

KIRKUS REVIEWS

Pinget, Robert
THAT VOICE
Trans. by Barbara Wright
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Like *Fable* (1981), this short novel is quintessential later work by one of literature's most daunting, intriguing avant-gardists: it is fiction like unidentifiable soup, chocked with ingredients which seem homely enough but are at first unexplainable; and this little book of 114 pages may require four or five times the concentration demanded by the average piece of serious fiction. There are repeated runic sayings ("Traces of effacement" is the most charged one here) which surpass understanding. There is a continual motif of self-registering effort: "an illocalizable whisper, voices from all around at first, and then here, without appeal, those who had chosen it remain in it unscathed, the voices went on speaking here. . . ." There is a choir of anonymous, plain, local speech: the gossip of French townspeople about an old man found murdered in his bed, about his nephew who discovers notebooks the man kept (about everything and nothing), about later efforts to archive those notebooks. Pinget starts, then, with gossipy speculation; but through it is threaded a meditation on whether

death and remembering and written language can be anything more than a damage done—an investigation of whether memory can or can't be made into record. And things do sometimes become clear: the phrase "Traces of effacement," for example, turns out to refer to the old man's habit of jotting every bit of daily trivia on a slate (sponging it clean each night). Yet, even when all at sea here, the adventurous reader will be compelled to continue—because of the unpretentiousness of the contributing voices (no experimental writer other than Beckett is less patronizing) and because Pinget slowly reveals his own authorial anguish over this paradox of trying to capture things in words. ("This ridiculous attempt at evasion will have been necessary in order to discover where the beyond resides.") The most rooted of all avant-gardists at work now, Pinget uses as a tension his own pain at having to tug at those roots by writing, telling, even mumbling—which lends the book's last pages, and its last paragraph in particular, a remarkably beautiful, flayed poetry (superbly translated by Barbara Wright): "All regrets stifled, task accepted, to recompense as a defense against anguish, no matter where it may come from, that unforgotten dream, then finally leave it far behind, an old ceiling cluttered with birds and flowers in the taste of a bygone age, and progress toward the inaccessible, without landmarks, without notes of any kind, unattainable but present, which must be believed in for fear of never dying." Immensely difficult; but, for the most serious readers, immensely rewarding.