Introduction

“La passion du réel”

In a provocative book that attempts nothing less than to sum up what was decisive about the twentieth century, Alain Badiou has placed the years from 1914 to 1989 under the sign of a passion. According to the philosopher’s *Le siècle*, translated into English as *The Century*, the “short” twentieth century is not to be conceived of in terms of its “grand narratives,” of the great ideas and ideologies that attended its course, but rather as deeply and passionately invested in what he calls the real. The two main areas in which Badiou sees this “passion of the real” at work are the arts and politics, the century’s artistic and literary avant-gardes, its great revolutionary struggles, but also the two world wars. The goal of the book, based on a series of lectures given in 1999 and early 2000 at the Collège Internationale de Philosophie, is to understand and recuperate the century’s most vital concerns. Its methodological premise is to do so by looking at some of the epoch’s accounts of itself, especially as they are articulated in the poetry of the times. The philosopher’s *parcours* through the previous age is thus guided by some of the best-known modernist poets, from Mandelstam to Pessoa and Brecht, from Mallarmé to Saint-John Perse and Paul Celan. Other figures who flesh out his proposal to conceive of the century under the sign of the “passion of the real” include Nietzsche, André Breton, Pirandello, Malévitch, Lenin, and Mao.

The guiding motif of the passion of the real is as suggestive as it is vague, combining, it seems, affect and fact, the subjective and objective, evoking at the same time a sense of complexity and reduction. It is indeed both things, a reductive and polemical term, rather than a descriptive category, and a fairly complex notion that seeks to recuperate a lost legacy. The formula’s conflicting connotations obviously make up part of its appeal: *passion*, as in the commitment or devotion to a cause, is connected to a
term, the *real*, that couldn’t be more remote from anything constituting a cause or value about which, at least on the face of it, one could imagine being passionate. There is also some ambiguity in the concept of the real itself. Vacillating between abstraction and concreteness, it could be perceived as an abstract ontological notion or its opposite, as the epitome of facticity (the real as opposed to the semblances of, say, ideology and discourse). But, as quickly becomes apparent, it is a notion that is not quite as simple as it may seem, in spite of its polemical thrust. It is, on the contrary, a rather intricate category that Badiou adapts from Lacanian psychoanalysis, albeit with important modifications.

If we associate the real with horror and disgust, as, say, in the sight of wounds, of bare flesh, of bodies in agony, the kinds of things with which it is frequently linked in Lacan, then Badiou’s depiction of the past age is, in some respects, not that different from other accounts of the century that have singled out the unheard-of scale of violence and destruction as its defining characteristic. But as much as the passion of the real may bear responsibility for the century’s darkest moments, Badiou tends to recall this passion as the mobilizing force behind the century’s most audacious aspirations, refusing, by the same token, to dwell on its tragic aspects. The real is, in fact, very much mobilized against a contemporary historiography that views the century in terms of its aberrations and pathologies, and against a present that has lost touch with the resolve that is the prerequisite of radical change. Against this tendency the recapitulation proposed by Badiou seeks to recover a largely forgotten or misrecognized force.

The ambition to sum up the century in a simple formula is bound to elicit skepticism. There is something provocative, and even preposterous, not only in the formulaic character of the definition but also in the very terms the formula conjoins. I want to introduce the project of this book by way of sounding out some of the connotations of these two terms, the *passion* and the *real*, and their conjunction. Two implications of this formula impose themselves immediately. Placing the twentieth century under the “passion of the real” is to set it against a present that supposedly partakes of no such passions anymore. Passion, as in the passionate commitment to a cause, is what is lacking in the current age, “after” the twentieth century. But passion also implies a lack itself, a desire for something that is missing, something one does not have. Calling this something the
real, in turn, suggests that the given, and possibly even reality itself, is somehow not real. In other words, the symbolic order, which constitutes our world and which the real calls into question, is in some way unreal, afflicted with a lack of being, so to speak. For Badiou the real is a political, and indeed an ethical, category, but what it indicates, above all, is a lack in and of reality, a kind of ontological shortcoming. The twentieth century felt this lack acutely, and its defining passion was to counter it.

As we will see shortly, The Century elaborates on the notion of the real quite a bit. By contrast, the other term of the book’s formula, passion, remains largely underdeveloped. It is taken in its colloquial meaning, but this is not to say that Badiou is not aware of its semantic scope. On the contrary, the duplicity of passion and pain, of passionate engagement for a cause, on the one hand, and the torments of desire, on the other, might very well be on his mind. What gives the book its edge, though, is precisely its apparent disregard for this latter dimension, for the suffering implicit in the term passion. There is indeed at times an unmistakable nonchalance with which the hardships and horrors of the century are subordinated to its passionate commitments and struggles, even if a closer look reveals that the passion of the real is closely tied to these very hardships and horrors. The provocation of Badiou’s definition consists in the fact that he takes passion in a more or less positive, one-sided sense. One may justifiably wonder whether Badiou’s formula, precisely in its suggestiveness, obfuscates and mystifies the realities of the twentieth century rather than casting light on its moving principle. How could the confluence of political, social, economic, cultural, and historical factors that together made the century what it was possibly be subsumed under a single heading? True, what Badiou dubs the passion of the real may intersect with some of these areas and may reflect some characteristics of the age, but why accord it so much significance, especially given its obvious vagueness? Arguably, objections like these miss the thrust of the book. Badiou’s mise au point of the century does not aim at a comprehensive account in the first place but takes the “age of extremes,” as Eric Hobsbawm has called it, at its most extreme. The formula seeks to get at and make sense of the experience of this extremity.

The present book differs in scope and ambition from Badiou’s probe into the twentieth century, but it is very much about the appeal of the extreme that The Century seeks to recall and, in some sense, to recover. In
different ways the engagement with such extremes, with a kind of excess that is beyond our grasp—intellectually, affectively, and, today, if we are to believe Badiou, even historically—is the subject of the works at the center of this study. In some respects the notion of the passion of the real captures what is at stake in their confrontations with this extreme experience, with the experience of violence and excess, quite well. At the same time, the engagement with the real staged by these works often evinces a much greater ambiguity than Badiou allows for, even though it is implied in his formula, at least to some extent and largely malgré lui. The instances of violent excess around which the works studied in this book revolve thus corroborate the notion of the passion of the real, yet they also recast it. In preparation for the readings that form the core of this book, the first two sections of this introduction provide a rather detailed account of the notion of the real, both in Badiou’s “passion of the real” and in Lacanian psychoanalysis, which is where the term first originated. The remainder of the introduction turns to the concept of pathos and outlines the themes of this book.

