jewish) Vienna and Berlin alongside *Quasikristalle*, with its focus on women's lives and relationships on the one hand, and the experiences of Austrian Jewish émigrés in Germany on the other, the article shows that minority literature can be both mainstream and political, both explicit about its concerns and subtle in its undermining of stereotypes about minority identities.

Tweetable Abstract: This article reads Menasse's *Quasikristalle* as minority literature, rather than as minor literature in Deleuze and Guattari's sense.

Quasikristalle [*Quasicrystals*] (2013) is Austrian author Eva Menasse's second novel, published eight years after the acclaimed semi-autobiographical *Vienna* (2005).¹ Despite the popularity of her novels, Menasse is primarily known as an author of short stories and non-fiction essays,² some of which Anita Bunyan discusses in her article in this volume. With my own article, I hope to extend the discussion of Menasse as a minority author, specifically as a female,

¹ I will be citing the paperback editions of all primary sources, all of which are now more readily available than hardback copies.

² Her best-known collections of short stories are *Lässliche Todsünden* [*Casual Mortal Sins*] (2009) and *Tiere für Fortgeschrittene* [*Animals for the Advanced Learner*] (2017). The latter was awarded the Austrian Book Prize in 2017. Her volume of essays *Lieber aufgeregt als abgeklärt* [*Better Be Angry than Complacent*] (2015) brings together political op-eds, pieces of literary criticism, autobiographical essays, and two short stories published between 2002 and 2014.

part-Jewish, and expatriate author,³ by proposing a reading of *Quasikristalle* as a narrative shadowed by doubt about the possibility of representing (minority) identities as clear-cut constructs. The novel pieces together the life narrative of one woman, Xane Molin, through the accounts of people who have known her in various phases of her life. Xane is a Viennese-born, half-Jewish activist, businesswoman, friend, wife, and mother who spends most of her adult life in Berlin, only returning to Vienna in her old age, after her husband's death. In the course of the novel, we see her through the eyes of, among others, her best friend in school, a former landlord, her gynaecologist, and an older diplomat or political activist who falls in love with her. Apart from a single chapter in the middle of the novel, which is narrated in the first person from Xane's own perspective, each of the remaining twelve chapters has a different focaliser, and turns out to be more revealing about them than it is about Xane herself. As a result, the more the reader tries to hold onto the apparent protagonist as the only point of connection between the individual chapters, the more elusive she seems, and the more complex her relationships with those surrounding her.

Though the language is conventional, accessible, and occasionally even conversational, the overall structure of the novel generates a high degree of uncertainty about Xane, as well as showing her to be herself uncertain about her own identity and relations to others. As the different characters' perspectives in *Quasikristalle* constantly relativise or contradict each other, the reader's identification keeps shifting, and stable positions towards and judgments about the narrated events and characters quickly become untenable. In this way, the novel not only makes the protagonist appear confusingly out of focus as each secondary character provides their own, highly subjective version of her life story but destabilises the very notions of the life story, of the self as a coherent narrative and of unified identity. More specifically, however, I would like to show in this article that the strategically generated uncertainty in *Quasikristalle* is *politically* significant insofar as it mostly affects the representation of the protagonist's minority identities: her identity as a woman, as a Jewish Austrian, and as an émigré.⁴ The novel's ambivalent stance towards these minority identities, and its recourse to unhelpful clichés about them, is all the more significant when we consider that Menasse herself is publicly perceived – and to some extent styles herself – as a minority author. The use of the attributive noun “minority” here instead of the adjective “minor” is deliberate: the vocabulary of minor languages and literatures that Deleuze and Guattari popularised with their 1975 study on Kafka, and which serves as a conceptual framework for all the articles in this volume, is only partly helpful in our understanding of Menasse and more generally of twenty-first-century minority authors, many of whom self-consciously participate in contemporary identity politics both through their work and through their public persona. *Quasikristalle* is a paradigmatic text in this context, as it engages with and nuances the kind of identity politics at work in Menasse's reception, while reflecting on the universal instability of identities, minority or otherwise.

Admittedly, Menasse *can* to some extent be considered a minor author in the same sense that Deleuze and Guattari considered Kafka to be in German, as well as Joyce and Beckett in English, and Artaud and Céline in French (Deleuze and Guattari 19 and 26). It is therefore worth first making a small digression to discuss how the term “minor” features in their writing. In order to do so, in turn, we must first briefly sketch how the term features in Kafka's own writings. On 25 December 1911, Kafka wrote a rather cryptic entry in his diary in which he reflects on how contemporary Jewish literature in Warsaw, with which he had become

³ Menasse has been based in Berlin since 2003.

⁴ As will be discussed later on, the notion of minority used in this article, namely as referring to a disadvantaged or underrepresented social group of *any size* within a culture, allows us to disregard demographics and consider female identities to also be minority identities.

acquainted through his friend and member of a touring Yiddish theatre troupe Jizchak Löwy, and the contemporary Czech literature which he knew first hand, compared, in their breadth and influence, to the national literatures of big nations. Czech literature and the Jewish literature of Warsaw, he explains, flourish because they lack great masters – towering literary figures whose shoes are filled either by epigones or by aspiring but talentless young authors. Though he neither explicitly terms such literatures minor nor specifies which minorities produce them,⁵ it is quite clear, as Lowell Edmunds points out, that Kafka ‘was thinking of the literature of peoples *numerically* small, i.e., smaller than the populations of the nations that had produced the literature that he and everyone else considered most important’ (356). This point may seem obvious to Kafka’s reader but is less clear in Deleuze and Guattari’s account. Deleuze and Guattari were certainly right in emphasising the political nature of minor literature in Kafka’s model: smaller literatures, Kafka writes, with “smaller” traditions, allow the literary treatment of more minor themes, themes that greater literary traditions disdain. This gives them a ‘Lebhaftigkeit’ [liveliness] (Kafka 314) which major national literatures lack, makes them energetic and participatory, and allows people to engage with them more honestly and directly.⁶ A minor literature is, for Kafka, ‘weniger eine Angelegenheit der Literaturgeschichte als Angelegenheit des Volkes’ [less a concern of literary history than of the people] (315).

