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Infernal Poetics: Peter Weiss and the Problem of Postwar Authorship

SARAH POURCIAU

ABSTRACT: The article investigates the relationship between grammatical temporality and historical fiction in the work of Peter Weiss. It proposes a notion of redemptive ambiguity at the level of tense, with which Weiss’s language actively resists the claustrophobia of a posthistorical (because of post-Auschwitz) eversame. It then goes on to extrapolate, from this grammatically resistant aesthetics, a Weissian critique of linguistic fluency and political pragmatism as embodied, for Weiss, by his contemporary Günter Grass.

Keywords: grammatical temporality, Günter Grass, historical fiction, language, Peter Weiss

Keinen Toten kann der Dichter von heute erwecken, er besitzt nichts als die Wirklichkeit von Worten, die jetzt noch aussprechbar sind, und es ist seine Aufgabe, diese Worte zu finden, und sie leben zu lassen, in der absoluten Leere. (Weiss, Rapporte 138)

Gegen den blutigen Ernst der totalen Gesellschaft […] steht einzig noch der blutige Ernst, die begriffene Wahrheit. (Adorno 241)

From 1964 to 1970, Peter Weiss filled his notebooks with plans for a modern Divine Comedy, even going so far as to produce at least two different versions of the Inferno. He never published this material and eventually abandoned the idea of rewriting Dante’s epic work, but countless motifs from the Dantean afterworld found their way into the novel he began in 1971—a novel that eventually grew to encompass
three volumes under the title *Die Ästhetik des Widerstands*. The Dantean motifs in Weiss’s last novel have received a great deal of attention from the scholarly literature; yet in spite of the important contribution such studies have made to our understanding of this text, the discussion has thus far tended to miss a crucial point. For what Weiss discovers in Dante is ultimately less a set of motifs, or even techniques, than a peculiarity of narrative structure that mirrors his own predicament: the medieval Christian content of the *Commedia* fascinates this twentieth-century Communist Jew only insofar as it serves the revolutionary *form* necessitated by the poem’s premise. Dante’s storyteller, who travels through the afterworld of damned and saved souls, experiences as a living, breathing being the realm where experience has always already come to an end. His story thus narrates a world beyond the reach of narrative time. Small wonder, then, that it is punctuated by lamentations about the impossibility of the entire poetic project. In an effort to demonstrate the significance of this *afterworld* structure for a Weissian aesthetic, and for the notion of resistance his aesthetic *puts into words*, I will begin, not with his last novel, but with his first—*Der Schatten des Körpers des Kutschers* will lay the groundwork for *Die Ästhetik des Widerstands*. My contention in doing so will be that the Dantean aesthetics of resistance shapes Weiss’s literary production from the moment he sets out to write and not, as so often maintained, from the moment he sets out to write about *politics*.

**THE GRAMMAR OF HELL: DER SCHATTEN DES KÖRPERS DES KUTSCHERS**

The narrator of *Der Schatten des Körpers des Kutschers* explains that he writes to fix the contours of his sensory surroundings: “Mit dem Bleistift die Geschehnisse vor meinen Augen nachzeichnend, um damit dem Gesehenen eine Kontur zu geben, und das Gesehene zu verdeutlichen, also das Sehen zu einer Beschäftigung machend, sitze ich neben dem Schuppen auf dem Holzstoß [. . .]” (*Schatten* 38). His image suggests the sketching artist. He, however, is writing, not drawing. The pencil moves laterally across the page, “von Wort zu Wort und von Zeile zu Zeile,” (38) translating his visual experience atop the woodpile into a linguistic stream, one that mimics the filmstrip it most definitively is not. The clarity he hopes thereby to bestow on his immediate sensory impressions belongs, despite his recurrent insistence on the visual, to the temporal unfolding of language.
Schatten, which narrates three days and nights in an isolated, rural guesthouse, was Weiss’s first published work in the German language, and its exaggeratedly filmic approach to literary representation immediately attracted the attention of the literary establishment. Weiss’s contemporaries praised the seventy-seven-page “micronovel” as a hyperrealist experiment in the relationship between language and vision, and they predicted great things for the graphic artist-turned-author who had thus so suddenly and boldly emerged from the silence of his Swedish exile (see, for example, Enzensberger, Krolow, and Wolf, as ctd. in Rector 401). More recent reception has tended to read the text as a battle for the word, focusing on the narrator’s compulsive need to transcribe his sensory observations into language. Although there can be no question, however, that the resulting negotiations structure the Schatten, or that the notion of verbalizing visual stimuli goes on to inform the great ekphrastic passages of Weiss’s later works, some of the most interesting studies look elsewhere for the true stakes of the experiment. The attempt to portray Weiss as a hyperrealist, fascinated by the (im)possibility of recording life, gives way in these readings to the insistence that Weiss, as author, ultimately undermines his narrator’s project of pure description, by subordinating it to a more or less traditional teleology of climax and denouement.

The approach depends on the observation that despite the absence of a traditional plot, the text conforms to a familiar pattern of escalating tension and climactic release. The repeated references to an empty chair at the communal dinner table—“zu meiner Linken sitzt niemand; der Platz ist leer und wartet auf einen neuen Gast” (Schatten 20)—establish an atmosphere of expectation from the beginning. Frequent sexual innuendos on the part of the narrator, only partially concealed beneath the veneer of precise, impersonal description; fragments of conversation revolving around explicit, sexual content; the sexual nature of the narrator’s own imaginative visions, which he ostensibly produces by blurring his vision with salt crystals, all contribute to a steady intensification of sexual tension. And as if to reinforce the impression of mounting pressure, the narrator’s descriptions grow gradually more complex and convoluted, the spaces he describes more suffocatingly claustrophobic as the text progresses. The whole process ostensibly culminates in the much-needed experience of release—the coachman arrives to fill the empty seat at the dinner table; later that night, he and the housekeeper have sex on the kitchen table—an experience that, in turn, supposedly transforms the narrator
from an alienated, dispassionate observer into an emotionally engaged participant, capable of asking questions at the dinner table and feeling sympathy for a mistreated horse (see Zeller and Ivanovic).

