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HANNAH PROCTOR 

## Resistance I

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**ABSTRACT:** In an essay on Peter Weiss, W. G. Sebald remarked observes that 'the grotesque deformities of our inner lives have their background and origin in collective social history'. Weiss's works explore the relationships between writing and action, aesthetics and politics. This short essay discusses some fragments of texts by Weiss, asking how subjects formed and (grotesquely) deformed by history can continue to resist or intervene to alter its course.

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# Resistance I

HANNAH PROCTOR

1937 — Hitler is ensconced at the Reichstag, Stalinist terror reigns in Moscow and the Republican Army are battling the fascists in Spain. In Berlin, a group of young communists gaze at the ancient battle of deities and giants depicted on the Pergamon Altar. This is how Peter Weiss begins his epic three-volume novel *The Aesthetics of Resistance*. Sinewy stone figures wrestle in a state of petrified unrest, their heroic actions frozen *in media res*. The scene is ‘shattered into fragments’. ‘Yawning cracks’ cut once whole figures to pieces. Muscular stumps, bits of jaw, leg, ankle, and ‘tremendous and dismembered hands’ protrude from the hard marble.<sup>1</sup> Hands without fingers, shoulders without arms, fists without swords... Mutilated bodies strangle, clamber and clutch at one another desperately. Torsos convulse in pain. Ligaments tear, sweat pours, blood congeals, arteries swell. The silence, occasionally broken by the soft echoes of tourists’ footsteps, seems

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1 Peter Weiss, *The Aesthetics of Resistance, Volume 1: A Novel*, trans. by Joachim Neugroschel (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), pp. 3–5.

to contain an 'inaudible roaring' that the young observers strain to hear:<sup>2</sup>

We heard the thuds of the clubs, the shrilling whistles, the moans, the splashing of blood. We looked back at a prehistoric past, and for an instant the prospect of the future likewise filled up with a massacre impenetrable to the thought of liberation.<sup>3</sup>

They gaze at the beaten and the dying. They stare at the stone and it is as though they can see their own future defeats unfold before their eyes, brutal defeats that the novel goes on to trace in visceral detail. 'The silence, the paralysis of those fated to be trampled into the ground continued to be palpable.'<sup>4</sup> But they perceive other struggles contained in the panorama of devastation. The scene is one of antagonism and striving rather than of resignation; perhaps another outcome could have been possible. The scene also seems to function as a possible source of hope and spur to resistance, confirming the necessity to keep on fighting.

*The Aesthetics of Resistance* itself stands as a scarred monument to past struggles. Weiss is unflinching in his portrayal of political failure and the historical wreckage of twentieth-century Europe. Yet, as Fredric Jameson discusses, he is concerned with asking 'how to draw energy from such endless images of horror.'<sup>5</sup> Forced to contemplate the novel's corpse-strewn pages, Weiss places the reader in the position of his young protagonists at the Pergamon Altar in order to provide 'a lesson about the

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2 Ibid., pp. 3–5.

3 Ibid., p. 9.

4 Ibid.

5 Fredric Jameson, 'Foreword: A Monument to Radical Instants', in Weiss, *The Aesthetics of Resistance*, pp. vii–xlix (p. xliii).

productive uses of a past and a history that is not simply represented or commemorated but also reappropriated by some new future of our own present.<sup>6</sup> The novel ends by returning to the frieze, dwelling on the empty space on the altar where the lion's paw of Heracles should be: 'The empty space in the frieze, at the spot where the lion's paw of Heracles would hang, designates precisely something absent, unrealized.'<sup>7</sup> The empty space is left open for future intervention. As Weiss himself stated, both the Pergamon and his novel are addressed to the present: 'that turmoil, those figures tangled up in relentless, dreadful combat, figures strangling one another, lacerating one another with spears. It is the very same struggle that we are engaged in today.'<sup>8</sup>

The novel's narrative ends in 1945 but was written decades later. Weiss died in 1982, shortly after the publication of the novel's third and final volume (the first having appeared in 1975). The Berlin wall fell seven years after that, bringing to an end one of the major conflicts that animates the narrative: between the official positions (both political and aesthetic) of the Communist Party and unorthodox communist idealism. This conflict is also evident in Weiss's play *Trotsky in Exile*, which points to a gap between historical materialist predictions and historical reality as it unfolded. A programme note by Ernest Mandel written to accompany a production of the play in London remarks:

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6 Ibid., p. xlvii.