Deleuze and Guattari are therefore still quite close to Kafka’s understanding of minor literature when they suggest that the second and third characteristics of the phenomenon in their own conception are, in this order, that ‘everything in them [minor literatures] is political’ and that ‘everything takes on a collective value’ (17). The latter characteristic only accentuates the former, since ‘what each author says individually already constitutes a common action, and what he or she says or does is necessarily political, even if others aren’t in agreement’ (17). These two characteristics are arguably present in Menasse’s writing, at least in *Quasikristalle*. As will be discussed in the two sections below, Menasse’s second novel is subtly political throughout, and its protagonist’s narrative is also posited as exemplary of women’s narratives of her age group and class, to the extent that it occasionally slips into clichés. The political relevance and universalising intention of Menasse’s work could arguably be related to her status as a minor author. Yet Deleuze and Guattari’s discussion of the *first* characteristic of minor literature completely changes the content of the term they borrowed from Kafka,⁷ and makes it much more difficult to use not only in reference to Menasse but in a contemporary context more generally. This first characteristic is that the language of minor literature ‘is affected with a high coefficient of deterritorialisation’ (Deleuze and Guattari 16). The authors provide several clues as to what this means, not all of which are compatible with each other. On the one hand, they explain, a deterritorialised language is the majority language used by a minority: the German used in Kafka’s time by rural Czech Jews who had moved to Prague, for instance, was a deterritorialised language insofar as it included several literal as well as symbolic displacements, that is, insofar as it was a substitute for the lost or non-existent language of a specific community. Ronald Brogue’s summary of Deleuze and Guattari’s argument is helpful here:

⁵ Lowell Edmunds argues that Kafka’s reflections on “minor” literature, which ostensibly started out as reflections on the minority status of Czech literature within the Austro-Hungarian Empire, were actually derived from his experience of Yiddish literature, and especially Yiddish theatre. See Edmunds 353 and 362.

⁶ All translations from the German are my own.

⁷ My aim here is not to critique Deleuze and Guattari’s misreading of Kafka, which has been done often enough (see Edmunds 351) but rather to outline, by discussing the differences between them, Deleuze and Guattari’s and Kafka’s accounts of minor literature as clearly as possible in order to show how my own use of the term “minority” relates to and departs from both.

Prague Jews found themselves between several languages and at home in none. The Czech of their rural origins (which Kafka learned to speak as a child) was being supplanted by the German of the cities, an artificial 'paper language' of commerce and government. The literary language of Goethe's German seemed admirable but remote, the religious language of Hebrew even more removed (Kafka studied Hebrew rather late in life), and Yiddish, as Kafka said, instilled in many "a dread mingled with a certain fundamental distaste" [...] This linguistic dispossession, claim Deleuze and Guattari, is not unique to Prague Jews in the early twentieth century, but is typical of those minorities and marginalized groups the world over who must express themselves in the language of an alien culture. (117)

On the other hand, departing from their previous point, Deleuze and Guattari argue that linguistic "deterritorialisation" is not necessarily contingent upon the minority status of its users; they write about the deterritorialisations – the displacements and disjunctions between sound and sense – that to some extent occur in all uses of language. In most instances, however, language is "reterritorialised", linked to sense, made communicative (Deleuze and Guattari 20). A language is therefore *deterritorialised*, that is, minor, when it is used in such a way that it refuses the easy coupling of expression and meaning. A minor use of language is at once radically defamiliarised and defamiliarising, and has the paradoxical effect of investing the language in which it develops with new intensity (Deleuze and Guattari 23). Ultimately, Deleuze and Guattari conclude, on the basis of their reading of Kafka's use of sounds, that being a minor author means being 'a sort of stranger *within* [one's] own language' (26). Unlike Kafka himself, then, they conceptualise minority as the effect of an original, extreme use of a language, a use that challenges and subverts the dominant discourses, traditions, and hegemonic power structures inherent in this language. This use of language correlates with, but is not exclusively bound to, the presence of minority communities within national cultures.⁸

Menasse's use of language is rarely, if ever, radical or subversive. She does not write in dialect, and local elements feature only infrequently in her writing: while there are occasional transcriptions of the Viennese accent and local manipulations of syntax and grammar in *Vienna*, we are hard pressed to find such examples in *Quasikristalle*. Only one scene, in which the protagonist Xane meets her childhood friend's sister Sally at a Berlin café, self-consciously thematises some of the more trivial differences between Viennese and standard German, the way of referring to an ATM, for example ("Bankomat" in Viennese, "Geldautomat" in standard German), or to a spritzer ("Spritzer" in Viennese, "Weißweinschorle" in standard German) (*Q* 185). Moreover, the novel's often ironic attitude towards gender and gender relations, Austrian and German identities, and both Jewish and non-Jewish characters, is far from subversive. Despite the political inflection of her writing, Menasse can therefore not be said to be a minor author in Deleuze and Guattari's sense of the term. Neither, however, can she be said to fit in with Kafka's own conception of a linguistic and cultural, rather than aesthetic, minority in quite the same way as, say, younger, multilingual authors such as Olga Grjasnowa and Sasha Marianna Salzmann, who came to Germany as Russian-speaking Jewish

⁸ Deleuze and Guattari's understanding of "minor literature" as referring to a specific use of language establishes a connection between Kafka's aforementioned reflections on minor literature in his diaries and his comments on the three impossibilities facing Jewish Prague authors writing in German in later correspondence with Max Brod, which Deleuze and Guattari cite at the end of the first paragraph of their chapter on minor literature (Deleuze and Guattari 16–17). Edmunds argues that this connection is arbitrary and unintended by Kafka. For Kafka, minor literature is modelled on the immediacy of Yiddish theatre, whose liveliness and energy the young Jewish authors writing in Prague German are lacking. See Edmunds 366.

