The Resistance to Pathos and the Pathos of Resistance

Peter Weiss


—Peter Weiss, “Laokoon oder über die Grenzen der Sprache”

Dein Schmerz ist eitel. Du bist die Erschütterung, die Dich überkommt, nicht wert.

—Peter Weiss, Fluchtpunkt

La mort de Marat

In one of its final scenes the play that bears the baroque title The Persecution and Assassination of Jean-Paul Marat as Performed by the Inmates of the Asylum of Charenton under the Direction of Monsieur de Sade reenacts in a living picture Jacques-Louis David’s famous painting of Marat’s death: “All surround the bathtub in a heroic tableau, its composition as follows: Marat’s right arm hangs over the side of the bathtub as in David’s classic painting. In his right hand he holds the pen, his left hand holds papers. Corday still holds the dagger. The Four Singers hold her from behind and pull back her arms with such force that her neck cloth opens and her breasts are revealed. Simonne is leaning over the bath-
tub in horror. Duperret lies on his knees. Roux stands behind the bathtub erect on a bench.”¹ But even without this explicit reference to one of the emblematic images of the French Revolution, the picture of Marat expiring in his bathtub is inevitably there, present throughout the play, conjured before the spectator’s or reader’s inner eye, as it were. David’s La mort de Marat, sometimes called Marat à son dernier soupir, is a work that mounts a complex play of references and allusions.² The dying man’s posture invokes two prominent motifs of Western art: the pietà, the image of the dead Christ in his mother’s arms, and the hero’s funeral of antiquity. The painting associates Marat with the figure of Christ not only by the depiction and positioning of his right arm and of his head, slightly inclined to his shoulder—think of Michelangelo’s pietà in St. Peter’s Basilica—but also by the very noticeable incision a little below his collar bone, which recalls the wound in Christ’s side. The two letters that can be seen on the painting are testimonies of the revolutionary’s benevolence. Marat received his murderess, whose letter to him had appealed precisely to his “bienveillance,” with the utmost kindness, seeing her the very moment he had signed a remittance of bread to a mother of five, as the second letter reveals. The last act of the expiring Marat was thus to give bread to the poor, and he received his killer, as the posture in which David portrayed him suggests, with open arms, the gesture of compassion and mercy.

At the time of his murder Marat was a figure of great controversy. The painting undertakes a reevaluation and revision of this reputation. While Marat’s adversaries liked to portray him as a “buveur de sang,” David shows the revolutionary lying in his own blood, the blood-stained knife that killed him at his side. By contrast, the quill in his right hand shows the “weapon” with which he, “l’Ami du peuple,” another one of Marat’s epithets, had engaged himself until the very end and on behalf of the people—an engagement for which, as the picture suggests, he was to pay with his life. The close proximity of the quill to the murder weapon also functions as a reminder, whether intentional or not, of the lethal effects of the littérature’s and political agitator’s pen.³ The bathtub and the white linen from which the body protrudes, unprotected and vulnerable, brings to mind Agamemnon’s inglorious end and Stoic suicides like that of Seneca, who slit his wrists in a bath. These props frame a scene of death: the bathtub resembles a sarcophagus, and the white sheets recall representations

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of the dead Christ shrouded in linen. There is a wooden case that has David’s dedication, “A Marat,” the artist’s signature and the date of the Revolutionary calendar on it, and that obviously figures as a kind tombstone. The conspicuous brushwork of the otherwise undefined background forms a remarkable contrast to the detail and the painterly effort that has gone into the depiction of the image’s lower half. Everything has been worked with a great deal of attention: the texture of the wooden case, the bloodied papers, and Marat’s immaculate and youthful body that seems free of all tension, relaxed, almost relieved. In the play of dark and light (a chiaroscuro technique reminiscent of Caravaggio), the body emerges from the uneven obscurity of the background, turning toward the beholder as if to address him or her. The small piece of paper poised on the edge of the wood case appears to protrude into the space of the beholder as well. Whether the result of the distribution of light and darkness or just an effect of the different traditions combined in the picture, the long muscular arms, the torso, and the face tilted sideways appear sculpted and waxen at the same time, and one has the peculiar impression that Marat’s pale body is somehow illuminated. Indeed, the picture as a whole has a remarkable luminosity about it. (This is true even for the background, where it is particularly difficult to determine the source of light.) For all the apparent nuance and plasticity of the body, a closer look reveals that it is nonetheless left strangely diffuse. One of the most striking features of the image is, finally, the expression on Marat’s face: he appears to be smiling. The hint of a smile, the relaxed posture, and the sense of relief it conveys, the largely preserved integrity of the immaculate body, all of this turns the dying Marat—it is difficult to decide, by the way, whether the painting shows Marat dying, à son dernier soupir, or dead—into a martyr and a figure of redemption. It reconciles the beholder with his violent end, and his smile appears to absolve even his killer, Charlotte Corday, the absent presence on David’s painting.4