7 Klaus R. Scherpe and James Gussen, 'Reading the *Aesthetics of Resistance*: Ten Working Theses', *New German Critique*, 30 (Autumn 1983), pp. 97–105 (p. 104).

8 Burkhardt Lindner and Christian Rogowski, 'Between Pergamon and Plötzensee: Another Way of Depicting the Course of Events an Interview with Peter Weiss', *New German Critique*, 30 (Autumn 1983), pp. 107–26 (p. 120).

The theoretical controversies, which initiate the play — concerning the role of the peasant, the proletariat, the intelligentsia and the bourgeoisie in the coming Russian revolution, the precise, future form of government and society, the organizations of revolutionaries most appropriate to a rapid success — all find at most a contradictory, incomplete or provisional validation in the actual course of history.<sup>9</sup>

Weiss stages theoretical discussions against the backdrop of historical events that surge weirdly and wildly in directions that the protagonists cannot predict and thus constantly destabilize, undermine, or complicate their pronouncements; theory and praxis (or perhaps it would make more sense to say ideas and history) crash into each other constantly. Jameson's description of *The Aesthetics of Resistance* is also pertinent here: 'the urgency of the dialogical [...] is fueled by a passion for a unity that can never come into being.'<sup>10</sup> The passion for unity that the text exhibits is rooted in a relation to an orthodox Marxist-Leninist understanding of the dialectical movement of history, which sees tensions resolve in a final moment of reconciliation (Absolute Knowledge/Communism). Weiss does not operate entirely within the parameters of this paradigm but whether consciously or unconsciously, critically or obediently, he nonetheless contends with the dominant Party line.

Jameson's discussion of dialogism in Weiss invokes the Soviet literary scholar Mikhail Bakhtin, who argued that language is always internally split. Bakhtin acknowledged

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9 Ernest Mandel, 'Trotsky in Exile' [programme notes from the 1971 London production] <<https://www.marxists.org/archive/mandel/1971/xx/exile.htm>> [accessed 20 December 2018].

10 Jameson, 'Foreword', p. xxvii.

that language is 'ideologically saturated',<sup>11</sup> but claimed that the apparently rigid structures of the 'unitary language' always operate in the midst of heteroglossia;<sup>12</sup> a tendency to unite is constantly undermined by a tendency to disassemble. The unitary language and heteroglossia are in constant dialogue; the former imposing limits, tending towards stasis and ossification, the latter always fighting to resist these constraints. The unitary language is centripetal, it keeps the language moving uniformly along a prescribed path, whereas heteroglossia is centrifugal; it pulls things apart. For Bakhtin, every utterance is 'a contradiction-ridden, tension-filled unity of two embattled tendencies in the life of language.'<sup>13</sup> This tension between these two modes of language recalls the tension between a particular meta-historical understanding of progressive time and the messiness of history as it unfolded in practice.

In an essay reflecting on Weiss's work, W. G. Sebald perceives a similar tension in a self-portrait of Weiss, which demonstrates 'both the will to resist and a process that may be described as the assimilation of the chill of the system which the subject knows threatens him.'<sup>14</sup> The work operates within a particular ideologically saturated discourse, which the experiences being described cannot be fully contained by. Heteroglossia — although it would be clearer to

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11 Mikhail Bakhtin, 'Discourse in the Novel', in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. by Michael Holquist, trans. by Michael Holquist and Caryl Emerson (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), pp. 259–422 (p. 271).

12 The Russian term is 'raznorechiye', derived from 'ravno' (different) and 'rechi' (speech).

13 Bakhtin, 'Discourse in the Novel', p. 272.

14 W. G. Sebald, 'The Remorse of the Heart: On Memory and Cruelty in the Work of Peter Weiss', *On the Natural History of Destruction*, trans. by Anthea Bell (New York: Random House, 2003), pp. 169–91 (p. 175).

say history — intrudes, cracking open the official unitary language.