As a description of the way the text functions, the teleological account is essentially accurate. Indeed, the problem is not that these organizing structures do not exist, but rather that they are everywhere. Weiss’s brief text is utterly saturated with shaping devices of this kind, including a few more extravagant permutations where the teleological arc assumes the spiritual weight of an anticipated redemption. To mention just two of the most significant, which draw little or no attention from the secondary literature: the narrative span covers precisely three days and three nights at the pension, thereby recalling both Christ’s three days in the realm of the dead (from Good Friday to Easter Sunday), and Dante’s three-day journey through the afterlife; the empty chair at the dinner table alludes to the Jewish tradition of leaving a space vacant for the messianic return of Elijah, prophet from the Book of Kings who ascends to heaven on a chariot of fire as a kind of mystical Kutscher. This absurd proliferation of teleological structuring devices paves the way, not for an actual, redemptive release, but for a parodic fulfillment that collectively subverts all proffered meanings. The long-awaited messiah arrives in the form of the coachman, a frequent visitor to the farm whose coming therefore in no way qualifies as a messianic event, his coal-laden coach a ludicrously prosaic version of Elijah’s holy chariot. And the insistent undercurrent of sexual innuendo ends not in the ecstasy of consummation, but in the preposterously precise account of two shadows having shadow sex (“Der Schatten des Unterleibes des Kutschers hob und senkte sich [. . .] über dem mittanzenden Schatten des Körpers der Haushälterin” [Schatten 76])—from the narrator’s point of view, an experience no less mediated, and presumably no more satisfying, than the imaginary visions of naked women and copulating deer that precede it. The narrator responds to these pseudoclimactic events, not with an outpouring of previously repressed empathic emotion, but with an overwhelming “Gleichgültigkeit” that sets in immediately after the arrival of the coachman and prevents him from continuing his narrative for three full days. Even after this three-day interlude, he can write only with great difficulty, “bereit, jeden Augenblick [meine Aufzeichnungen] abzubrechen und für immer aufzugeben” (Schatten 70–71). When the final sentence of the text concludes without a period—a sentence
that, teleologically speaking, ought to definitively complete the dramatic arc of tension built and released—it is therefore impossible to discount the possibility that the narrator has, in fact, simply succumbed to temptation and “broken off” his observations. 7

My contention, then, is that Weiss’s interpreters are right in pointing out the presence of these various shaping mechanisms, but wrong in accepting them at face value—and that Weiss’s treatment of categories such as subjectivity, experience, fulfillment, and introspection ultimately does more to destabilize the whole notion of authorial shaping than it does to discredit the descriptive distortions of his narrator. The project of the Schatten, in other words, goes beyond an attempt to replicate traditional dramatic or novelistic structures with nontraditional means. The disagreement is important, because the parodic perspective manages to take seriously a dimension of the text that remains essentially inaccessible to the teleological approach.

This dimension involves the notion of the tiny Schatten universe as a miniature version of hell. The phrase “remains inaccessible” should not be taken to imply that the secondary literature somehow fails to recognize the hellish undertones of the narrator’s world, because the notion of the farm as inferno crops up in almost every interpretation of the text. Weiss himself will later and elsewhere describe the real-world progenitor of his fictional guesthouse as an “Ort der Verbannung, der Verdammnis” and compare it with Swedenborg’s vision of hell (see Weiss, Fluchtpunkt 122); indications internal to the narrative include the aforementioned intertext of Christ’s three days in the realm of the dead, the coachman’s role as a kind of Charon figure, transporting the occasional new “guest” to the underworld of the Pension and the Schatten of the title, which can refer as legitimately to the shades of Hades as it does to the shadow of the fornicating coachman. The teleological approach, however, leaves no room for a notion of hell that transcends a rather vague, metaphorical expression of subjective desolation and alienation—no room, in other words, for hell as a definable philosophical concept like the one Weiss first explicitly articulates in 1965, more than ten years, I would argue, after he has put the concept into aesthetic practice: 8

Es [gibt in der Hölle] keine Hoffnung auf Veränderung [. . .] Es ist das Wesen der Hölle, daß es dort keine Einsicht gibt. Ihr Schmerz führt zu keinem Ergebnis und kann deshalb als nicht vorhanden angesehen werden [. . .] Solcher Schmerz läßt sich nie sühnen. Das Furchtbare an der Hölle ist ihre Starre. (Weiss, Rapporte 166)
Hell, for Weiss, defines precisely the kind of space that the teleological account insists does not exist in the *Schatten*: a space where all teleologies turn back on themselves, where master narratives of progress and redemption proliferate impotently and every promise of release morphs into its own parodic debasement. Its *hellishness* resides in the absolute negation of hope—a hell that left the door open for its own teleological overcoming would no longer be hell at all; it would be history. This rigorous conceptualization of a world beyond all possibility of change is what Weiss will later discover in and explicitly ascribe to Dante, the poet who marks the entrance to his underworld with the inscription, “Abandon all hope, ye who enter here.” There is, however, one crucial difference: for the petrified stasis of hell does not, in its Weissian manifestation, remain safely consigned to the afterlife. Rather, in the apocalyptic era of the Holocaust, it has begun to intersect with the world of the living, thereby establishing a realm of worldly experience that is beyond the potentially redemptive reach of worldly time. What is truly new about the modern experience is that the eternal return of oppression and domination, sealed off from the possibility of historical change, no longer leaves open even a sliver of space for the truly new. Hopelessness has become the objective condition of a posthistorical world, and the notion of hell allows Weiss to conceptualize this condition without reducing it to the trivial consequence of an alienated, bourgeois subjectivity.