Kontingentflüchtlinge [quota refugees] in the 1990s.⁹ The question, then, is not whether Menasse's work can be subsumed into the category of minor literature as used by Deleuze and Guattari, or by Kafka before them, but rather which, if any, notion of minority applies to her case, what its implications are, and how it features in her work. My hypothesis is that Menasse works with, and is received with reference to, a notion of minority shaped by twenty-first-century identity politics.

Since around 2010, the term "identity politics" has been used to describe different ways in which minorities relate to and assert themselves politically within and against majorities. The term is sometimes used derogatorily, mainly by the political right, yet identity political practices and arguments are to be found across the political spectrum. In her entry in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Cressida Heyes traces this phenomenon back to the liberation movements of the mid- and late twentieth century, during which marginalised groups became organised to campaign for recognition of their rights as members of a minority community, one defined on the basis of shared identity, rather than on common 'belief systems, programmatic manifestos, or party affiliation'. Though identity politics has often been criticised for being essentialising and reductive, there is critical consensus 'that the notion of *identity* has become indispensable to contemporary political discourse' (Heyes). While historically identity political campaigns have improved the situation of some disadvantaged minorities defined by reference to gender, ethnicity or religion, among other aspects of identity, identity political practices have also redefined the very meaning of "minority", which is increasingly used as an attributive noun: phrases such as "minority identities", "minority communities" or "minority cultures" no longer seem less intuitive than constructions with the adjective "minor", but have rather become part of ordinary public discourse. As these examples suggest, "minority" is used as an umbrella term to describe all non-majority identities and is therefore much broader and more inclusive than the terms for the smaller group identities it encompasses. The near ubiquity of the term in the context of contemporary identity politics suggests that the assertion of minority identities is, paradoxically, no longer a minority phenomenon. By extension, minority politics are no longer "minor" in the sense of exceptional, radical or necessarily subversive but more mainstream than ever before.

The extent to which identity political discourses of "minority" have become mainstream is particularly salient in the context of the contemporary German literary market, and more broadly in the contemporary *Literaturbetrieb* [literary scene].¹⁰ Minority identities relating to an author's gender, sexual orientation, religion, geographical origins or cultural background, among many other things, are very often the focus of both publishers' and reviewers' attention. Most significantly, however, they are a fundamental part of how authors perform their own identities in public, part of their *Selbstinszenierung* [self-staging] in interviews, readings, and lectures known as *Poetikvorlesungen* [poetics lectures], whose format resembles the writer-in-residence schemes in the United Kingdom and United States. In many (though by no means all) instances, minority identities also feature prominently in fiction by authors who identify with minorities themselves.¹¹ Unlike minor authors in Deleuze and Guattari's understanding, who are defined as "minor" because of their politically subversive use of language,

⁹ See also Anita Bunyan's contribution to this volume for how Menasse's mixed Jewish-Christian background complicates her position as a minority author.

¹⁰ For Bodo Plachta, the term *Literaturbetrieb* encompasses more than just the literary market; it includes not only practices of literary production and promotion but also practices of reception, such as reading, reviewing, and critically discussing literature in the media and scholarship (9–15).

¹¹ Grjasnowa and Salzmann mentioned above, for example, both thematise minority identities in their fiction. Both their debut novels (*Der Russe ist einer, der Birken liebt* [2012] and *Außer sich* [2017], respectively), feature protagonists who identify with the same or very similar transcultural minorities as the authors themselves.

minority authors in the contemporary context self-define as such, and are marketed and received as such. Their minority, in other words, is *contextual* and *paratextual*: it is defined with reference to an author's public identity or identities, rather than inhering in their writing. Therefore, while Menasse does not fit Deleuze and Guattari's idea of a minor author, and does not belong to a clearly defined ethnic, religious or linguistic community of the kind that produces the minor literature that Kafka had in mind, she is a minority author in a contemporary sense insofar as she is concerned, both in her public commentaries and in her fiction, with the political implications of gendered and diasporic identities that she herself shares.

As mentioned at the beginning of this article, Menasse has been received – and performatively positions herself –, as a feminist, partly Jewish and expatriate author. The reception of her fiction is largely and sometimes uncritically steered by the way she inhabits her role as a public intellectual. Menasse became known to a broader public in 2000 (Körte 577), when she covered Holocaust-denier David Irving's London trial for the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*. The ongoing processes of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* [coming to terms with the past] in Austria and Germany and their impact on the situation of Jews in the two countries, as well as on the two countries' relations with Israel, remain central concerns of both her journalism and her fiction. Besides her support for other political causes,¹² she has also been outspoken in her support of women's rights, particularly about the benefits of reproductive medicine and IVF. Yet does Menasse's public interest in questions of gender and family policy, or in questions of Jewish and Austrian identity, legitimise the focus of her fiction's reception on these themes? To what extent is Menasse's fiction, and *Quasikristalle* more specifically, "women's literature" or feminist literature? And to what extent does it have something interesting to say about Austrian, Viennese, and/or Jewish identities?