Alain Badiou’s The Century

In Badiou the “passion of the real” is opposed, first and foremost, to any project purporting to derive its legitimacy from the future: “The nineteenth century announced, dreamed, and promised; the twentieth century declared it would make man, here and now. This is what I propose to call the passion of the real. I’m convinced it provides the key to understanding the century. There is a conviction, laden with pathos, that we are being summoned to the real of a beginning.” A bit later he writes that the twentieth century “is not the century of promise, but that of realization. It is the century of the act, of the effective, of the absolute present, and not the century of portent, of the future” (§8). This emphatic sense of presentness that is thus associated with the real can be conceived in two ways: as culmination and finalization of what came before or as discontinuity and rupture. In Badiou it is for the most part the latter conception that prevails.

The Century presents the real alternately as the means to a cause, as the index of that cause, or even as the cause itself, though its features remain vague. Ultimately, the orientation toward the real aims at a radical re-
alignment of the given order. In this it must not be thought of as some inner kernel, an identity or an essence, accessible only by way of stripping the outer layers, as in the century’s fantasies of “purification.” It is, rather, a realignment that requires a different kind of move, though one that, in many respects, is no less violent than its counterpart. Badiou calls it “subtraction.” This subtraction is a form of negation, but unlike ordinary “destruction,” which remains beholden to what it destroys, it is a negation that removes itself from that which it seeks to undo. The operation of “subtraction” is thus a kind of removal from and displacement of the order of the given. The passion of the real asserts itself not simply in the direct assault on this order but rather in the rejection of the given terms, of what constitutes reality, including the terms of its termination and transformation. In a sense this is why the real has to remain strangely undefined. It is what is lodged in the difference, in the gap opened up by subtraction, rather than in some kind of depth or beyond. The task is “to purify reality, not in order to annihilate it at its surface, but to subtract it from its apparent unity so as to detect within it the minuscule difference, the vanishing term that constitutes it” (65). Echoing one of Lacan’s paradoxical pronouncements, Badiou’s “real” is what is impossible. And it is precisely the determined embrace of this impossibility that confers a sense of urgency and resolve on the passion, a resolve as unconditional as it is uncompromising. Paradoxically, the “realism” of the appeal to the real consists in its militant opposition to “reality,” whose parameters it seeks to suspend.

The century’s engagement with the real is always a kind of wager that doesn’t flinch when it comes to the use of force. In fact, the ready employment of violent means is the mark of its determination, the refusal to be restrained or limited in any way by the alleged pieties of the age, by its prevailing normativities. The passion of the real is indeed very much sustained and driven by an enthusiasm and the willingness to exercise violence. “The theme of total emancipation, practised in the present, in the enthusiasm of the absolute present, is always situated beyond Good and Evil.” In other words, “the passion of the real is devoid of morality” (63). “The absolute violence of the real” is, as he put it in an earlier formulation, “simultaneously lethal and creative” (52, 32). Not surprisingly, one of the principal arenas in which the encounter with the real is played out is war, which the book treats with the same kind of awe that character-
izes its attitude toward the real itself. The twentieth century “unfolded under the paradigm of war” (34), more specifically still and, more shockingly, under the paradigm of total war and final struggle. This has to do with the fact that the century, as Badiou notes, not without relishing the frivolousness and shock value of his terminology, was given to “the idea —widely held in all domains of thought and action—that problems allow for an ‘absolute’ solution” (36).

As careful as he is to draw a distinction between the century’s totalitarian fantasies of destruction and purification and his own notion of subtraction, also referred to as “active nihilism” or “affirmative negation,” and as much as he indulges in the provocation of his unabashed fascination with the radical commitments of the past, what makes the wars of the twentieth century, especially the two world wars, such apt instances of the propagated real is precisely their radically antagonistic character, for Badiou’s real is a figure of irreconcilable antagonism and conflict, situated in the gap, the disconnect between the end, the definitive destruction of something, and a new beginning, a commencement that one should not, as he insists, imagine to arise from the past in any dialectic fashion.

Unlike the notion of the real in Lacan, and in one of the most vocal advocates of Lacanian psychoanalysis in the late twentieth century, Slavoj Žižek, Badiou’s conception of the real is, as his translator and commentator Peter Hallward put it, an “activist” one. The real is very much something to be seized. It issues an appeal, an address or a claim that subjects ought to recognize and assume, calling for a break with the received patterns and parameters of action. Hallward writes, “The real is the element of action undertaken at precisely the unknowable point, action that converts the impossible into the possible. Action pursued on the ‘level of the real’ is action in its most inventive and most dangerous sense, a kind of rigorous improvisation pursued in the suspension of every moral norm and every academic certainty. Only such action can access the real in its structural sense. . . . The ‘stasis’ of the real—the real as that which always remains in its place—can be encountered, very precisely, only by moving it.” The real in Badiou’s The Century is thus not, as one might expect at first, a neutral category aimed at capturing the unprecedented horrors that marked the “age of extremes.” What it stands for is rather what appears at times as an urge, manifested in a number of different areas, at times as a certain type of maneuver or operation, performed time and again only
to fail, yet at other times still an opportunity, as relentlessly sought as it is consistently missed. The real is taking the age of extremes, as I have said, at its most extreme—and this in order to embrace it. No wonder Badiou’s invocation of this passion is so emphatically oblivious to the costs in human suffering exacted in its name. In fact, he quite explicitly defends the indifference in this regard, especially when it comes to the question of the individual. Irrespective of continually missing the encounter with the real, to put it in a famous Lacanian phrase, for Badiou the passion of the real persists, and it has lost nothing of its allure.

The real stands for the will to engage in conflict and confrontation, not just in the twentieth century but also at the beginning of the new millennium, when the lessons and legacy of the avant-garde and of modernism, to which *The Century* pays belated tribute, have fallen into oblivion. Badiou’s intervention itself is spurred by this passion, taking to task the malaise and lack of fervor that in his perception mark the present age. His own recapitulation can even be regarded as a symptom or last extension of what he describes, but the polemical and partisan character of Badiou’s recalling of the real does not invalidate the term or the formula he proposes. It is precisely its vagueness and the slightly ominous ring that capture something about which the century itself may very well only have had the vaguest of ideas. The associations the slogan takes on in Badiou’s elaboration, the sense of determination, finality, definitiveness, and violence, clearly resonate with the most extreme experiences and the most deadly engagements of the twentieth century, even if Badiou, in a sense, wants to turn them on their head. In its polemical thrust against approaches that view the century solely in terms of its aberrations and pathologies, Badiou’s reappraisal is provocatively unequivocal, treating the passion of the real as a kind of inexhaustible and incorruptible resource, ostensibly unaffected by the excess to which it has given rise. The real is the name of a certain ruthlessness, impervious to the unintended consequences of its radical measures and interventions. In this sense it is both passionate and dispassionate; or, put another way, the passion of the real, “always situated,” as Badiou writes, “beyond Good and Evil,” is a sentiment that knows of no compassion, a passion without pity, so to speak.