Although the configuration of David’s image appears only briefly on Weiss’s stage, the play as a whole consists to a large degree of tableaux, arranged for the viewer, and often supplemented with captions by a figure called herald, only to be dissolved quickly thereafter. Marat/Sade is made of such “stills,” the attendant commentary, and the dialogue between the two main antagonists, but frequently these episodes and exchanges are interrupted and give way to frantic action, a kind of commotion and tur-
bulence usurping the stage. There is something of a kaleidoscopic effect in this dynamic of scenic arrangements made and unmade. Weiss’s play takes its cues not only from the modern theater—Brecht, Beckett, and Artaud—and its distant precursor Georg Büchner but also from the commedia dell’arte and related popular genres. From Brecht he takes the antithetical dialectics without, however, allowing for any synthesis or sublation of the exposed antagonisms; from Beckett the sense of the absurd (history like nature appears as a spectacle profoundly indifferent to human affairs); from Artaud the notion of a theater that transgresses its own boundaries, a “theater of cruelty” that doesn’t shy away from the production of violence and pain. (Originally, Weiss’s play was supposed to end with an attack on the audience.) Weiss draws on lesser dramatic forms, as well—pantomime, acrobatics, litanies, ballads, even slapstick—and at times the stage resembles the arena of a circus or a fair. Like the painting that inspired it, the play is multilayered. But unlike David’s *Death of Marat*, its layers do not converge in a coherent or unified image. On the contrary, the play has an overtly self-reflexive dimension—as play within a play—and provides its own metacommentary, albeit erratic. The Marquis de Sade, for instance, is supposed to be the director of the performance within the play, but he is also a character in the story. He, in fact, never appears to be directing the character of Marat, but instead he engages the revolutionary directly, as his equal and adversary. His speeches occur in the same space as Marat’s and cannot lay claim to any greater authority than his. There is, at any rate, a continual mixing of the different levels of action, of time, and of reflection, a “perspectival complexity,” as Martin Rector has called it, that thwarts any clear-cut conclusions or “lessons” one could attribute to the play. Although the painting undoubtedly forms the backdrop to the spectacle of Weiss’s *Marat/Sade*, the drama is, in fact, very much at odds with the main thrust of David’s picture, its attempt to make the slain murderer Marat transcend his own violent death and reaffirm the cause of the Revolution. The pathos of David’s *Marat* is undercut in a number of ways by Weiss’s play. The first consists in transplanting the French Revolution to an asylum, stressing the affinity between revolution and madness. There is not much grandeur about the two main protagonists, and one finds very little of the sublime oratory of the Revolution, which Büchner, for instance, used to such great effect in *Danton’s Death*. The play’s Marat is for the most part a pathetic
figure, whiny and given to grandiose pronouncements—“I am the revolution,” he proclaims at one point—and commonplaces about the social question. The Divine Marquis, by contrast, is less hysterical and generally a bit more cool, but he is portrayed above all as apathetic and resigned. Once driven to his notoriously cruel fantasies by the desire to challenge and overcome the indifference of nature, at this point he has abandoned his erstwhile ambitions. Conquering nature has no more appeal for him. A radical nihilist, Sade has lost his interest in the mysteries of pain. He has chosen the role of a dispassionate observer, as he explains while being whipped mercilessly, though upon his own request, refusing compassion for the victims as much as allegiance to the cause of the Revolution or any cause whatsoever. Urged to explain the point of the spectacle he has staged with the inmates of the asylum, he refuses to provide an answer. Marat, for his part, defends the importance of taking sides—“I don’t watch unmoved I intervene”—and the need for violence:

And what’s a bath full of blood
compared to the bloodbaths still to come
Once we thought a few hundred corpses would be enough
then we saw thousands were still too few
and today we can’t even count all the dead
Everywhere you look
everywhere.7

Two passages stand out. Corday’s vision of an execution by guillotine (perhaps her own) and Sade’s description of the gruesome execution of Damiens.8 (The latter is well known to readers of Foucault’s Discipline and Punish, which opens with this very episode, quoting it as an example of the festival and “splendor” of early modern public executions, supplanted in the late eighteenth century by a new set of penal technologies and new rationales of punishment.) These are unapologetic depictions of violence, conjured up for no other reason, it seems, than to expose the viewer to the harrowing sight of torture and violent death, unmitigated by any kind of higher purpose.