The infernal order takes shape in the *Schatten* as the absolute impossibility of the singular event, a logic that dictates the radical absence of particularity and difference within the enclosure of the ever-same. Actions at the guesthouse have no meaningful consequences; they relate to each other within the context of a purely deterministic but nonetheless opaque causality, according to which utterly trivial occurrences set off mechanical chain reactions: a music box breaks, coffee spills, an iron falls, chaos ensues. Such sequences have nothing to do with the historiopolitical category of human intention. They are as impossible to predict as they are to interrupt. They bear no fruit; they change nothing. Action in the *Schatten* finds its paradigmatic representation in the perfectly Sisyphean task to which one of the characters is condemned on day two, that of continually transporting large stones from one pile to another. In such an environment, the passage of time loses all meaning, degenerating into an undifferentiated, frictionless flow that can no longer be distinguished from absolute stasis. This degeneration explains why the doctor—one of the
four “guests”—cannot remember whether the amount of time he has spent at the guesthouse should be measured in months or years, and why the narrator ends his description of the breakfast meal with the statement: “Ich aß weiter, um das plötzlich aufsteigende Gefühl der Unendlichkeit dieses Morgens zu ersticken” (Schatten 52).

The subversion of the teleological arc that concludes the narrative thus serves only to confirm the self-evident hopelessness of a situation in which all the necessary preconditions for fruitful, productive activity have disappeared. Except, it would appear, for the activity of writing. The narrator writes down his experiences because he wants to hold on to what he has seen and heard, a goal that would be innocent enough to qualify as banal if it were not for the fact that what he has seen and heard belongs to a world where experience has no contours. This fact alone redeems, for Weiss, the project of “pure description” that so many of his interpreters feel compelled to praise or dismiss. The effort to grasp and preserve the infinitely iterable, utterly meaningless happenings of hell transforms an apparently mimetic gesture into a thoroughly subversive attempt to introduce the discontinuity of discrete, bounded moments into the undifferentiated flow of hellish time. A dinner that takes place in precisely the same way every day reemerges through the act of narration as this dinner, as the dinner of the first day. Although the experience the narrator describes would apply just as well to any other dinner on any other day, the fact of the narrative remains that the description refers to this particular meal. The shift from hell to history requires no magical intervention; it relies only on the entirely prosaic capacity of ordinary language to point to the particular. Words such as here, now, this, and even I take their concrete meaning from the specific, spatiotemporal position of the speaker; they presuppose a there, a then, a that, and a non-I toward which the language moves, and with which it establishes a relation. Ordinary language is thus about time and difference in every significant sense in which hell is not; to mean at all, it must follow a teleological arc. It has the structure of hope, and the openness toward a future implied by that structure, even when hope is absent from the world it ostensibly represents.

This tension between the “over and over” of hell and the singular “now” of narrative language plays out at the level of grammar. Consider, for example, the following passage:

Den Kaffee nehmen wir in der Diele ein, nachdem die Teller, von den Gästen übereinander gestellt, von der Haushälterin zum Abwaschbecken
getragen, und die Becher, von der Haushälterin aus der blauen Kanne gefüllt, von den Gästen durch die Küche getragen worden waren, und die Gäste aus der Zuckerschale, von der Haushälterin aus der Speisekammer herbeigetragen, ein Zuckerstück genommen und es in die Tasse gelegt, und die Gäste, mit einem Löffel, von allen, außer dem Doktor, vorher abgeleckt, in den Bechern rührend, die Schwelle überschritten und in der Diele Platz genommen hatten. (Schatten 24; emphasis added)

Weiss’s narrator exploits here the ambiguity of the German present tense, which can express both the present progressive (“I am doing this right now”) and the general present of repeated action (“I do this in general”), to introduce confusion into the seamlessness of hellish time. The first part of the sentence—“den Kaffee nehmen wir in der Diele ein”—ends a description of the daily dinner ritual and introduces a description of daily after-dinner coffee. The second part, however, performs a grammatically impossible shift from the general present of repeated action to the emphatic singularity of the past perfect: “nachdem [. . .] die Becher [. . .] durch die Küche getragen worden waren” (Schatten 24). The clumsiness of the transition is not accidental: it bears witness to the extraordinary opposition the narrator encounters in his effort to transcend how things are always and to insist instead on how things are in this particular moment. Because nothing new ever happens at the guesthouse, there is in fact no substantive difference between these two radically opposed temporalities. Undeterred, the narrator stages a jarring confrontation between mutually exclusive grammatical forms and, in doing so, calls this all-important distinction into being. The resulting text represents no definite victory over the forces of empty time, but the record of a battle in progress—a battle waged at the level of language, beneath the private, psychological agon this language would appear to “express.”

The extreme difficulty of such a project does not augur well for its success. Hell resists its entrapment in the particularizing flux of language, and a reference to this resistance can be found in the narrator’s notion of a “Gegenkraft,” against which he must struggle for every written word.