The confrontations with violence and destruction at the center of the works on which this book is focused seem in many respects to instantiate the passion that is supposed to have animated the century, carrying its
greatest ambitions and culminating in its greatest horrors. At the same time, their engagement with the real is far more equivocal than Badiou’s evocative formula suggests. As we will see, they summon us before a similar configuration: the spectacle of suffering that they conjure up in the most vivid terms, urging our gaze to dwell on it. But the reactions this spectacle elicits are much more ambiguous, in some sense more painful. Rather than embodying a unified sentiment, the passion that is displayed in them is conflicted, strangely at odds with itself, torn, it seems, between exaltation and resignation. The passionate commitment that is at stake in the passion of the real is frequently undercut by, and gives way to, a sense of numbness and of stupor in the face of the intolerable. Given this uneasy amalgamation of affects warring with one another, I want to place the confrontations with violence and pain staged in the works studied here under a slightly different title and speak, instead, of the pathos of the real. Although in today’s lexicon the term pathos has mostly pejorative connotations, it is a much richer notion than its Latin cognate, passion, and its associations of suffering and (erotic) desire. Of course, Badiou’s own invocation of the “passion of the real” could be described as an attempt to recover and salvage the “pathos” of the twentieth century, the grandeur of its aspirations, now buried under the rubble of its failures. The flip side to such greatness is the sense of adversity, defeat, and devastation that is also implied in the notion of pathos. (As we will see, one important connotation of pathos is precisely the moment of grandeur in defeat.) The complex semantics of pathos is a better match for the elusive real and the twentieth century’s engagements with it, not just because it implies a kind of dialectic of grandeur and defeat but also because of another prominent connotation it has to this day: the idea of theatricality.

Before recalling the rich semantics of pathos, I want to turn to the area in which the real first gained prominence and from which Badiou borrowed it: Lacanian psychoanalysis. Although the psychoanalytic notion differs from the later appropriation of the term by Badiou, it seems to have been charged with a certain pathos from the very beginning.

The Real after Lacan

As Hallward points out, Badiou’s real is an activist, interventionist notion, one that is very much in keeping with the central concern of the philoso-
pher’s work, namely the question of the “event,” which he has referred to elsewhere, in terms quite close to those used in connection with the real, as a kind of “deregulation of the logic of the world.”9 The Real—is, of course, a key concept in the later Lacan, though it remains for all its prominence a fairly elusive term. It also figures very prominently in the work of Slavoj Žižek, one of Lacan’s best-known and most congenial readers, who returns to the question of the Real time and again. As is well known, in Lacan the Real is one of the three registers shaping human experience and a crucial category in the Lacanian theory of the subject. The chief characteristic of the Real is its opposition and resistance to the two other registers to which it remains nonetheless bound, if negatively. (Badiou’s passion of the real does largely without this orientation toward the Imaginary and the Symbolic.)10 Though it is only one feature in a tripartite model and despite the interdependence of the three registers, famously illustrated by Lacan’s Borromean knot, the Real, especially in late Lacan (and also in Žižek), clearly occupies a privileged position in relation to the other two.11 Why this is so, however, is not immediately evident.

Perhaps the most salient aspect of the Real is its paradoxical and slightly ominous character. It is inaccessible, an absence or a void that defies representation, yet it is also characterized as excessive and violent. Where it appears, it is said to erupt or to break through, shattering representation and reality. Its impact is as intolerable as it is undeniable. Its “eruptions” cannot be ignored. The characterizations of the Real vacillate between a dimension that is somehow presupposed but utterly unknowable, clearly echoing in this respect Kant’s noumenal Ding an sich, and a violent outburst, a traumatic encounter, a recalcitrant remainder that proves to be unassimilable by the psychic system. The Real is at times associated with primal organic matter of which we catch a glimpse wherever bodies are torn apart; it figures as the material, corporeal foundation of the subject from which we shrink in horror as from our own finitude wherever we are reminded of it—our unfathomable origin and end being the contingent facts of our existence that the Symbolic is unable fully to grasp. At times the Real is of a more phantomlike presence, immaterial and yet of a stubborn and quasi-lethal efficiency: something that cuts through, troubles, and disturbs the order of things. The term itself suggests a dimension irreducible to anything else, irrespective of the alleged interdepend-
ence of Lacan’s three registers. There is nothing beyond or behind the Real, although picturing it in spatial terms is misleading, for the Real appears where the other registers cease to function, in the cracks of our Imaginary-Symbolic reality. The Real can be conceived of as what is lost as the subject enters the realm of the Symbolic, but it returns where this order reaches an impasse and breaks down.

While the domain of the Imaginary-Symbolic, of reality, is governed by laws or lawlike regularities, the Real belongs to the order of accidental cause, the Aristotelian *tuché*, invoked in Seminar XI, the contingent trigger that sets in motion the very processes constituting the subject’s Imaginary-Symbolic reality while separating us from and safeguarding us against this first “touch” or impact from nowhere, which set everything in motion: the finitude and contingency of our birth and death, the beginning and end, which are conditioned by our corporeal foundation. In this sense the Real can be said to be the intimate and yet excluded kernel of reality, its external center, occupying a position of “extimacy,” as Lacan would call it.

But how does any of this account for the privileged status assigned to the Real? Though it is somewhat less explicit than in Badiou’s case for the century’s “passion for the real,” there is a strong suggestion in Lacanian psychoanalysis that the Real holds an important lesson for those prepared to engage it. As in Badiou, the Lacanian Real is linked to violence and destruction. On the surface level this association has to do with the undoing of the Imaginary-Symbolic framework, for the Real is said to appear in the shattering of this framework. In its “extimacy” it both sustains and threatens reality, which is, in turn, both contingent on it and working to transcend the relation to its “lost” or “barred” cause. As it comes apart, reality gives way to the Real.