If David’s painting tried to capture a dramatic turning point in the history of the French Revolution and to condense but also attenuate some of its inherent tensions in his image, Marat/Sade can be viewed as a re-dramatization of the picture. Staging the Revolution’s conflicting forces,
it continually defers what is announced in its title: the death of Marat. The pattern of repetition, interruption and deferral effects a desublimation, robbing the iconic image of its pathos. It is drowned out, so to speak, by the noise and turbulence of the play’s very last tableau, which, incidentally, “quotes” yet another emblematic picture of the Revolution: David’s Tennis Court Oath.

Images of the last moment, of agony and dying, such as David’s Death of Marat, are a signature feature of Peter Weiss’s writing, from Marat/Sade to The Aesthetics of Resistance, the author’s late novelistic trilogy, which owed its success in no small degree to the remarkable ekphrastic descriptions of the Pergamon frieze in Berlin, Géricault’s Raft of the Medusa, Picasso’s Guernica, and many other works of art featuring violent subjects. Yet from the beginning there is, on the author’s part, a peculiar ambivalence about the iconic representations of suffering and death that have such a pervasive presence in his work. Clearly, the pathos they depict has a powerful appeal, but at the same time it elicits resistance. Such opposition is not only explicit in some of Weiss’s own commentaries on the poetics of his texts; it is also evinced in the works themselves, where it is typically not subject to the kind of carnivalesque deflation practiced in Marat/Sade but often gives rise to a more austere treatment. The question is how the author balances the preoccupation with violence and suffering so much in evidence throughout his oeuvre with the programmatic distance vis-à-vis traditional models and forms of figuring violence, in particular the iconographic ones that hold such a prominent place in his texts. I begin by recalling two instances of such programmatic distancing: a brief episode in the author’s second novel and the poetics elaborated in his Laocoon address. The major focus of this chapter is, then, on the two best-known works besides the Marat/Sade: first, the play about the Frankfurt Auschwitz trial, The Investigation, and second, The Aesthetics of Resistance. The poetological premise of the former is that the scale of the genocide disallows any form of mimetic representation. The play, therefore, programmatically abstains from illustrating or “picturing” the horrors of the Holocaust. But this dramatic proscription of the image and of the semblance of presence, of recreating the experience of the camps on the stage, is continually thwarted by the vivid and graphic testimonies by the survivors whose affective intensity is excruciating. The lengthy engagements with works of art depicting scenes of violence constitute one of the most prominent fea-
tures of Weiss’s last work, The Aesthetics of Resistance. The very pathos placed under suspicion in the Laocoon address, and that the antimimetic poetics of the Auschwitz play sought to eschew, thus returns center stage in the novel. The trilogy relates the story of the resistance group Rote Kapelle, or Red Orchestra, and more broadly the fate, that is, the defeat, of the clandestine antifascist struggle in Germany. Its objectives are twofold. On the one hand, it tries to reconstruct this story in painstaking detail and with documentary accuracy. This search for facticity is combined with the attempt to recapitulate the ideological reflections and analyses of those involved in this fateful endeavor. On the other hand, the novel seeks to reinvoke the pathos of this struggle, its grandeur and its failure, but also the determination and vigor that sustained it, a vigor shaped and informed by the encounter with visions of agony and pain, in short, with the real of the tormented and suffering body. The work’s ambition is thus to recall the intellectual and ideological aspirations and the promise of a movement that, in Weiss’s view, has received short shrift in the historiographical accounts of the period, but also to reclaim the inspiration of its doomed engagements: the confrontation with the real, obstinate and harrowing.