Menasse's fiction could be described as "women's literature" insofar as the author's gender influences her concerns and interest not only in women's lives but in questions of gendered experience more broadly.¹³ The term *Frauenliteratur* [women's literature] is now assumed by scholarship to have shaken off its postwar association with *Trivialliteratur* [trivial/commercial literature], and contemporary female authors in Germany and Austria have frequently been awarded prestigious literary prizes in recognition of their work's quality and appeal to an educated readership (Baer and Hill 7). *Feuilleton* [newspaper arts' section] criticism, however, seems to lag behind the scholarly advances in appreciating fiction by and about women, and is still caught up in a narrow conception of what "women's writing" is and does: even established, acclaimed authors are routinely faced with the association of their writing with the "sentimental or girlish prose" (Baer and Hill 7) of commercial literature. Menasse is no exception and has had to defend *Quasikristalle* against such associations. Few of the novel's reviewers have seen the centrality of women's issues in it as a welcome feature, and these have notably been women themselves. In *Cicero*, for instance, Catharina Koller describes it as 'ein geschliffener Frauenroman' [a polished novel for women], while in the *Osnabrücker Zeitung*, Elke Schröder praises it for its 'brillante Reflexionen über weibliche Identität und Beziehungspflege' [lucid reflection on female identity and relationship work]. For many other *Feuilleton* critics, however, the novel's focus on a contemporary, privileged woman's experiences and relationships, and Menasse's light-handed and often humorous

¹² Eva Menasse, alongside Juli Zeh, Ilija Trojanow, and four other international authors, co-initiated the global Writers Against Mass Surveillance Campaign in 2013. The campaign garnered about 500 signatures and issued a statement calling on the United Nations and national governments to protect the civil rights of citizens online and to guarantee citizens the right to choose how their data is being gathered, stored, and processed. See von Wedemeyer.

¹³ Following thoughts on what constitutes "women's writing" in Brown 7–10; Heffernan and Pye 1–35.

style, mark *Quasikristalle* as easy, and therefore trivial, reading. The publisher's choice of a colourful Penrose tiling against a fuchsia backdrop for the cover design probably reinforced these critics' prejudices. Among those disparaging of the novel's focus on female experience, Christine Käppler, writing in the liberal weekly *Der Freitag*, likens parts of it to a 'Brigitte-Kolumne' [column in *Brigitte*, Germany's largest women's magazine] and warns of the many platitudes the critical reader must overlook in order to enjoy the novel.

It is comments such as Käppler's which, especially when coming from young women who are trying to prove their own intellectual prowess in the still male-led media and culture industry, denigrate "women's literature" and reiterate its association with literary forms that are considered trivial. Because of this association, Hester Baer and Alexandra Hill write, many contemporary female authors in Germany 'reject the notion of categorising their work as "women's literature" and even repudiate a connection between their gender politics and their writing. For example, Julia Franck, Judith Hermann and Juli Zeh have all denied that their works are feminist' (Baer and Hill 3). Unlike her colleagues, however, Menasse is open about her feminist views, though her approach to women's issues is not always circumspect or carefully worded. In the 2010 article 'Nicht christlich, sondern krank: Zur Debatte um die Präimplantationsdiagnostik' [Sick, not Christian: About the Debate on Preimplantation Diagnostics] (*Lieber aufgeregt* 26–34), which was written as a response to Merkel's support for a ban on preimplantation genetic diagnosis of human embryos, Menasse argues that such a ban would condemn some women to suffering through avoidable miscarriages and late abortions. Despite its feminist intention to support women's reproductive freedom and well-being, however, the article occasionally makes essentialising assumptions about women's attitudes to motherhood. After describing at length the painful medical procedures involved in assisted reproduction, for instance, Menasse explains that 'Frauen tun sich das an, Frauen tun sich das immer wieder an, wie freiwillige Laborratten, nicht weil sie pervers sind, sondern weil ihre *Natur* ihnen sagt, dass sie ein Kind wollen' [Women inflict this on themselves time and again like willing laboratory rats, not because they are perverse, but because they feel a *natural* urge to have a child] (*Lieber aufgeregt* 33, emphasis in the original). While such comments do not, I think, undermine the many other reasonable and fair-minded arguments in the article, they do limit its scope and relevance by revealing a subjective bias which, as I shall argue later on, is replaced by nuance and ambivalence in the representation of motherhood in *Quasikristalle*.

Similarly, there are subtle differences between the representation of Austrian and Jewish identities in Menasse's fiction on the one hand, and her comments on Austrian, German, and Jewish identities in *Feuilleton* pieces on the other. In the latter, she often reflects on the cultural and linguistic differences between Germans and Austrians, and specifically between Berliners and the Viennese, with her loyalties lying alternately with one or the other side. In such essays, as to some extent in *Quasikristalle*, Menasse indeed strikes a balance between self-consciously falling into the cliché, or rather, the Austrian predilection for *Heimatbeschimpfung* [slandering one's home country] or *Nestbeschmutzung* [soiling the nest] and keeping an ironic distance from it. In an essay about contemporary Vienna called 'Wasserkopf und Krone: Über Wien, die Heimatstadt' [Hydrocephalus and Crown: Vienna, My Hometown], she writes with fondness of 'diesen freundlichen, offenen, ideologisch und moralisch frisch gelüfteten Westdeutschen' [those friendly, open-minded, ideologically and morally well-aired West Germans], and contrasts them with her own compatriots, 'eine Bevölkerung, die ab dem Mai 1945 von nichts gewusst, keinen einzigen Nazi unter sich gehabt haben und weinerlich das erste Opfer gewesen sein wollte' [a people who, after 1945, claimed to have known nothing, to have not had a single Nazi among them, and who whined