But there is more at stake in the engagement with the Real than this “surface vs. depth” or “appearance vs. hidden substratum” picture suggests. Getting in touch with the Real entails a profound reorganization or reorientation of the libidinal economy, which constitutes the chief concern of psychoanalysis. As much as the examples invoked in connection with the Real appeal to acts of violence and destruction, it shouldn’t simply be equated with the spectacle of annihilation. Such annihilation may well be the index of the Real, but it does not spell out its real significance. It is true, the Real is invariably pictured as something horrible, a
Medusa-like sight that fascinates and disturbs us at the same time. But curiously enough, “tarrying with the negative” that is the Real is not in the service of placing us under the spell of horror, both thrilling and painful. Tarrying with the Real is, rather, in the service of ridding the subject of another kind of spell, the spell, namely, of desire, the desire of the Other, that is. The most prominent example of this kind of liberation, which amounts to a disruption of the symbolic matrix informing our desire, is provided by Antigone, the paradigmatic figure of the Lacanian ethics of psychoanalysis.

To see the point of the psychoanalytic appropriation of Antigone, we should briefly recall that desire, in one of Lacan’s famous dicta, is always the desire of the Other. It is wanting to be desired by the Other, that is, wanting the Other to want me to desire him or her; desiring what the Other desires; and, finally, desiring in the same way as the Other desires. The Other’s desire, however, is far from stable or clear, desire being, by definition, dynamic and volatile, metonymic, as Lacan says, moving from one object to the next, only to find that “this too is not it,” never finding the object that would afford us definitive satisfaction. Ultimately, desire proves to be about the impossibility of ever reaching full satisfaction while remaining bound to (the promise of) the Other’s desire. It is being on a permanent flight for an ever-elusive object with no chance to extricate oneself from this dynamic.

What fascinates the psychoanalytic readers of Sophocles’ play, not just Lacan himself but also his prominent Slovenian students and commentators, Slavoj Žižek and Alenka Zupančič, is Antigone’s stubborn insistence on the burial of the desecrated remains of her slain brother. Dismissing the heroine’s own claim, according to which the obligation to the dead trumps the raison d’état invoked by Kreon, these commentators emphasize her seemingly irrational insistence on performing the burial rites for Polynices. Her defiance of the Symbolic order, represented by Kreon, is so unconditional and fearless that it overrides her own survival instinct. Nothing affects Antigone’s determination, neither the circumstances of the situation nor the consequences of her action. Downplaying both the fact that there is something excessive in Kreon’s orders and that Antigone’s act actually does have a rationale (that is, the duty to bury the dead), a Lacanian reading of the play sees her as a subject acting on a principle that has no other justification than itself; even the question of self-preservation does not per-
turb her. In the ultimate analysis, this principle is itself enigmatic, an opaque, incontrovertible “cause” more precious than life itself and in whose name, if there was one, the subject defies and asserts itself over and against the demands of reality. (It is this categorical appeal that explains Lacan’s affinity for Kantian ethics.) In *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* this intractable cause is called the Thing, though the term soon thereafter disappears from the Lacanian lexicon. Elevating the unknown or unknowable cause to the dignity of the Thing is Lacan’s definition of sublimation. Contrary to conventional wisdom, sublimation, on this account, does not consist in a kind of redirection or ersatz satisfaction of drives that would otherwise remain unsatisfied. Sublimation, Lacan insists, creates new values by suspending the Symbolic order. In sublimation the Thing is pitted against the reality principle, the Real against reality, creating nothing less than a space of freedom, even if the Thing appears to be a dark, ominous, foreign body within us, life-threatening even, as in the case of Antigone. Another, more familiar, term for identifying this impenetrable hard kernel of the subject is the death drive, a drive that does not, as one might assume, propel us toward death but rather plunges us, like Antigone, into the space between two deaths, the space between biological and symbolic death. It is in “this domain of the undead: ‘beyond life and death,’” as Žižek explains, “in which the causality of Symbolic fate is suspended.”

Here, too, the subject moves beyond desire, transcending the dependence on symbolic recognition by undoing its attachment to the desire of the Other that had forced it on its relentless and yet futile pursuit of (dis)satisfaction. In the register of drive, which can never be the drive of another nor a matter of one’s choosing, the subject recovers in a sense its cause, its autonomy, despite the fact that the drive may be a much more exacting and cruel master than desire. The latter is always bound up with the law, the merciless injunction to enjoy that in reality can never be fulfilled. As much as it is triggered and driven by the rules and dictates of law, it never achieves enjoyment, *jouissance*. What would give it satisfaction always turns out to be illusory so that its real target is not satisfaction itself but, in fact, to remain unsatisfied. Lacan’s name for that which thus systematically eludes our desire is *objet a*; desire is, by definition, not aimed at any specific object but chooses whatever the desire of the Other, *le grand Autre*, has put before us. Drive, by contrast, wants what we do not want...
but always get anyway. If the dynamic of desire is marked by variation—the place of objet a can be occupied by an infinite number of candidates—that of drive is repetition. It is in mindless repetition that we experience jouissance as that which we struggle to resist but cannot not enjoy. This is why such jouissance is painful and pleasurable at the same time: pleasure-in-pain. What insists in it is the dimension of the Real, that is, that which has not entered the Symbolic in the process of subjectivation. Unlike desire, which receives its directives and orientation from the transcendent field of the Other, the social symbolic structure by way of which we have split ourselves from, and have disavowed, our material, corporeal foundation, drive is purely immanent. It would be a mistake, however, to view this recovery in terms of reconciliation or a finally achieved peace with oneself. It is first and foremost a recognition of one’s contingency. Analysis does not aim at completing the subject but rather seeks to confront us with our fundamental lack. It is not about the restitution of a lost whole but about the recognition of the subject’s destitution. In Žižek’s formulation: “when at the end of the psychoanalytic cure I ‘traverse my fundamental fantasy,’ the point of it is not that, instead of being bothered by the enigma of the Other’s desire, of what I am for others, I ‘subjectivize’ my fate in the sense of its symbolization, of recognizing myself in a symbolic network or narrative for which I am fully responsible, but rather that I fully assume the uttermost contingency of my being. The subject becomes ‘cause of myself’ in the sense of no longer looking for a guarantee of his or her existence in another’s desire.”19 But this contingency paradoxically coincides with the realization of one’s freedom, or, as the title of the essay from which the last quote is taken has it, the “abyss of freedom.”