“Your Suffering Is in Vain”

In Weiss’s second autobiographical novel, Fluchtpunkt (Vanishing Point), the narrator recounts his first confrontation with pictures of the concentration camps, in the spring of 1945. The effect of looking at these pictures is devastating. They wipe out the budding artist’s faith in the arts and culture. Everything comes apart; nothing remains the same “in the face of these ultimate pictures.” Any attempt at artistic creation is called into question; nothing in the cultural imaginary matches the horror of these photographs. The text does not show this horror; it says very little about what is actually in the pictures. Instead, the brief passage focuses on the affective and bodily impact the pictures have on the narrator. But even the description of his reaction is cut short abruptly and rigorously. “Your suffering is in vain, you are not worth the horror that overcomes you.” The horror is so exorbitant it denies the beholder the pain that overcomes him. It exceeds the imagination and overrides the quasi-instinctual reaction of sympathy and pity. Obviously, there is more than a hint of guilt that speaks in this categorical prohibition of affective re-
sponse. The shock of the pictures is followed by a second “strike”: the rebuke reduces the beholder to silence and to shame. At the same time, the verdictlike sentence has its own kind of pathos, indicating the magnitude of the horror by silencing its expression and suppressing any emotional response. It is the pathos of antipathos, the pathos of a pathos muting itself, the equivalent perhaps of Timanthes’ painting of the sacrifice of Iphigenia, cited in Lessing’s *Laocoon*, in which the painter has chosen to present the highest degree of pain precisely by not showing it, veiling the father’s grief-stricken features under a cloth the artist has put over Agamemnon’s head.11

In his speech delivered apropos of the reception of the city of Hamburg’s Lessing prize, “Laokoon oder Über die Grenzen der Sprache,” Weiss himself has reflected on the paragon of pathos, the Laocoon sculpture, if in a more cursory fashion than the title of his speech suggests. The speech is for the most part an account of Weiss’s transition from being a visual artist to becoming a writer. The story of his commitment to “words” as opposed to images is embedded in a recapitulation of the child’s initial acquisition of language; the subsequent loss of that language as the family is forced to leave Germany; and the turn to images, both of the imagination and of painting, as a response to the situation of exile. The speech then proceeds to recount the relationship first to the foreign language, in Swedish exile, and concludes with the recovery of his native tongue, uneasy at first but decisive and on a rather affirmative note in the end. Although these developments are presented in a strangely impersonal tone and in a language suggesting less of an individual experience than a universal condition, the autobiographical circumstances that have shaped the story do come through very strongly throughout the speech. As a number of readers have noted, the emphatic commitment to language with which the speech ends was not only at odds with Weiss’s ongoing, if lesser known, work as a visual artist and filmmaker but also with the continuous importance of visual artworks for his own writing.12 The apparent demotion of “images” in favor of writing is not entirely consistent with the story presented in the speech itself either. For according to the speech, images as much as words, depending on the circumstances, can very well prove to be the appropriate means of expression, just as much as both can fail in this endeavor. The pronouncement in favor of the image very obviously coincides with another development more alluded to than spelled out in the speech:

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the author’s politicization. In a somewhat apodictic tone, Weiss concludes his exploration of the alternation between language and images: “Images resign themselves to the pain; words want to know about the origin of the pain.”¹³ In this vein, as Julia Hell has pointed out, the author contrasts the figures of which the Laocoon group is composed, identifying two positions vis-à-vis the spectacle of violence and pain.¹⁴ Weiss regards the priest and his youngest son as paralyzed in the snake’s constriction. They have lost the struggle; their pain has completely muted them. For them there is no hope of liberation. The older son, however, is in a different position. He is wrestling himself from the deadly embrace of the python, breaking out of the immobilized configuration to call for help and to speak of the horror suffered. His task is “to bear witness in front of those who might come to his rescue” (180–81). The opposition to the image is thus an opposition to being spellbound by the spectacle of pathos. Instead, the speech opts for undoing this spell by probing its circumstances and conditions. The distinctions proposed here are overtly schematic: language is the vehicle of analysis and critique; images are inherently affirmative, incapable of calling into question the status quo. Evidently, the author’s commitment to the newly proclaimed political charge of his writing is not without its own kind of pathos.