Meine Hand führt den Bleistift über das Papier, von Wort zu Wort und von Zeile zu Zeile, obgleich ich deutlich die Gegenkraft in mir verspüre, die mich früher dazu zwang, meine Versuche abzubrechen, und die mir auch jetzt bei jeder Wortreihe die ich dem Gesehenen und Gehörten nachforme einflüstert, daß dieses Gesehene und Gehörte allzu nichtig sei um festgehalten zu werden, und daß ich auf diese Weise meine Stunden [. . .] völlig nutzlos verbringe. (Schatten 37)
To write is to wage continuous war on the overpowering *Nichtigkeit* of all hellish activity, and it is in this sense that the perhaps impossible project of the *Schatten* demands to be taken seriously: not as a hyperrealist experiment in the language of vision, not as a formalist exercise in breaking new technical ground while conforming to conventional, conceptual rules, but as a challenge, issued in the inherently historical voice of narrative, to the ahistorical order of a meaningless reality. Understood in accordance with a rigorous conception of hell, the *Schatten* enters the pantheon of Weiss’s political writings, a designation usually reserved for his later works. Despite its utter lack of overtly political content, it becomes readable as the first in a long line of attempts to intervene *textually* in the living hell of modernity—the first, in other words, to explore the relationship Weiss treats so definitively more than twenty years later, between writing and change, art and political action, aesthetics and *Widerstand*.

**HOPE SPRINGS CONDITIONAL: DIE ÄSTHETIK DES WIDERSTANDS**

Written in three parts over the last ten years of Weiss’s life, *Die Ästhetik des Widerstands* (1975–81) narrates the history of the Communist antifascist movement in Europe, beginning with Hitler’s rise to power and ending just before the execution of the *Rote Kapelle* resistance group in 1942. The nameless narrator, who considers himself a member of this movement, has lived out the war years in the relative safety of exile and, having survived, feels a responsibility to record his experience of the calamity on behalf of those who can no longer speak. As in the *Schatten*, however, the conditions of that experience transform an apparently straightforward project of memory and mimesis into an unwinnable battle against an army of *Gegenkräfte*. To avoid writing a “Geschichte der Sieger,” the narrator must tell the story of failed resistance without submitting to its end, but to tell the truth about his murdered friends, he must also find a way to resist this end without reverting to the fantasy of denial. In an environment where all teleological promises of progress and change have been supplanted and subverted—in the aftermath of the ultimate catastrophe—the war on impotence must renounce all direct relationship to the real. A naive representation of history, one that simply seeks to remember accurately, can only reinforce the hegemony of the eversame. A representation, on the other hand, that rejects history in favor
of heroic defiance—an aesthetic that closes its eyes to hell and hopes on—consigns itself to anachronistic irrelevance.

True to the question implied by its title, then, Weiss’s novel does not end with the execution, but with an epilogue designed to reflect on the dilemma of representing resistance. The epilogue is composed of three parts, and each of these parts centers around a particular strategy of commemoration. In the first sequence, the resistance fighter Lotte Bischoff carries around a notebook filled with the names and deeds of her dead comrades; intent on providing a record for posterity, she envisions herself as a schoolteacher, guiding her charges through the “goldnen Namen” of a “Gedenktafel aus Marmor,” in an attempt to bring the past to life. At the same time, however, she recognizes the futility of such dreams, for she knows that her students will never be able to grasp the enormity of her story: “Wie sollten ihre Schüler später in Friedenszeiten verstehen können, welche Wagnisse das gewesen waren” (ÄdW 1156). Nor, for that matter, will she herself be capable of telling it: “Wie sollte sie je ihre Stimme noch erheben können, da sie, die dunkel rings um sie her standen, schweigen mußten” (ÄdW 1158). A past that cannot be made “greifbar” cannot be handed down; the power of memorialization depends on a capacity for (self)expression on the part of the storyteller and for empathic identification on the part of the listeners, which have largely disappeared from a post-Holocaust, posthumanist world.

Bischoff ends up alone with her memories, an “unbemerkt Wanderin” in the traffic-ridden new streets of a rebuilt but riven land.

Weiss follows this pessimistic reflection on the retrospective act of pure memorialization with an equally pessimistic portrayal of the more future-oriented alternative, embodied by the reformer Hodann. Hodann’s insistence on further political action, his struggle to unite the communists and social democrats under one progressive and politically viable banner, cannot ultimately prevent the fractious splintering of interests that—according to the narrator—inevitably condemns the socialist project to failure and postwar Germany to the claustrophobia of the eversame. His unsuccessful attempt to introduce real change into the postwar reconstruction process leaves him socially isolated, emotionally depleted, financially desolate, and, most important, politically ineffectual.

In its treatment of these two key figures, the novel explores and rejects both the proactive and retrospective approaches to representing resistance. I want to suggest, however, that the final pages of the
novel offer one other possibility for understanding the title, and that this possibility functions for Weiss as a kind of third way—a third way that transcends the binaries of political action and commemorative narration by doing battle at the level of grammar. Once again, in the last work as in the first, an inherent ambiguity in the German tense structure becomes the site of a potentially redemptive equivocation. This time, however, the present tense will not suffice: the conclusion of the novel, in which the narrator turns explicitly to the dilemma of representation, unfolds in the peculiar temporality of the conditional:


On the one hand, of course, the passage employs the standard tense of an epilogue. The story is over, but the narrator goes on to tell us what will later occur. “Ein paar Jahre noch würde [Hodann] durchhalten, mittellos [. . .] bis zur frühen Morgenstunde am siebzehnten Dezember Neunzehnhundert Sechszehn, als ihn der Erstickungsanfall überkam, [. . .] und [er] tot gefunden wurde, in einer Lache von Schweiß” (ÄdW 1195). This is the structure of memorialization, the retrospective that tries to be true to the past, but makes no claims regarding a postnarrative future. On the other hand—and this is the crux of the conditional—the passage undeniably also has a submerged, future-oriented if-then structure, which occasionally breaks out of its past-tense imprisonment long enough to call into question the backward-looking closure of the epilogue. A sentence such as “Wenn ich beschreiben würde, was mir widerfahren war unter ihnen, würden sie dieses Schattenhafte behalten (ÄdW 1193)” has the shape of a hypothetical statement about the future and could legitimately be translated as follows: “If I were to describe what I had experienced among them, they would retain this shadowy quality.” The effect is such that the essentially Proustian structure of retrospective anticipation—of a future that exists for the narrator at the time of narration but is the past by the time of writing and of reading—collides with a futurity that is also valid (albeit only conditionally) for the temporality of the reader and for the present moment. Weiss underscores this effect through his use of the ambiguous “wenn” construction, and in
doing so, renders crucially undecidable the status of key sentences such as “Hope would remain,” and “Utopia would be necessary.” Would they remain and be necessary from the definitively past-tense future perspective of the epilogue, or as the future, hypothetical consequence of some unspoken and presumably unspeakable precondition? Weiss’s text resists its postapocalyptic predicament precisely insofar as it escapes, through a trick of language, the apparent necessity of this decision.