The notion of the real, whether in Badiou’s “passion of the real,” in Lacan’s conception, or in Žižek’s explications of the latter, is hardly a unified one. In spite of its range and in spite of the various inflections it takes in these different thinkers, however, several commonalities emerge. It is true that, on the face of it, what is called the real in Badiou often appears as less elusive than that of the psychoanalytic account. This doesn’t mean, however, that Badiou’s real is a given. It is important to bear in mind that the real in the “passion of the real” is not conceived as some kind of thing, something that could be attained in some shape or form but, rather, as the driving force behind the century’s highest aspirations. It is not the name
of what is to be achieved but a certain stance vis-à-vis reality, namely a kind of detachment, an operation called “subtraction,” that seeks to make room for radical innovation and the formation of a new type of (collective) subjectivity. In Badiou’s parlance the real is what emerges when reality is made to cease to coincide with itself and when it gives way to what was thought to be impossible hitherto. Hallward is right to note that horror and disgust, key characteristics of a certain Real in the Lacanian repertoire, are not paramount in Badiou’s “passion of the real.” But violence certainly is. To be sure, Badiou is not entirely oblivious to the excess of violence that the “passion of the real” generated in the twentieth century. In some passages he seems to criticize the denunciation of the century’s “barbarity” as reductive, suggesting that it is but one dimension or aspect of the “passion of the real.” But for the most part the proponent of the “passion of the real” unapologetically affirms the use of violence. Violence is not just a necessary means for the transformation that is to be achieved; it functions like a token of the faith and commitment to the cause of radical change. Recall how much Badiou is at pains to differentiate between right-wing “purification” and left-wing “subtraction,” but while the latter suggests a different kind of move or maneuver based on a different vision of the transformation that is to be accomplished, it doesn’t shirk violence either. Hallward points out that the Lacanian Real is more passive. What is missing from the psychoanalytic conception is the audaciousness and élan that the “passion of the real” is supposed to inspire; nor is there, at least not in Lacan himself, much of the sense of militant political engagement fueled by this passion. What prevails, instead, is a sense of mysteriousness and paradox. As we have seen, the Real forms a contradictory complex, a coincidentia oppositorum, simultaneously inaccessible, nonsymbolizable, and aggressive, ominous, asserting itself in the most forbidding and irrefutable ways. It is typically described as exerting a Medusa-like effect on those who encounter it: irresistible and lethal at the same time. But there is also a Real that is less material than the one exemplified by the sight of “putrefied flesh...the disgusting substance of life.” This is the Real that is at stake, though not always in explicit terms, in the switch from desire to drive, in breaking away from the regime of the Symbolic (the notorious Big Other) and assuming the full responsibility for the utter contingency at the core of one’s being. One of the difficulties of making sense of this shift consists in the fact that it is of the utmost vi-
violence, violence that the examples present as typically not only directed against the Other but also against the self: suicidal or virtually suicidal acts, the foremost examples being Antigone and Medea, which seek to “subtract” the subject from the domination of the Other and to suspend the power of the Symbolic order. Irrespective of the disastrous consequences, the (self-)destructive acts are hailed as the tokens of a fundamental reorganization of the subject’s libidinal economy, revoking the effects of subjectivation to give birth to a subject embracing the dark, persistent dimension of the death drive at its very core. Again, this realization is a harrowing one, but the theorists of the real think of it as a price worth paying to undo our entanglement in the desire and demands of the Other.

The Real is what always returns to its place, as Lacan put it in The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, but its place is virtually impossible to localize.\(^{23}\) It is the dimension of extremity, of the inside-out, the unbearable kernel of the subject; elusive and stubborn, radically immanent, material, and yet spectral, illusory and yet persistent; haunting the order of the Symbolic, which can neither account for it nor rid itself of it. Its effects are similarly ambivalent, indeed double-edged: simultaneously disturbing and transformative, a sense of paralysis coinciding, paradoxically, with the possibility of a conversion to a state of pure immanence and autonomy, redrawing the coordinates of the given and forcing the subject to confront its own constitutive lack. It is as though we were asked to imagine the lethal gaze of the Medusa as awakening us to a different kind of existence, a different form of organization, both of the self and of the world, releasing us, as Eric Santner might put it, to a different kind of vitality.\(^{24}\) Although the Real is accentuated slightly differently in Badiou, Lacan, and Žižek, it is privileged for similar reasons: for being antithetical to the reality principle and for being a kind of conduit for the undoing and radical recasting of the space of subjectivity and sociality.

Violent Images

As I have mentioned, Badiou develops what he calls the “passion of the real” by drawing on a number of different sources: philosophy, political theory, and, perhaps most surprisingly, modern poetry (Mandelstam, Pessoa, Mallarmé, Saint-John Perse, and a few others), art (Malévitch), and music (Webern, Schönberg). In spite of the examples provided, it is, how-
ever, not always easy to follow *The Century*'s trajectory as the author moves, rather effortlessly himself, through the different domains touched and transformed by the “passion of the real.” While the formula is quite suggestive in the domain of the political, it is somewhat less evident in the arts, at least in the examples he gives. In what ways could the dimension of the real, unlocatable yet “always in the same place,” this phantasmatic power, have a place or be registered in works of art? Can there be such a thing as an aesthetics of the real? And if so, what would it look like? The works Badiou discusses in *The Century* typically instantiate the real not so much by way of their iconoclasm but by the operation of subtraction, by removing themselves from the regime of what is possible in order to reconceive and reconfigure the parameters delimiting the space of creativity and action. Abstractly put, one could say that the real is figured here not as disfiguration but as a form of displacement, indeed a shift in the terms of figuration itself. Among Badiou’s favorite examples are Malevitch’s *White on White* painting, as well as the puzzling line from Mallarmé’s *Un coup de dés* “Rien n’aura eu lieu que le lieu.”25 For all the verve and momentum that comes to be associated with the “passion of the real,” it is often presented in terms of a small gap, a minimal difference but one with far-reaching and incalculable consequences since this gap or difference is supposed to intervene in and change the very realm of what is imaginable itself.

In contrast to this picture the real figures in a much more ostentatious manner in the works at the center of this book, at least at first glance. For all their obvious differences, all the works discussed here revolve around spectacles of blatant violence and suffering, and they all seem to be about tarrying with this sight. In many instances the violence is evoked in strikingly visual terms, sometimes literally as a pictorial representation, sometimes as if it was an image before which we are summoned. The term *spectacle* should be taken in its proper sense of “given to be seen,” of being arranged and staged for a spectator. The affinity between the focus on violence and excess and the appeal to images is one of the central puzzles of the texts’ engagements with the real. As we will see, the scenes of pain and suffering are very much about the construction of, but also a challenge to, certain modes of spectatorship and of viewing. The arrangements often appear created expressly to expose onlookers to the deadening gaze of the Medusa, to place them and us before this absolute image. The real is
what becomes visible in the spectacle of agony and pain whose affective impact the beholder cannot possibly escape. In fact, the works are not just about this impact; part of their ambition seems to be to reenact and produce it themselves, that is, to trigger visceral responses and induce quasi-somatic effects. Often the excess they draw into focus is both absorptive and paralyzing. What is glimpsed in the violence and agony staged in these works is the real of our corporeal existence as it comes into view only where it is caught at its limits.