about having been the (Hitler's) first victim] (*Lieber aufgeregt* 87–8). Elsewhere, her view of the Germans is just as stereotypical as her view of the Austrians, giving the reader the impression that in her reflections, Germany and its people only function as foils to Austrian vices and virtues. In both 'Unter Piefkes: Als Österreicherin in Deutschland' [Among the *Piefkes*: An Austrian Woman in Germany] (*Lieber aufgeregt* 69–79) and 'Raus aus dem Quadrat: Deutschland, auf seinen Bahnsteigen und anderswo' [Outside the Designated Smoking Area: German Train Platforms and Beyond] (*Lieber aufgeregt* 109–22), Germans are represented as blunt, inflexible, and serious, while Austrians are polite and sharp-witted, but notoriously chaotic, unstructured, and evasive, shunning 'die Eindeutigkeit wie die Motten das Licht' [clarity like moths shun the daylight], while being '[Weltmeister] im Blödeln und Witzeln, im Kalauern und dialektischen Relativieren' [world champions in joking and mockery, in fooling around and talking back] (*Lieber aufgeregt* 73). As on other occasions, Menasse's portraits of the two countries' "national characters" in these three articles are blatantly reductive and would have been of little interest had they been entirely devoid of irony. Yet Menasse herself willingly takes on the stereotypical role of the tongue-in-cheek *Wienerin* [Viennese woman] which she evokes in her articles.

Indeed, even Menasse's critics have praised her "Wiener Schmä" [Viennese snide humour], which is understood as a characteristically Jewish brand of irony and humour.¹⁴ Because of this feature, as well as the thematisation of Jewish-Viennese family history in *Vienna* and of contemporary identities in *Quasikristalle*, Menasse's fiction can fruitfully be viewed within the context of an ongoing revival of Austrian-Jewish culture in the thirty-odd years following the Waldheim Affair in 1986, which saw a new generation of more outspokenly Jewish or partly Jewish intellectuals gain visibility in the Austrian literary landscape (Reiter 6–7). For these authors, being Jewish is not necessarily related to their ethnicity or family history but, in the spirit of twenty-first-century identity politics, is asserted in terms of belonging to a community defined by shared identity: it means they identify as Jewish and participate in public discourse as Jewish, though their individual understanding of what this actually means may differ considerably. Menasse's own half-Jewish identity is a focal point of her public persona, though it rarely features directly in her own *Feuilleton* pieces. Only her repeated dismissal of the 'intellektuell sehr schlichte "Du Antisemit"–"nein, du!"-Geblöke [...] das seit Jahren alle einschlägigen Diskussionen um Israel, Juden und den Nahostkonflikt [in Deutschland] begleitet' [intellectually quite simplistic exchange of "you anti-Semite!"–"no, you!" bleats which has accompanied all discussions of Israel, the Jews and the Middle East conflict in Germany for years] (*Lieber aufgeregt* 119), an argument that is notoriously difficult to make publicly in Germany from a non-Jewish perspective, could be seen as relating to her partly Jewish background. The fact that Menasse's Jewishness is public knowledge, however, has often set the tone for how her fiction is received, in a way that is, I think, often quite problematic. In the case of *Quasikristalle*, it meant that critical focus fell disproportionately on the novel's second chapter, narrated from the perspective of Bernays, a half-Jewish British Holocaust researcher and Auschwitz tourist guide, who in the course of the chapter becomes infatuated with Xane against the bleak landscape of the concentration camp. Yet, unlike what criticism has so far argued, this "Auschwitz chapter" has little to do with the depiction of the protagonist's own Jewish identity in the novel, and rather reflects on the pitfalls of contemporary *German*, rather than *Austrian*, discourses about the Holocaust. Unlike the latter, the discussions about Jews and the Holocaust in German politics and culture are, in Menasse's

¹⁴ See Bunyan's article in this volume for a discussion of how Jewish humour often functions as a mechanism of coping with traumatic family histories.

view, often so moralistic that they stunt an honest discussion of contemporary Jewish identities in the German public sphere.¹⁵

The fictional identities featured in *Quasikristalle* both pre-empt and undermine the same minority identity labels attached to the author herself, and thereby challenge the identity political arguments circulating on the level of the novel's reception. By juxtaposing thirteen perspectives on Xane's life and refusing to privilege any one of these perspectives over the others, the narrative creates a sense of the relativity and instability of positions and identities that is in stark contrast to the politically well-defined minority identities with which the author is associated. Yet it is not just the (deceptive) effect of polyphony created by this juxtaposition of perspectives that destabilises the characters' positions. A much greater source of ambivalence on the level of the narrative structure is the fact that the thirteen perspectives are chronologically ordered and tightly controlled: each narrating character only occurs once, though they may be mentioned in other characters' accounts, and each only narrates the events of one period in Xane's life, though the periods covered by individual chapters vary in length. Almost all commentators on the novel remark on how the titular "quasicrystals", which are crystals with symmetrical but aperiodic, non-recurring patterns, function as a metaphor for the narrative's irregular symmetry, though different reviewers have drawn different implications from this metaphor.¹⁶