“DER BLÜTIGE ERNST”: PETER WEISS VERSUS GÜNTER GRASS

I have argued here that Weiss conceptualizes the challenge of post-war authorship as a structural impossibility: history as we know it came to an end in the Germany of the Holocaust, and there is therefore no story left for the German writer to tell. To write from the hellish perspective of the damned (un)dead—from the perspective, that is, of the survivor—should be an exercise in futility, for the empty time of the eversame can never be “captured” by the contours of linguistic form. Such an understanding of the postwar present radicalizes the famous Adornian injunction against writing poetry after Auschwitz by transforming a normative barrier into a factual one. Weiss’s insistence that to write at all is to write in the presence of this injunction, and that writing as such must therefore be treated as an act of defiance, does justice to Adorno’s notion of an objective paradox. Speaking of Die Ästhetik des Widerstands, Weiss goes so far as to conflate the resistance he describes with the resistance his description is forced to perform:

Je mehr es auf den dritten Band zugeht, desto mehr wird das ganze Buch zu einer einzigen Hadeswanderung, wo die Menschen auf schreckliche Weise untergehen. Das ist das Prinzip der Kunst, etwas zu tun, obgleich die Umstände dagegen sind [. . .] dieses “Trotzdem,” das ja auch Sartre in seiner Philosophie übernimmt. “Es ist hoffnungslos, aber wir müssen trotzdem weitermachen.” (Gerlach and Richter 278–79)

From the perspective of the philosophical “Trotzdem,” here explicitly identified with the perspective of art (“das Prinzip der Kunst”), alienation becomes the only conceivable mode of experiencing the world. The existential weight attached to this Sartrean structure is not, for Weiss, an accident of artistic attitude—it is the actual predicament of a posthistorical age.
The theme of difficulty that runs through his writing—thereby setting him definitively apart, as we will see, from one of his best-known contemporaries—acquires its true significance only in this context. At the center of Weiss’s textual identity stands the struggle for aesthetic expression he shares with his narrators. The endless labor of interpretation his characters perform on their chaotic and uninterpretable surroundings, their arduous confrontations in *Die Ästhetik des Widerstands* with artifacts of culture from the Pergamon frieze to Dante’s *Commedia*, reflect for him the role of effort (“einer ungeheuer anstrengenden Arbeit” [281]) in his own aesthetic experience. Weiss relates this experience of effort to the apparently idiosyncratic situation of his exile. The years in Sweden, so the argument, have deprived him of an unmediated relationship with his mother language, and thus also to language in general. The result is a writing process defined by struggle: “ich muß mir das Deutsch, das ich schreibe, erkämpfen. Es ist für mich keine natürlich fließende Sprache. Ich habe nicht den unmittelbaren Kontakt. Das Schreiben vollzieht sich in einem schweren Prozeß, der oft zum Stocken kommt” (281). The *Schatten*, site of Weiss’s first attempt—in his mid-thirties—to “reconquer” the German language for aesthetic use, is in this sense indeed a “Sprachexperiment” (282). It is not, however, an experiment he ever leaves behind, even once he has regained command of his linguistic tools, for the act of writing against resistant forces, and thus of writing as a form of resistance owes its origins to his exile only in a figurative sense: Weiss discovers, in his own subjective experience of geographical and linguistic alienation, a paradigmatic figure for the principle of an art conceived as confrontation:

Mir hat sich beim Schreiben über die Vernichtung der Widerstandsbewegung in Deutschland eine völlige Lähmung eingestellt. Wochenlang konnte ich überhaupt nicht weiter. Es war schrecklich, die Dokumente zu lesen; ich hatte kaum mehr die Kraft dazu. Aber das entsprach dem Stoff des Pergamon-Frieses, diesem Getümmel und diesen fürchterlich ineinander verbissen Figuren, die einander erwürgen und mit Spießen durchrammen. Es ist der ständige Kampf, in dem wir uns auch heute befinden. Er ist doch überall, nicht nur weit weg, sondern in unserer allernächsten Umgebung. (279–80)

The passage explicitly attributes those aspects of Weiss’s writing practice elsewhere most closely associated with his (linguistic) exile—“die Ermüdungen und das Immer-wieder-Aufgeben-Wollen und das Anzweifeln” (281)—to a conflict larger than any attitude or sense of place, a conflict taking place both everywhere and today. In
doing so, it raises exilic consciousness to the level of universal ethical
necessity and turns an ostensibly private battle against paralysis into
a public standard. Those who consider themselves “at home” in the
posthistorical wasteland, it implies, have already capitulated and, in
capitulating, have affirmed the impossibility of real change.

This understanding of exile gives new and provocative meaning
to Weiss’s habit of contrasting his own linguistic deficiencies (“zum
Beispiel bin ich nicht in der Lage, Dialoge in naturalistischem Stil
tzu schreiben, weil ich die gesprochene Alltagssprache nicht mehr
ausreichend beherrsche” [113]) with the instinctive mastery of his
contemporary Günter Grass, and his own static stilization, which
constantly threatens to tip over into lifeless abstraction, with Grass’s
natural vitality (“mein[ ] Unvermögen, im Strom der gefühlsmäßigen
Sprache zu schreiben, wie beispielsweise Grass” [Gerlach and Richter
113]).