But the sense of an insurmountable, unsublatable facticity experienced at the sight of horror is not the only register of the real in these works. True, in many instances the confrontation with violence is cast as an encounter with an erratic and irreducible presence. Violence appears as a matter that affects bodies, reducing them to things and exposing the human body in its fragile materiality; the agony and pain on display seem indisputable evidence of our finitude. But the spectacles can also have the opposite effect, creating the sense of unrealness, of a realm that appears at some remove from reality. At times there is a peculiar vacillation, then, between the sense of materiality, on the one hand, and a spectral, auratic immateriality, on the other. The latter results, in part, from a concentration on what one could call the phenomenal givenness, a focus on detail and appearance that can seem strangely oblivious to the agony before it. The real becomes visible in the often ostentatious exhibition of corporeal suffering and the creaturely materiality that eclipses the Symbolic order but also in the ways in which the gaze is drawn to and confounded by the peculiar phenomenality of the spectacles conjured up before it. Another way of getting at this split is to say that the fascination with the real is related to the ambition to produce presence, the irrefutable immediacy of powerful affect, brought about by the focus on the agonizing body, but also for the desire to capture the opposite, that is, a presence that is never fully realized, present only by way of its absence, in the mode of withdrawal, palpable precisely by remaining inaccessible, ineffable. The appeal to visual and pictorial representation is linked to this split. On the one hand, the framing, staging, and focus of the image removes whatever it features from reality, if only, as is often the case, to heighten its intensity, its presence. On the other hand, the real can never be the subject of representation in the first place. It is what disrupts the virtuality of the image. And in this respect it is what the texts bring into focus, not in their os-
tensibly unperturbed gaze at scenes of violence and pain but rather in the moments of the failure of representation, the nagging sense that the paintings, photographs, and other pictorial works encountered in the texts, are not about what they show but what they do not show, or what shows itself only in their destruction or disintegration.

No less important than the tension between these two different modalities of the real, however, is another kind of ambiguity: that between an experience of radical immanence and the search for the signs of transcendence. In fact, the response to the real, violence and suffering brought up close, resulting in an often unbearable degree of detail, is not limited to the sentiments of horror and awe. The remarkable preoccupation with the spectacle of pain, the way in which the works in question tarry with, and seek to immerse themselves in the sight of destruction and death, bespeaks a different kind of desire. The play between attraction and repulsion, the conflicting impulses of fascination and anguish in the face of the real, is sustained by the anticipation of some kind of insight. In ways very similar to the conception of the real we have seen in Badiou and Lacan (obvious differences between them notwithstanding), the confrontations with the real staged in the works on which this book focuses seem to hold the promise of a revelation and, possibly, a reversal. The contact with the dimension of ultimate negativity is to effect a transformation in which the sight of tormented, agonizing creatureliness shifts into a sense of sublime exaltation, the spectacle of disfiguration giving way to images of transfiguration. It is precisely the exposure and submission to a certain excess and radical alterity that are taken to culminate in a kind of elevation, finally overcoming and breaking the spell of the exorbitant real.

As I said earlier, the ambiguous reactions to which the confrontation with the real gives rise are best captured by a notion that doesn’t have much purchase in our contemporary critical idiom. This notion is the notion of pathos. As much as it may have fallen out of favor (colliquially, it is used in a largely pejorative sense today), the semantic complexity of the term matches the conflicting impulses and desires sustaining the engagements with the real that form the subject of the following chapters. Pathos is itself a complex and contradictory notion, not only in terms of its semantic scope—it can designate a painful event or the reaction to that event; it is one of the major effects of the tragic spectacle; it marks a register of speech associated with “high” or noble subjects; it is a proof of endurance
under duress and a sign of distinction and nobility; it is the mark of theatricality—but also because of the tensions inherent to it, in particular the dialectics of devastation and elevation, of being overwhelmed and rising above it at the same time.27

Pathos

As a register of speech, pathos has given rise to the suspicion of its being employed for manipulative purposes from its earliest beginnings. Of the three means of persuasion discussed in classical rhetoric, πάθος (pathos) is the one in which the orator appeals to the emotions of his audience, often by foregrounding his own emotional response to the hardship or misfortune under discussion, making his case less by way of argument, logos, or through the authority of his character, his ethos, than by way of emotional appeal.28 Páthos designates the moment when the speaker allows himself to be overtaken by his passion. Though in fact the opposite may well be the case, it is when the orator appears to be at his most spontaneous and impulsive, the most impassioned and stirring—a state of mind best induced, according to the standard recommendations, by evoking whatever causes the powerful affect as though one were in its presence, living through it oneself.29

The concept of páthos was central to Attic tragedy.30 At the beginning of the Poetics Aristotle identifies the páthê, emotions, as one of the main objects of the mimetic arts (1447a). He later names páthos, typically translated as suffering, as a key element of the tragic plot (1452b), alongside reversal (peripeteia) and recognition (anagnorisis). Finally, the páthê play a crucial role in achieving the purpose of the tragic spectacle, which is both to “stir up the emotions” (1456b) and to relieve us of them (cf. 1449b). From the beginning the concept not only refers to pain and suffering as events but constitutes the affective reaction to these events as well. Put differently, it is something happening before and to a subject and is intended to prompt similar reactions in the spectators. Given that the sense of decorum prohibited showing violent death on the Athenian stage, páthos was present above all in the dramatic speech: in a discourse fueled and compelled by the passions and thought to be of a quasi-contagious appeal. It is the appeal of compassion triggered by the sight of suffering but also of awe in light of the self-possession on the part of those struck by misfor-
tune. For as much as *páthos* stands for the irrepressible, spontaneous reaction in the face of suffering, by articulating their pain, the dramatic characters must have managed to remove themselves, at least somewhat, from the experience that threatens to overwhelm them. In this respect *páthos* also implies the distance and control somebody is able to maintain over his or her pain.