What has not been adequately spelt out, I would argue, is that it is precisely this *combination* of irregularity and symmetry, of equally weighted but seemingly unrelated and often competing perspectives, that generates uncertainty on the level of reading. Rather than helping the reader find their bearings, the accounts of the thirteen narrators ultimately leave both the narrating characters themselves and the reader with a strong sense of how limited and subject to revision their judgments are. There are many points in the novel when individual characters reflect on the inadequacy of their own point of view. Bernays, for instance, is aware of the pointlessness of his own vanity: 'immer verwechselt man den eigenen Blick mit dem der anderen', he muses, 'nur weil man selbst vor dem eigenen Spiegelbild noch mehr als sonst erschrickt [...] ist man noch lange nicht auffälliger' [one always confuses one's own gaze with that of others (...) just because you find your reflection in the mirror even scarier than usual, it really doesn't mean others notice you more] (Q 64). In the next chapter, Sally, the friend's sister whom Xane takes under her wing, is shown to be 'der Meinung, dass es verschiedene Konzepte von Wahrhaftigkeit gibt' [of the opinion that there are various ways of understanding "truthfulness"] (Q 202). Both Bernays and Sally, like many other characters in the novel, are frequently intoxicated (e.g. Q 49, 85, 197, 217 and 473), which further widens the gap between their own view of the world and that of others. Xane herself is also often seen in altered states of consciousness, whether sick (Q 48), drunk (Q 83, 174), or overmedicated in preparation for an assisted pregnancy (Q 250). Unlike the others, however, Xane is generally quick and absolute in expressing her judgments and 'Überzeugungen' [convictions] (Q 200). Only in the seventh chapter, which is narrated from her own perspective, does she briefly doubt the truth of her own convictions, though she attributes this not to her

¹⁵ See, for instance, her speech for Günter Grass's eighty-fifth birthday celebration in Lübeck, on 14 October 2012 (*Lieber aufgeregt* 53–60).

¹⁶ While some reviewers (e.g. Kegel; Boehme) find the metaphor helpful and in some instances (e.g. Schlaffer) suggest further ways of visualising the novel's narrative structure, others (e.g. Schmidt) think that, after Goethe's *Wahlverwandtschaften* [*Elective Affinities*], which elevates the titular chemical term to a narrative principle, 'naturwissenschaftliche Vergleiche' [comparisons with the natural sciences] in literature 'sind allzu oft ein Ablenkungsmanöver' [are all too often a diversion tactic] (Schmidt) that only lead readers astray. Only one reviewer (Obermüller) goes a bit further than the others in explaining the implications of the quasicrystal as consisting of irregular symmetries for how we read the novel.

individual circumstances but to her being a woman: 'Man könnte sagen, ein Frauenleben besteht aus einer Folge von unverbundenen Zellen, in denen man je nach Alter einsitzt. Das Wissen fließt, wenn überhaupt, nur in eine Richtung' [One could say that a woman's life is made up of a series of unconnected cells in which she serves her sentence, depending on her age. Knowledge flows only in one direction, if at all] (Q 361). The image of the unconnected cells through which knowledge flows in only one direction translates rather too obviously onto the novel's narrative structure, in which information gets lost in between the individual chapters: while their unbroken chronological order creates an expectation on the reader's part that each "next" chapter will fill the informational gaps opened up by the previous chapters, each chapter contains numerous flashbacks and opens up a number of new gaps which make those of the previous chapters redundant.

As Xane is the only link between the various chapters, the only character who always recurs, she becomes the point of reference by which readers try to situate and understand the different characters' perspectives. Her narrative function is that of a *roter Faden* [golden thread (literally: red thread)] that runs throughout the novel, and yet she remains rather obscure both to other characters and to the reader. Those around her remark at times on her transparency – they see 'durch Xane hindurch' [right through Xane] (Q 54) – but more often on her opacity: she remains 'undurchsichtig' [opaque] (Q 299), 'unerforschlich' [inscrutable] (Q 309), or 'unverständlich' [incomprehensible] (Q 557) to her family, friends, and lovers. The seventh chapter, narrated by Xane herself, does not grant the reader any fuller access to her experience, but rather makes her appear just as self-involved, insecure, and prone to self-deception as all the other characters of the novel. If anything, Xane is less visible, more "blank", in this seventh chapter than in any of the previous or subsequent ones. Much of the chapter shows her in crisis, feeling stagnant and stifled in her moderately successful, upper-middle-class life. As she grapples with her friend Krystyna's betrayal of her husband, who is himself an old friend of hers, Xane's doubts about her own marriage and her own fidelity materialise against her desperate self-reassurance that her life 'bleibt das, was ich immer wollte' [is still what I'd always wanted] (Q 328). What in this chapter initially seems to be a concern with moral uprightness on Xane's part, however, is revealed in the eleventh chapter, which is narrated from Krystyna's perspective, to be mere vanity and navel-gazing:

Xane war die geborene Drama-Queen. Als sie vierzig wurde, redete sie monatelang obsessiv über das Älterwerden und die Endlichkeit des Lebens, als sie fünfundvierzig wurde, jammerte sie über das Teufelchen, das tief in ihrem Innenohr saß und mit schönheitschirurgischen Maßnahmen lockte; als sie fünfzig wurde, sah man ihr von Weitem an, dass sie mit dem Nächsten, der ein wenig Interesse zeigte, ins Bett gehen würde, einfach nur, um auch einmal ihren Mann betrogen zu haben. Was hatten Xane und sie früher über dieses Ich-ich-Geschrei gehöhnt! (Q 485–6)

[Xane was a born drama queen. When she turned forty, she obsessed for months over getting older and the finitude of life; when she turned forty-five, she whined about the imp lodged deep inside her ear tempting her to get plastic surgery; when she turned fifty, you could see from afar that she would get into bed with anyone who showed even the slightest interest, just for the sake of cheating on her husband. How Xane and she had scoffed at such self-centred noise in the past!]