For in light of Weiss’s prioritization of linguistic struggle, the
comparison turns out to implicate Grass—who as autochthon (and
non-Jew) can speak without difficulty—in an affirmative ideology of
life and home Weiss clearly considers deeply suspect.

The submerged polemic has a history, and over the course of this
history Grass, too, found ample opportunity to attack. Examining
what may well have been his opening salvo will provide a more nu-
anced sense of the alternative Weiss so subtly but consistently rejects.
In 1966, when the Gruppe 47 held their annual meeting at Princeton
University, Princeton German Department Chair Victor Lange orga-
nized a small colloquium on the question of art and engagement. At
this occasion and with Weiss in the audience, Grass gave a talk,
titled “Vom mangelnden Selbstvertrauen der schreibenden Hofnarren
unter Berücksichtigung nicht vorhandener Höfe,” in which he openly
mocked his colleague’s conception of politically engaged writing. The
talk has often been understood as a plaidoyer for divorcing literature
from political action, for it ends with the following lines:

Und es gibt auch die Menge Schriftsteller, bekannte und unbekannte,
die, weit entfernt von der Anmaßung “Gewissen der Nation” sein zu
wollen, gelegentlich ihren Schreibtisch umwerfen—und demokratischen
Kleinkram betreiben. Das aber heißt: Kompromisse anstreben. Seien
wir uns dessen bewußt: das Gedicht kennt keine Kompromisse; wir aber
leben von Kompromissen. Wer diese Spannung tätig aushält, ist ein Narr
und ändert die Welt. (Grass 112)

Prior to these lines, however, Grass has set up an opposition—be-
tween “Hofnarr” and “persönlicher Berater”—that has little to do with
divorcing literature from politics (a project as foreign to Grass as to Weiss) and everything to do with the question of how to write after Auschwitz. Weiss, presumably, would have understood the thrust of this opposition and would have known that he was being mocked, not for writing politically, but for writing *unironically.*

Grass begins by emphasizing the hypothetical nature of his categories and, in doing so, performs the very gesture he will fault Weiss for avoiding:

\[
\text{[E]s gibt keine Höfe und also keine Berater und Narren. Doch, wie zum Spaß angenommen: es gibt ihn, den schreibenden Hofnarr, der gern bei Hofe oder in irgendeinem Außenministerium persönlicher Berater sein möchte; und angenommen, es gibt ihn nicht: der schreibende Hofnarr ist vielmehr die Erfindung eines seriösen und langsam arbeitenden Schriftstellers [...] und beides angenommen: es gibt ihn und gibt ihn nicht, gibt ihn als Fiktion und also wirklich: ist er der Rede wert, der schreibende Hofnarr? (105)}
\]

The speech that follows makes clear, in typically oblique fashion, that Grass takes his “wie zum Spaß angenommen” very seriously, and that, indeed, contemporary German writers (his primary example is Weiss, although he also throws darts at Böll) fail as writers by failing to write “as though for fun.” The structure of “es gibt ihn und gibt ihn nicht,” of the ironic “as if” that says one thing but knows another—and therefore manages to mean what it says only by maintaining the schizoid posture of the performing court jester—is for Grass the true structure of modern fiction and the only legitimate foundation for literary engagement. Those who insist on the humorless role of personal adviser merely make themselves ridiculous; in their refusal to entertain (“Die Angst, nicht Ernst genommen zu werden. Die Angst zu unterhalten, d.h. genossen zu werden”), they play Polonius to Grass’s Shakespearean fool:

\[
\text{[V]om “Nouveau Roman” bis zum “Sozialistischen Realismus” ist man, von Sekundärchören unterstützt, redlich strebend bemüht, mehr zu bieten als bloße Fiktion. Er, der Schriftsteller, der kein Dichter sein mag, mißtraut seinen eigenen Kunststücken. Und Narren, die ihren Zirkus verleugnen, sind wenig komisch. (107)}
\]

Grass counters the wooden sincerity of these stubbornly nonfictional realisms with his own brand of ironic naturalism, which joins the pleasure of the credible illusion to the critical potential of satire. His famously unreliable and morally ambivalent narrators, beginning with the lying dwarf Oskar of *Die Blechtrommel,* allow him to tell stories
in the tension of “es gibt ihn und gibt ihn nicht” without abandoning traditional principles such as narrative flow and proximity to life. The distance he builds in to the relationship between author and storyteller, and between storyteller and reader, opens up a space where he can say what he means without having to mean all he says, where he can challenge established conventions and convictions without negating all that exists, and where he can therefore avoid the pedantic pretensions of his contemporaries’ paper revolutions. This last point, in particular, is more a question of politics than of style, as the “revolutionary” mode leaves little room, in Grass’s mind, for real political action. A standpoint too radical and unironic to affirm the lesser of two evils—a standpoint that says “no” to reality whether totalitarian or social democrat—regresses into inaction, its defiance rendered impotent by its inability to compromise, or at least to laugh at itself: “Wenn es der Ohnmacht an Witz mangelt, wird sie wehleidig” (Grass 112). More powerful than Communist daydreams is “demokratischer Kleinkram,” which carries forward into the future the progressive tradition of the German Enlightenment—and refuses, in its emphasis on historical continuity, to make Auschwitz the end of the world.\(^\text{16}\)