Since its first occurrence in the Greek lexicon, the term seems to have a remarkable capacity to span opposites: external and internal, trigger and reaction, spontaneous affect and reflective distance, being overpowered and asserting oneself anyway, instinctive compassion and staged emotionality, the grandeur of suffering and the recognition of its futility. The modern appropriation of the term concerns yet another polarity, that between passivity and activity. In a seminal article Erich Auerbach has shown how the relatively neutral Aristotelian concept evolves from the Stoic condemnation of the passions (“perturbatio animi”) to the Christian idea of “passio,” where the connotations of passivity give way to a more positive and affirmative conception.³¹ In the wake of Christ’s “passio,” suffering is no longer something that befalls us from the outside. Instead, “passion” takes on an active meaning. By taking the pain upon themselves, Christ and those following in his wake make suffering into a form of protest against the ways of the world: “what the Christian authors opposed to the passions was not the serenity of the philosopher but submission to injustice—a Christian . . . should not withdraw from the world to avoid suffering and passion [as the Stoics would have it]; he should transcend the world through suffering. . . . The aim of Christian hostility to the world is not a passionless existence outside the world, but counter-suffering, a passionate suffering in the world and hence also in opposition to it.”³² Passion is the name of an engagement and intervention on behalf of conviction and faith, which prove their transcending powers precisely in submitting to and sustaining the pain. As in Greek tragedy, where *páthos* implies not just the suffering of painful events but also stands for the perseverance and dignity in the face of extreme calamity, the Christian passion implies a certain distance from and a way of overcoming pain in pain. At times our modern usage of the term still bears out the same connotation, that is, the idea of achieving one’s freedom from suffering in the very midst of it.³³ In a paradoxical turn pathos asserts itself by way of self-cancellation.
Pathos Formulae

Besides Auerbach’s short article on the subject, the most prominent adaptation of the concept of pathos in the twentieth century is arguably Aby Warburg’s idea of *Pathosformel* (pathos formula). In keeping with the characteristic polarities of the category, Warburg’s term encompasses the tension between the appeal to a certain affective excess and the need to get this affective overload under control, precisely by casting it into a form, by fixating this intense vitality in an image. Warburg’s coinage also makes explicit another familiar opposition: that between the conventionality of inherited forms on the one hand and spontaneous expressivity on the other. According to his biographer Ernst Gombrich, Warburg’s intuition about the persistence of certain motifs was first inspired by a remark by Jacob Burckhardt, who claimed that wherever pathos appeared, artists had to resort to the models provided by antiquity. Warburg found evidence for this observation in the recourse by Renaissance artists, such as Botticelli or Ghirlandajo, to some of the pictorial templates they had come upon in the Ancients, especially in their treatment of movement and affect, “the forms used to express the highest degree possible of emotional involvement.” Warburg’s own recourse to the concept of “formula” points to the means by which the expressive power of pagan antiquity becomes available to modern artistic creation. As much as pathos stands for eruptive, uncontrollable affect, to speak of pathos *formulae* is to remind us that the ostensibly spontaneous or natural gestures and movements through which the emotional turmoil manifests itself are part of a coded repertoire, even if what puzzled Warburg is precisely that these formulae can be employed in different contexts and can serve very different ends. In other words the formulaic character allows for a certain flexibility and adaptability of the pictorial motifs borrowed from antiquity. Finally, the notion of formula also implies the idea of a magic spell that allows the artist to capture the energy of violent affect and to keep it at a distance, deflecting its full force in quasi-apotropaic fashion. (Another means for tempering the surplus energy of the pagan figures without relinquishing it entirely is the grisaille technique, which also underscores the spectral character of these revenants from antiquity.) In many instances the images of violence analyzed in the following similarly hark back to a certain iconic repertoire that they seek to reactitalize. And, as in the model of Warburg’s
pathos formulae, they do so not only to activate the energetic impact of pictorial representation, the power of the image, its capacity to strike and startle the beholder, but also to avert and arrest this energy in the stillness of the pictorial form.

Bringing to bear the notion of pathos to the visions of agony and excess in the twentieth century on which this book is focused makes sense both in terms of the different references of the category and its inherent ambiguity. The works that we will look at zero in on scenes of violence and destruction, on pathos in a quasi-literal sense, featuring scenes from which the beholders cannot turn their eyes, spectacles that exert an irresistible and yet disturbing fascination. They owe their effectiveness to the strange compulsion to look and to be riveted by the sight of violence, irrespective of its staged character, in fact, the mise en scène, or rather mise en image, often appears to enhance the force of the appeal. Pathos, however, is not only what is at stake, in a quasi-literal fashion, in the exhibition of violence and suffering. It is also what is reflected in the reactions these spectacles elicit from those who behold them: ranging from horror and revulsion to disbelief and despair; from stupor and a sense of numbness to anguish and compassion. But beside the paralysis and pain, there is also the more ambiguous shudder in the face of an experience that is incommensurable, the notion of being in touch with another kind of reality or of witnessing the power of a force that is beyond one’s control.

We could describe the tension within the complex semantics of pathos as that of a conflict between the effects and experience of dehumanization and the countervailing tendency, the reclamation of the very humanity that seemed to be forfeited. On the one hand, pathos is the name of unsalvageable pain and misfortune, radically immanent, that is to say, irredeemable creaturely suffering. It is the name of a pain that cannot be sublated or converted into something else, some higher meaning or cause, a pain, in other words, that shatters the symbolic economy that would allow us to make sense of it. As we have seen, the theorists of the real seem to be after something quite similar, except that they suggest that it is precisely by submitting to this experience of a radical immanence and by sustaining this numbness and shock that we push through to a different conception of subjectivity. But then, on the other hand, pathos is also the name of compassion. It is the means by which we relate to another’s pain and by which the suffering other is recognized and affirmed as human, pre-
cisely at the point of radical crisis. The significance of pathos is split between a sight all the more overwhelming for being beyond recognition and empathy (this is where the theories of the real situate their subject) and a medium in which a shared humanity comes to realize itself.

The pathos that marks the encounters with the real in the works at the center of this book rarely appears in the latter sense. For the most part the preoccupation seems sustained and fueled by the expectation of some kind of reversal or conversion. In this respect the fascination with the spectacles of violence and suffering resonates with the notion of the “passion of the real” with which we began. At the same time, however, the anticipated conversion never occurs, and in this respect pathos marks the moment in which the exaltation of violence and suffering fails, leaving the beholders to contemplate the price of the alleged “passions” of the twentieth century while disallowing any attempt at transfiguration or absolution. They provide no cathartic relief or soothing sentiment of compassion. This is where yet another ambiguity of the notion comes to bear. Pathos stands for the loss of the very aspirations Badiou’s passion of the real seeks to salvage. It also means a form of mourning that knows no consolation in the face of the destruction and suffering brought about by the failed encounters with the real.

There is something very bold in the gesture with which Badiou sums up the twentieth century as being driven by the passion of the real; at the same time, there is something rather blunt in the way in which he posits his terms. In part this bluntness has to do with the fact that *The Century* is as much about recapitulating what is behind us, the aspirations of the twentieth century, as it is about indicting the present for its sense of resignation and languor. The notion of the passion of the real may indeed capture the spirit of radical commitment that animated some of the major political and artistic movements of the twentieth century and their assault on the status quo. And it readily acknowledges, and in some sense even accepts, the excess of violence and destruction that came in their wake. But the bluntness of Badiou’s programmatic intervention also makes him miss a good deal of the tensions and of the complexity of the terms he suggests and of the radical engagements of the twentieth century they are meant to elucidate.