Krystyna's disloyalty towards her friend in this passage is no easier to empathise with than Xane's self-righteousness; yet Krystyna's account succeeds in relativising Xane's reflections,

revealing them to be banal and symptomatic of her privileged social situation. In her analysis, Marja-Leena Hakkarainen uses Pierre Bourdieu's concept of "habitus" to describe how Xane carries cultural burdens specific to her age, gender, and class:

Habitus ist Bourdieu zufolge zwar subjektiv, aber nicht individuell, und es zeigt sich, dass Xane nicht viel anders denkt und spricht als jede junge akademisch gebildete Frau, die Patchwork-Familie und Beruf unter einen Hut zu bringen versucht. Der persönliche Lebensstil erscheint als eine Variante des gemeinsamen Stils, der in zunehmendem Maße von der Medienwelt gestaltet und dirigiert wird. (278)

[According to Bourdieu, "habitus" may be subjective, but it is not individual; it is evident that Xane does not think or speak very differently from any other woman with a university degree who is trying to juggle a stepfamily and a career. Her own lifestyle is a variation on a common lifestyle which is increasingly shaped and steered by the media.]

This account echoes my argument that, despite the centrality of her narrative function, the "real" Xane remains unknown to the other characters, to herself, and arguably also to the reader. Xane is therefore the novel's protagonist only in a relative sense: the real protagonists in *Quasikristalle* are relationships, and specifically the narrating characters' constantly shifting relationships to Xane. It is in the novel's representation of relationships that the uncertainty surrounding individual characters' identities, and especially the uncertainty surrounding Xane's own, takes on a political dimension.

That the relationships at the heart of the novel are fraught with tensions, lies, insecurities, and (self-)deception is, I suggest, what is most profoundly political about *Quasikristalle*. These complex, ambivalent, and fragile relationships are precisely what defines Xane's identity as a woman, and more specifically as a partly Jewish Austrian woman in Berlin, beyond normative conceptions of these (minority) identities. Particularly through the portrayal of Xane's relationships with other women, such as her mother or her friends, her gynaecologist, and her stepdaughters, *Quasikristalle* presents the reader with nuanced and sometimes contradictory ideas about contemporary womanhood. Unlike Menasse's aforementioned article in defence of women's reproductive rights, which betrays its own feminist intention by inadvertently essentialising motherhood, the novel problematises an inauthentically feminist rhetoric which camouflages, rather than addresses, the double standards by which men and women are judged. More concretely, the female characters in the novel, including Xane herself, often resort to feminist-sounding platitudes of which they think they should be convinced. In the first chapter, for instance, Xane disapproves of her mother complimenting her friend's mother, pointing out her mother's seeming inability to comprehend 'dass eine Frau, die arbeitete, trotzdem gut aussah' [that a woman could both work and look good] (Q 41). Yet Xane's comment is undermined immediately afterwards when her friend Judith notices 'in Frau Molins Worten den melancholischen Neid' [the melancholy envy in Mrs Molin's words]. In the second chapter, Bernays' long-married lover Pauline justifies betraying him by explaining 'wieder einmal den Unterschied zwischen ihm [Bernays] und Andrej [...] der eine kein Vater, der andere kein Liebhaber. Dass sie aber beides brauche' [the difference between him (Bernays) and Andrej again (...) the one was not made to be a father, the other not made to be a lover. But that she needed both] (Q 65). Yet Bernays is not convinced of her equanimity: 'Und um zu betonen, wie Ernst sie das meinte und wie vollkommen legitim das war, hatte sie die Hände auf dem Tisch übereinandergelegt und sah ihm geradeaus in die Augen [...] Wenn

nur das rechte Lid nicht gezuckt hätte' [And to stress how seriously she meant this and how justified it was, she had folded her hands on the table and looked straight into his eyes. (...) If only her right eyelid hadn't twitched] (Q 65). In both instances, the women only say what they think they should, to cover up for much more complex emotional realities to which they have no access or for which they have no words.

In the seventh chapter, Xane presents many of her private concerns and fears about relationships, parenthood, and ageing as universal female problems. She is shown to be caught up in clichéd, outdated, and black-and-white ways of thinking about men and women, as well as younger and older women – patterns of thought reminiscent of the rhetoric of women's magazines of previous decades. Though unmarried older women are sometimes celebrated as eccentric, uncompromising 'Wahnsinnsfrauen' [super-women], she thinks, married middle-aged women with children will never achieve even such an ambivalent 'Trostpreis' [consolation prize] as this status:

Und deshalb fürchtet, wer ein respektables Ehemann-Exemplar gefunden, sich mit diesem zusammengerauft und sich an sein Schnarchen oder an seine herumliegenden Mokkalöffel gewöhnt hat, nichts so sehr wie die *junge Frau*. Sobald wir über vierzig sind, hegen wir jungen Frauen gegenüber Mordgedanken. Selbst wenn sie als heißverliebte Ehefrauen in unseren Freundeskreis eintreten, beobachten wir argwöhnisch, wie lange unser eigener Mann das Frischfleisch bei der allgemeinen Begrüßung küsst und an sich drückt. Da gibt es nämlich einiges zu sehen. Und da fragen sie in den Magazinen allen Ernstes, warum Frauen stutenbissig sind?! Warum sie nicht, wie die Männer, diese unsichtbaren Netzwerke bilden und sich gegenseitig zum Aufstieg verhelfen? (Q 360)

[And that's why whoever has found a respectable sample of a husband, attached herself to him, gotten used to his snoring or his coffee spoons lying around the house, fears nothing more than the *young woman*. As soon as we're over forty, we start having thoughts about murdering young women. Even if they are married and head-over-heels in love when they join our group of friends, we eye them suspiciously to see how long our own husband will linger when kissing and pressing the fresh meat to himself in greeting. Because there's rather a lot to see there. And then men ask themselves in earnest why women are catty?! Why they don't create these invisible networks men do, why they don't help each other make it?]