The second volume of *The Aesthetics of Resistance* contains a long meditation on Théodore Géricault's painting *The Raft of Medusa* (1818-19). Weiss's fascination doesn't only concern the painting itself, which displays the splayed corpses of the drowned shipwreck victims (and could in some sense be aligned with the Pergamon Altar), but also Géricault's personal and embodied sufferings — how the artist's struggle became intertwined with his subject matter in some sense. And as Weiss's novel unfolds, it similarly reflects this damaged subjectivity. As Sebald observes: 'the grotesque deformities of our inner lives have their background and origin in collective social history.'<sup>15</sup>

Is it possible for a damaged subject to damage the damaging world? Can individuals resolve their internal fractures through collective action? In Weiss's work the extent to which people are capable of changing or intervening in the course of that history remains a fraught question. In Weiss's 1963 play *Marat/Sade* (or *The Persecution and Assassination of Jean-Paul Marat as Performed by the Inmates of the Asylum of Charenton Under the Direction of the Marquis de Sade*), the tension between history and nature (or the contingent and the immutable) is exemplified by the figures of Marat and Sade respectively. Sade takes the position that nature is a 'passionless spectator'<sup>16</sup> indifferent to humanity, declaring that

Nature herself would watch unmoved  
if we destroyed the entire human race.<sup>17</sup>

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15 Ibid., p. 184.

16 Peter Weiss, *Marat/Sade*, trans. by Geoffrey Skelton and Adrian Mitchell (New York; Atheneum, 1983), p. 23.

17 Ibid., p. 24.

Marat, on the other hand, insists on the possibility of intervention:

Against Nature's silence I use action  
In the vast indifference I invent a meaning  
I don't watch unmoved I intervene  
and say that this and this are wrong  
and I work to alter them and improve them  
The important thing  
is to pull yourself up by your own hair  
to turn yourself inside out  
and see the whole world with fresh eyes.<sup>18</sup>

The play stages rather than resolves this contradiction. Structured as a play-within-a-play performed by patients in an asylum, *Marat/Sade* is set in 1808; the revolutionary events that are directed by Sade and performed by the inmates (which culminate in the assassination of Marat) took place in the preceding years. In addition to the dynamic between Sade and Marat there is also a tension between the patients and hospital workers. If the asylum is understood as a microcosm of France then this distinction between the insane and the sane maps onto a class antagonism between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie. The patients, ordinary French people who have not benefitted from the revolution, come into constant conflict with the bourgeois people who run the hospital, setting up a conflict-ridden dialogue similar to the relation between heteroglossia and unitary language. Weiss also aligns the Parisian audience of Sade's play-within-a-play with the contemporary audience he is addressing. According to John J. White, Weiss's depiction of French history, which draws a parallel between Marat and Sade should be

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18 Ibid., p. 27.



read as a comment on German history, drawing an analogous connection between the Nazi past and the West German present. For White the pronouncements of Sade regarding the immutability of history are characteristic of the play as a whole, which is governed by a 'cruel note of historical determinism'; history becomes a play lunatics are forced to perform like puppets.<sup>19</sup> This seems to offer a bleaker view of the world than the opening scene in *The Aesthetics of Resistance*. Would it be possible to imagine a scenario in which the audience somehow prises open a space for intervention, refuses the seemingly mechanically repetitious cycles history is fatefully trapped in to refuse the 'chill of the system'? Could the asylum's inmates overturn their situation in the manner dreamed of by the young protagonists standing before the Pergamon Altar?

Weiss's works pose often unresolvable questions about the relationships between writing and action, aesthetics and politics. They suggest that only through reckoning with the wounds of history can wounded subjects produced by history resist the continued perpetration of future violence.

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19 John J. White, 'History and Cruelty in Peter Weiss's "Marat/Sade"', *Modern Language Review*, 63.2 (1968), pp. 437–48 (p. 447).

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