Resistance to Pathos: *The Investigation*

The resistance to pathos as articulated both in the Laocoon speech and apropos of the first confrontation with the pictures of genocide is also in evidence in *The Investigation*, if in a paradoxical manner, for it is precisely through the play’s dramaturgical means of creating distance that it produces a peculiar kind of affective intensity. The author has gone to some lengths to be as matter-of-fact and as dispassionate as possible in his reworking of the Auschwitz trial. In keeping with this emphasis, the documentary character of the play has for the longest time dominated its critical reception. In many respects *The Investigation* appears to follow the views advanced in the Laocoon speech. Unlike Weiss’s other great dramatic success, the visual and musical spectacle of *Marat/Sade*, the play programmatically avoids any kind of *mise en scène* or, as I would like to put it in view of the reflections on the image in the Laocoon speech, *mise en image*. Instead, it seeks to expose the structures the author held to be re-
sponsible for the establishment of the death camps. Many critics of the play have followed Weiss’s “lead,” if only to criticize the partisan character of his work. But they have often neglected the dimension that is no less prominent than the drama’s ostensible political analysis and commentary: the detailed depictions of killing and torture that make even just reading the play a nearly intolerable experience.

In the well-known dramaturgical preface to his piece Weiss described the rationale for the antimimetic poetics of his work: “In the presentation of the play, no attempt should be made to reconstruct the courtroom before which the proceedings of the camp trial took place. Any such reconstruction would, in the opinion of the author, be as impossible as trying to present the camp itself on the stage.” At first, this caveat simply appears to reassert the topos of the impossibility of representing the genocide. Yet the first part of the statement actually includes the Auschwitz trial itself as something that cannot be recreated onstage. It may have been purely practical considerations that led the author to this view. The duration and scale of the trial made finding ways of compressing the material inevitable. The author has called the result of his work “a condensation” of facts (I, 118; E, 9) in which the stories of particular individuals have been largely absorbed. Above all, he defended his decision to leave the majority of characters, especially those representing the witnesses of the prosecution, anonymous, a crucial feature of the play’s approach to its subject.

For many readers Weiss’s choice to write a play about the trial rather than recreate the reality of the camp was not just a consequence of technical dramaturgical constraints. According to these readers, what is on trial in the play is not only Auschwitz but the form of the trial itself. In this view The Investigation charts the limits of juridical procedures, critically reflecting on the attempt to deal with the crimes under investigation in judicial terms. Many aspects of the play support such a reading. The disputed subject matter seems to exceed any form of judicial treatment. The Investigation starts in medias res and ends abruptly, suggesting an ongoing and interminable process that will continue even after the play has ended. Just as many of the witnesses stress the persistence of the camp in their memories, the lack of an ending and the sense of a beginning that precedes the start of the play suggest that the trial fails to bring about any closure. For all
the dynamic in the exchanges between judge, witnesses, defendants, attorneys, and prosecutors, the insistent questioning and the hesitant answers, at times elusive, at times defiant, there is something monotonous and serial about the procedure. The trial does not culminate in any verdict; the gathering of evidence does not seem to lead to any conclusions. The witnesses for the prosecution, former camp inmates, often interrupt their statements and fall into silence. On several occasions they stress how much everything is still before them: “I would like to forget / but I keep seeing it” (I, 194; E, 89). But at the same time, they are incapable of speaking about their experience—“I couldn’t speak about it” (I, 169; E, 63)—falling silent as they are pressured by the defense attorneys who question their credibility and charge them with self-contradictions. “Counsel of the Defense: Then it was possible / to survive it after all” (I, 173; E, 67). By contrast, the defendants eloquently claim their innocence, insisting on having been restricted to their narrow field of operations and of not having noticed anything of what was going on outside their area of responsibility. The motives of their actions are rarely investigated, nor are they asked to explain themselves. There is even less room for the few moments in which the witnesses succeed in overcoming their silence to talk about what was done to them. As in one of the devices used for torture, the “Redemaschine,” the bureaucratic rules of the trial always redirect the focus to the issues and facts under dispute. The witnesses get their chance to testify, but the judicial procedure is itself a mechanism that does not bother with the pain that the memories of the camps resuscitate. In the continual alternation between statements and counterstatements everything seems to disappear as quickly as it has surfaced. The testimonies are absorbed in the unceasing flow of voices.