Xane's thoughts here are admittedly banal and reliant on stereotypes; yet the accounts of other characters in previous and subsequent chapters put them into perspective, showing the protagonist's worries to be unfounded, exaggerated, and inconsistent with her behaviour. There is indeed a dialectical relationship throughout the novel between clichés about the female experience on the one hand – clichés that led the novel's critics to compare it to "Brigitte-Kolumnen" and which Menasse to some extent reproduces in her own op-eds – and details that question, nuance, or undermine these clichés on the other. This dialectic can perhaps be seen most clearly in the subplot of Xane's assisted pregnancy in earlier chapters of the novel: the familiar tropes used to describe Xane's desire and repeated failure to get pregnant are counterbalanced by a rather cynical view of reproductive medicine, which is much more complex and nuanced than in Menasse's *Feuilleton* essay. The fifth chapter, in particular, narrated from the perspective of IVF specialist and Xane's gynaecologist Dr Heike Guttmann, shows reproductive medicine to be not just accessible to the privileged few but also above all a profitable business. Xane's ultimate success in conceiving a child, moreover,

is neither celebrated as a triumph of medical science nor presented as a token of her social privilege; it is relativised by her account, however brief and cursory, of post-natal depression in chapter seven. In this way, each turn of the plot, however predictable, is coloured with ambivalence: Xane's difficulty in getting pregnant can only be overcome through an expensive, fallible, and invasive medical procedure, and her eagerly anticipated experience of early motherhood is overshadowed by a serious but little-discussed mental health condition. The examples considered in this section make it clear that the novel mobilises clichés about the female experience not in order to endorse them, as Menasse's critics suggest, but in order to show their inadequacy and unhelpfulness in representing the messy reality of female identities and relationships.

Similarly, the discussion of both Jewish identity and Viennese idiosyncrasies is much more nuanced in the novel than it is either in Menasse's essays or in the discussions of the novel in *Feuilleton* reviews. Xane's half-Jewishness seems to only have *social* rather than religious significance for her and those around her; the fact that her visit to Auschwitz, strategically narrated from the perspective of an insecure male tour guide, fails to lead her to any better understanding of her Jewishness, means that critics have been looking in vain in this chapter for the "key" to the representation of Jewish identity in the novel. Rather, Xane's exploration of her Jewishness comes as part of her more general intellectual and ideological development. As her friend Krystyna comments bitterly: 'Gerade war sie noch ein normales Wiener Mädchen aus einem konservativ-katholischen Gymnasium gewesen, da stürzte sie sich plötzlich auf die Verfolgungsgeschichte ihres Vaters, fand im Archiv zwei ermordete Großtanten und galt fortan als "jüdische Intellektuelle"' [One moment she was still a normal Viennese girl from a conservative Catholic high school, the next she suddenly stumbled upon her father's history of persecution, found two murdered great-aunts in an archive, and from then on made herself out to be a "Jewish intellectual"] (Q 478). Yet Krystyna's suspicion that Xane's identification as Jewish is inauthentic and invoked strategically as a means of self-promotion leaves no room for more sympathetic readings of the way Xane chooses to assume her Jewishness in the novel – as a call to political action and free thought, and an imperative to break out of the stifling conservatism of Catholic Vienna. The optimistic notion that minority identities can be freely chosen, empowered, and subversive positions of agency is further undermined by Krystyna's suggestion, elsewhere in the same chapter, that in later years Xane betrayed the ideological commitment that she had associated with her Jewish heritage. Xane's resentful friend Sally agrees with Krystyna that Xane's image as a Jewish intellectual is just a pose: from Sally's point of view, Xane, like many others in her generation of intellectuals who spent their youth exposing the complacency and hypocrisy of their parents' generation in Germany and Austria, becomes increasingly *spießig* [stuffy, boring] (Q 187) with age and overly attached to her 'bürgerlichen Gewissheiten' [bourgeois certainties] (Q 202). However, the novel undermines these two women's cynical view of Xane by shifting to the perspective of Xane's son in the last chapter, through whose emails to Xane we learn of her return to Vienna after her husband's death and of her new relationship. Through his viewpoint, her return appears to be not so much a homecoming or a final assimilation into a conservative milieu which she believes she has been opposing her entire life, but rather proof of her abandonment of petty 'Gewissheiten' and her acceptance of the unresolved questions that are her "home", her future, and her own sense of self.

The novel ends with Xane's acceptance of an uncertainty that, by trying to plan out and control the course of her life, she has been suppressing for years. Even her new beginning in Vienna late in life is well thought through, yet she does allow herself to be surprised by unforeseen 'Wendungen des Lebens' [turns of life] (Q 563) and questions which, 'wie die meisten interessanten Fragen, nicht so umfassend zu beantworten [sind], dass man am

Ende zufrieden wäre' [like most interesting questions, cannot be answered fully enough for one to feel satisfied in the end] (Q 566). I suggest that we read the heroine's embracing of uncertainty at the end of *Quasikristalle* as politically meaningful: it announces that the "difficult" questions with which the novel grapples, questions of identity shaped by gender and gender relations, by cultural and geographical borders, by ethnicity, class, and privilege, will ultimately be left unanswered. Minority identities, which in the context of identity politics denote forms of politically meaningful communities of belonging, are thereby shown to be relative, shifting, and ambivalent, rather than clear-cut and definitive. The uncertainty with which the novel ends ultimately also amounts to a rejection of prescriptive ideas about how to be – and write as – a woman, and a Jewish Austrian in Germany. Though Menasse engages with these minority aspects of her own identity in her journalism in ways that are, on occasion, biased and stereotypical, her fiction manages to ironise and nuance them, thereby rendering them ethically and politically productive. In other words, her fiction asks questions where her journalism makes statements, and by doing so opens up possibilities for reimagining the meaning of minority identities. While this does not qualify Menasse as a minor author in Deleuze and Guattari's sense, it does confirm that contemporary *minority* authorship can be original, critical, and subversive.

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