Weiss does not reject Grass’s critique out of hand. Although he does not respond directly to the 1966 speech, his treatment of the topic in other contexts demonstrates that he understands, and to a certain extent accepts, both the categories and the stakes of the debate. Asked about “Elemente des Humors, der Heiterkeit und der List,” he admits that they are absent in his work and begins with an explanation that parallels his assertions of linguistic incompetence: “Ich glaube, es sind eher persönliche Charakterzüge, daß ich zu dieser Art von List und Heiterkeit und Fröhlichkeit eben nicht richtig fähig bin” (Gerlach and Richter 278). A few sentences later, however, he elevates this incompetence to a principle of art by aligning it with the Sartrean trotzdem: “Es gibt kaum Produzenten der Kunstwerken, die nicht am eigenen Leib die äußeren Niederlagen erfahren hätten und trotzdem weitermachten. Das scheint fast ein Prinzip von Kunst zu sein” (278). Shortly thereafter, he shifts the emphasis once again, this time away from the domain of subjective experience (away, too, from his patent overgeneralization regarding the identificatory habits of his fellow artists) and onto the realm of objective events: “[D]ie Geschehnisse waren so, daß eigentlich kein Spielraum für die Fröhlichkeit war” (278). In doing so, he implies once again that the artistic principle of the trotzdem is less an aesthetic norm—a question of style and plea-
sure—than a factual predicament. And that the humorless aesthetic of Anstrengung performs this principle, not as an expression of the artist’s pessimistic, pedantic, or identificatory attitude, but as an unavoidable response to historical crisis. Once again, the vicissitudes of inner life—of subjectivity and psychology and apparently idiosyncratic incompetence—turn out to mimic the alienated trajectory of the outer world. Weiss, according to his own logic, could no more choose to lighten up and write ironically by practicing Grassean German than he could end his experience of exile by moving to Berlin.

The implicit debate between Weiss and Grass over the politics of writing after Auschwitz comes down, then, to the question of choice. The aesthetics of Anstrengung differs from the aesthetics of Leichtigkeit, with which it shares the structure of critical tension, in its refusal to presuppose the viability of voluntaristic action. For Weiss, this degradation of the willing subject defines the abyss that divides Before from After. The international mechanization of the political process (“die ganze destructive Gewalt der großen Mächte, unter denen der einzelne Mensch total ohnmächtig geworden ist” [275]) bears witness to a rupture that has transformed all traditional categories of agency into impotent and anachronistic parodies of themselves: “Der Parteienstreit läuft natürlich weiter, aber gleichzeitig ist der Parteienstreit unbedeutend geworden” (275). In such a context, the gesture of ironic resistance, which takes place at the level of the subject and seeks to modify subjective attitudes, remains woefully insufficient. An objective predicament demands an objective response, and Weiss’s aesthetic, which enacts the structure of the trotzdem at the level of grammar rather than thought, fulfills this condition. By eschewing the traditionally unspoken tools of the satirical trade ("[Ironie] hebt sich auf, sobald sie das auslegende Wort hinzufügt" [Adorno 237]) in favor of indisputably and explicitly ambiguous tenses, he declares war on the enemies of dispute with a weapon they cannot refuse to acknowledge. The forms of language require consensus to function and thus, in their functioning, serve to uphold the status quo. They are as objective and nonnegotiable as the hegemony they reflect by default, with the consequence that when, under the pressure of Weiss’s determinedly unironic resistance, they accomplish the momentary disruption of their own hellish time; this disruption, too, acquires the status of objective event.

The event, which really occurs, has the doubly unreal shape of a conditional departure from reality—a shape in which the ironic cham-
pion of a realistic resistance can see in it only the most banal form of escapism. In his Büchner-Preisrede of 1965, Grass once again chides his fellow writers (this time Böll and Andersch rather than Weiss) for refusing to do what he calls “das Selbstverständliche” and agitate, little by little, for democratic change. He enlists a familiar figure to highlight the absurdity of their abstemious behavior:

O, schöne Fiktion des freien, beziehungsweise vogelfreien, des unabhän-
gigen, beziehungsweise von der Unabhängigkeit abhängigen Schriftsell-
ers beziehungsweise Dichters! [. . .] Wie selbstherrlich verstanden sie es, sich am eigenen, selbstgeflochtenen Zopf aus dem Sumpf, das heißt aus der Realität, die immer geneigt ist, unfrei und abhängig zu machen, herauszuziehen? (Grass 102)

Nowhere does the chasm separating Weiss from Grass on the subject of reality and literature achieve more precise formulation than in Weiss’s radical transformation of this famous Münchhausian moment. In the final lines of Die Ästhetik des Widerstands, Grass’s emblem of escapism reemerges with all the dignity of a real, albeit conditional, escape:

[. . .] und solange sie unten nicht abließen voneinander, würden sie die Pranke des Löwenfells nicht sehn, und es würde kein Kenntlicher kommen, den leeren Platz zu füllen, sie müßten selber mächtig werden dieses einzigen Griffs, dieser weit ausholenden und schwingenden Bewegung, mit der sie den furchtbaren Druck, der auf ihnen lastete, endlich hinwegfegen könnten. (ÄdW 1195)

Drained of the comic character that Grass so effectively exploits to expose the fallacy of the apolitical poet, Münchhausen’s paradoxical leap becomes a figure for the (im)possibility of choice and change. In a world that leaves no room for the new, the only way forward is the way out, and progress, post-Auschwitz, must therefore be thought vertically rather than horizontally. What it would mean to take the vertical path—in the absence of messianic hope and in full awareness of its paradoxical character—is the question Weiss’s aesthetic of resistance tries, quite seriously, to answer.