While the philosophical and psychoanalytic accounts of the real, of its passion or rather pathos, provide the framework and foil for looking at a num-
ber of literary works that occupy a terrain of similar concerns, they do not inform the critical idiom guiding the following readings. The different confrontations with the sights of agony and pain that are the subject of this study do not follow the same script, and their contexts differ considerably. From the officer of Kafka’s *In the Penal Colony*, who revels in the description of the bloody labor of the apparatus inscribing the law into the body of the condemned man, to Georges Bataille’s excitement and horror before the photograph of a young Chinese man who is being dismembered alive at the turn of the century in Beijing; from W. G. Sebald’s unease as he contemplates the panorama of the battle of Waterloo to Claude Simon’s mirroring of his own traumatic experiences in World War II through the historical archives of war iconography; from Peter Weiss’s minute descriptions of violent death on the Pergamon frieze and of the killing in the Nazis’ torture chambers at Plötzensee to Heiner Müller’s execution scenes and the apocalyptic fantasies of his so-called postdramatic texts—throughout all these we observe similar patters of appropriation and distanciation, of creating the semblance of immediacy, the attempt to let the violence conjured up become real and the urge to undo its spell. But rather than mapping the dynamic at work here on the theoretical expositions of the real and fitting all the texts in the same mold, the following chapters attend to the particularities of the works and discuss them on their own terms. That is to say, the individual chapters consist of close readings that proceed immanently, centering on problems and puzzles encountered in the texts themselves: the dialectics of attraction and repulsion in the face of a gruesome image in the case of Kafka and Bataille, for instance; the opposition to, and the appeal of, a certain iconography of pathos in Claude Simon, and in kindred ways in Peter Weiss; the apparent indeterminacy between the aporias and the apologetics of violence and terror in Heiner Müller; and, finally, the peculiar mixture of pathos and apathy in the paintings of Francis Bacon. All of them confront characters and readers (or beholders) with an exorbitant spectacle, the eruption of the real, and offer different attempts to come to terms with it. The works of the three postwar authors are concerned in a very immediate fashion with the catastrophic experiences treated in Badiou’s *The Century*: the Spanish civil war, the two world wars, the death camps, and revolutionary terror. Compared to these authors, Kafka and Bataille, as well as Bacon, provide a more oblique reflection on the extremes that marked
the twentieth century, though their preoccupation with violence has fre-
quently been related to the century’s horrors.

The first chapter compares Bataille’s aesthetics of transgression with the
“Chinese” cruelty of Kafka’s *In the Penal Colony*. In many respects these
two prominent engagements with the spectacle of suffering employ a fa-
miliar dramaturgy, of conversion and catharsis, transgression and trans-
figuration; but, at the same time, their ambition is to overturn the very
logic, or economy, on which this dramaturgy is based so as to allow for a
different order of experience. Ultimately, however, the fascination with
violence and pain is based on two diametrically opposed visions. The en-
counter with the real, in spite of the ostensible similarity between these
two dramatizations, rehearses different fantasies about the subject’s rela-
tion to the space of the symbolic, its inscription in, as much as its possi-
ble extrication from, this space. Bataille’s exaltation of violence and sac-
rifice aims at undoing the order of the symbolic, at least temporarily,
whereas Kafka’s fantasy of a machine inscribing the law into the body con-
cerns the violence of that very order. Violence is not external to it but stands
at its very beginning.

In the next chapter we move from the spectacle of public execution to
the theater of war. The chapter begins with a brief discussion of the
panorama of Waterloo (and other iconic battle pieces) in W. G. Sebald
before turning to an author whose writing features the experience of the
battlefield as that of a sudden disruption of the order of the symbolic and
the imaginary, a conceptual and perceptual vertigo that does not subside.
Claude Simon’s attempts to make sense of his traumatic experiences in
the Second World War are fueled, and hampered, by a constant onslaught
and a constant flight of images, an excess of hyperprecise memories and
their continual dispersal and dissolution. The visions of war are inevitably
informed by an iconography of pathos, but the actual war experience is
radically iconoclastic, the encounter with a real that shatters all the pre-
fabricated images at our disposal. Simon’s persistent return to the same
episodes and events is part not only of the author’s interminable efforts
to render the “mindless fury of things,” which was unleashed on him on
the battlefields of the Second World War, but also of the attempt to ac-
count for his own fortuitous survival—which makes for the muted pathos
that permeates this writing.

The third chapter looks at another survivor looking back on the vio-

Introduction  25
lence he escaped, more or less inadvertently, and that does not cease to haunt him. Time and again, Peter Weiss’s literary works, the plays Marat/Sade and The Investigation, as well as the novelistic trilogy The Aesthetics of Resistance, summon their readers before representations of destruction and agony, calling for what appears to be a paradoxical combination of anaesthesia and pathos, seeking to simultaneously desensitize and incense the beholder faced with the sights of devastation and defeat. Weiss’s texts follow a contradictory poetics of numbness, or anaesthesia, and of militancy, shuttling back and forth between the resistance to pathos and the pathos of resistance.

The last chapter, on Heiner Müller, is about the painful contradiction, at least in the eyes of the author, between the inevitability of revolutionary violence and its inevitable “fallout,” the excess that disavows the very project by which it was generated. My reading compares the playwright’s so-called postdramatic work, shockingly graphic and grotesque collage-texts such as Hamletmachine or the ekphrastic prose poem Explosion of a Memory, with the surgical coolness that marked the “experiments” undertaken in some of his earlier works, the series Versuchsreihe (Philoctetes, The Horatian, Mauser), and its challenge to fully assume the aporias of violence exercised in the name of radical change. The pathos advocated in the earlier texts is not that of compassion for the victims, sacrificed for the sake of an unrealized cause, but rather that of embracing the monstrous real of indiscriminate and presumably unavoidable destruction.

The real is, almost by definition, an elusive and rather abstract category. The chapters of this book seek to counterbalance this seemingly inevitable abstractness of the term by engaging as closely as possible with the texts. Their investment in visions of violence and excess may be viewed as a testament to the “passion of the real” that fueled some of the grand aspirations of the twentieth century, as well as the disastrous aberrations they entailed. It also bears testimony to the ambition of achieving, by aesthetic means, the impact of the real, of (re)producing its characteristic sense of excitation and disturbance. At the same time, the confrontations with the real, staged in a number of different guises and settings, provide a different and more nuanced account of the fascination and the disquiet the last century’s excess in violence caused those willing to face it.