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NOTES

1. One of these Infernos has recently appeared in an edition prepared by Christoph Weiss.
2. The most extensive study is Birkmeyer’s. See also Combes, Hofmann,

3. By arguing for the presence of an aesthetics of resistance in Weiss’s early work, I do not mean to deny the importance of a turning point—toward politically engaged writing (“Zehn Arbeitspunkte eines Autors in der geteilten Welt” [1965]) and the problem of writing after Auschwitz (“Meine Ortschaft” [1964])—which Weiss himself repeatedly thematizes and which, not coincidentally, coincides with the beginning of his documented interest in Dante. (On the relationship between the Dante project and Weiss’s commitment to socialist politics, see Birkmeyer 17–57; Lindner, “Anästhesie”; and Combes.) Rather, I wish to emphasize that the earlier, “autobiographical” texts develop, at a formal level, the structures Weiss will later make the central feature of his more explicitly political writings.

4. In his Lessing-Preisrede of 1965 (“Laokoon oder über die Grenzen der Sprache”), Weiss reflects explicitly on the relationship between visual stasis and linguistic time, aligning the development from the former to the latter with a process of language (re)acquisition that both infant and writer must undergo. See Rapporte 170–87.

5. Rose Zeller’s 1968 study set the standard for this type of reading. See also Ivanovic, Schneider, and Soboczynski. Soboczynski shifts the responsibility for bestowing meaning away from the author and toward the reader, but maintains that the text itself calls out for such a teleological “completion.”

6. Intertexts that are discussed include Plato’s allegory of the cave (see Cunliffe 418) and the New Testament parable of the prodigal son (see Schneider 41–46 and Ivanovic 39–57).

7. For a diametrically opposed reading of the missing period, see Ivanovic 61. For a Lacanian one, see Soboczynski 82–83.

8. The *Schatten* was actually written in 1952, eight years before its publication by Suhrkamp.

9. For an analysis of the problem of post-Holocaust identification understood in terms of a fractured relationship to “the gaze of the other,” see Hell.

10. In my reading of the conditional, I am particularly indebted to the studies of Burkhard Lindner (‘Ich Konjunktiv’) and Rainer Rother, both of whom reflect on the relationship between Weiss’s philosophy of history and his grammar. Berthold Brunner productively employs the categories of Rother’s argument to investigate the role of “timeless” mythological motifs within the “historical” trajectory of *Die Ästhetik des Widerstands*. David Pike’s recent contribution builds on Lindner’s analysis to provide a subtle discussion of the novel’s art-history dialectic (see Pike 91–98).

11. The context for this remark and the ones that follow is an extensive 1981 interview with Lindner.

12. As will become clear, Weiss’s relation to a Sartrean-style existentialism is more complex than it appears in this remark. Over the course of the interview with Lindner, he continually corrects the existentialist emphasis on subjectivity—and on the radical freedom of will with which the existentialist subject confronts his worldly imprisonment—by subordinating the inner
experience of hellish time to the objective historical structure it reflects. Klaus Scherpe has investigated the complex interrelationship of “geschichtlich—un-geschichtlich” in the context of Weiss’s adaptation of Dante (94–99). See also Pike, who investigates a similar tension against the backdrop of modernist Dante reception (62–98).

13. The context for these remarks is a 1966 interview with Jean Tailleur. Weiss makes a similar comment in a 1982 interview with C. Bernd Sucher. See Gerlach and Richter 333.

14. Weiss himself used the opportunity to tell a programmatic story about how he became “political” in “I Come out of My Hiding Place.”

15. Sigrid Weigel has penetratingly analyzed the ideological implications of what she calls “das nachkriegsdeutsche Ironiegebot” in Ingeborg Bachmann 438–44. See also Weigel, “Generation” 273–75.

16. Grass’s commitment to future-oriented affirmation will eventually drive him to confront the voice of radical negativity directly. In a brief exchange of letters from 1968, he respectfully accuses Adorno of having fostered a corrosive atmosphere conducive to the spirit of the student revolts: “Wohl haben Sie Ihre Studenten mit kritischem Rüstzeug versehen [. . .] wohl kommt ihnen das eloquente Nein mit nahezu schlafwandlerischer Sicherheit von den Lippen; doch warum wurde versäumt, den gleichen Studenten ein für diese Demokratie wohltätiges, weil lebensnotwendiges Ja zu ermöglichen?” He goes on to declare himself—in accordance with a rather dubious rhetorical tradition of vitalist anti-elitism—too unintellectual, “um solch ausschließlichen Spaß an der permanenten Verneinung zu finden.” (Kraushaar 470)

17. It is perhaps not entirely coincidental that Grass here prioritizes the very concept Adorno critiques in his 1951 analysis of irony. According to this critique, it is the satirist’s relation to “die Idee des Selbstverständlichen,” and not, or not only, the rhetorical sophistication of satire, that traditionally sets the satirist apart from the idealist, whose pedantic protestations sound strident because they so often fall on deaf ears. “Der bedarf des Beweises nicht, welcher die Lacher auf seiner Seite hat” (Adorno 239). Precisely this relation, however, has become problematic in a posthistorical age that tolerates no dissent, for where consensus takes over the world, resistance can no longer call on common sense as a strategy for changing minds. “Das Selbstverständliche” is for Adorno the enemy par excellence of the potentially redemptive new.

18. The final lines of Die Ästhetik des Widerstands perform a similar transformative correction on Weiss’s earlier use of the Münchhausen paradox. What for Marat can (still) function as a figure of potential revolutionary action—“Es kommt drauf an/sich am eigenen Haar in die Höhe zu ziehn/sich selbst von innen nach außen zu stülpen/und alles mit neuen Augen zu sehn” (Die Verfolgung und Ermordung Jean Paul Marats 180)—becomes in its negative, conditional form the antithesis of all idealist excess, without, however, abandoning the structure of revolutionary renewal. For a different reading of the role played by the Münchhausen figure in Weiss’s life and work, see Combes, 343–54.
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