Reading the play as a critique of judicial procedure and discourse may seem persuasive enough. As I have already suggested, however, such a reading does not account for one of the most striking features of the work: its graphic precision, both in the way it charts the space of the camp and in the excruciating descriptions of the atrocities that were committed there. It is a feature that is strangely at odds both with the antimimetic poetics of the preface and with the critical implications of Weiss’s approach to Auschwitz. Before turning to the remarkable insistence on precision—graphic, visual, and spatial—I want to touch briefly on two important strategies of the play: the anonymity of the dramatic cast and the inde-
terminateness of the event. To many critics the abstraction that results, to a large extent, from these strategies is an indication of the author’s political bias.\footnote{17}

If the voices seem continually to vanish in a large chorus, it is no coincidence. Weiss deliberately stripped the characters, especially the witnesses, of their identity, just as he stripped the event described of its historical specificity. In neglecting the historical and political circumstances of the genocide, the playwright transposes the event to an unspecified time and place, suggesting that it could occur anytime and anywhere. As a result it often seems as though the play is less preoccupied with one particular historical event than with its persistence, that is, with the continuous possibility of its recurrence. The event conditioned and produced by a set of concrete circumstances becomes an ominous condition of modernity itself. “I came out of the camp yes / but the camp is still there” (I, 193; E, 88), explains one of the witnesses of the persecution. Shortly before, another witness had invoked the possibility of a repetition that would exceed its antecedent:

\begin{quote}
We
who still live with these images
know that millions could stand again
waiting to be destroyed
and that the new destruction
will be far more efficient. (I, 192; E, 86)
\end{quote}

This shift from the singularity of the Holocaust to an abiding and all-encompassing condition is based on an economic explanation of the genocide. Throughout the play there is the implicit suggestion that the concentration camps were profitable extensions of Germany’s capitalist industries. It is this “Kontinuitätsthese” that prompted an outcry among critics when the play was first performed.\footnote{18} With fascism as a consequence of “late capitalism,” the identity of the victims becomes a matter of secondary importance. In a few instances even the distinction between victims and perpetrators is blurred. A witness explains:

\begin{quote}
Many of those who were destined
to play the part of prisoners
had grown up with the same ideas
\end{quote}
as those
who found themselves acting as guards. (*I*, 190–91; *E*, 85)

And one of the defendants argues, “We were nothing but numbers / just like the prisoners” (*I*, 244; *E*, 143).

Curiously, the play’s ostensible abstraction from the identity of the victims, and from historical circumstance, is outweighed by the opposite tendency, the urge for a remarkable degree of concreteness, which has not always been sufficiently taken into account in the critical literature. In spite of the programmatic opposition to recreating the realities of the camp (or the courtroom), there is an almost obsessive concern with facts, numbers, and details, a concern, above all, with the topography of the camp, the organization of this space, its structures, facilities, and procedures. Time and again, the witnesses are pressed to be more precise in their descriptions, to specify and to elaborate. Often they are asked to provide figures, the exact measurements of a space, for example, and the number of people in it. The witnesses are repeatedly asked for estimates of how many people were killed in a given location. It is obviously part of any court’s task to establish the facts, but there is something obsessive in the play’s focus on statistics and on the topographical organization of the camp.

In a text written a few years earlier the author provided some clues about what might be at issue in this obsessive concern with the locality. “Meine Ortschaft” was written for an anthology that invited contributors to describe a place that had played an important role in their lives. Weiss chose a place for which, as he put it, he was “destined” but had never reached.19 The description of his first visit to Auschwitz is, above all, an account of his inability to picture the events that had taken place there. He wanders through the ruins of the camps, but his visit is marked by a disconnect between his prior knowledge about the place and its emptiness, which no effort of the imagination is able to fill. “I had seen it as I heard about it and as I was reading about it. Now I don’t see it,” he writes.20 The visitor soon limits himself to simply registering and enumerating what is before him, mechanically asserting the existence of the camp’s various facilities. But the feeling persists that he is incapable of imagining the horrors that actually took place here. The only way of knowing what it was like would be to have been there, he muses at the end of his visit.

In view of the experience described in “Meine Ortschaft,” it is hard not to conceive of *The Investigation* as an attempt to counter and over-
come this inability to imagine what happened in the camp. For all the re-
sistance to mimetic reconstruction, to “picturing” the camp onstage, the
charting of its topography often achieves an extraordinary sense of pres-
rentness, of being there and of “seeing” what is being described. It is pre-
cisely the meticulousness of some of the depictions that forces the described
scenes on the imagination, often in ways that are extremely difficult to
bear.

The remarkable attention devoted to the spatial organization of the
camp is matched only by the closely related focus on the countless ways
of killing and torturing that took place in the different sites of the camp
charted by the investigation. The number of atrocities that come up in
the different “cantos” seems virtually endless. It is not just the detail but
also the serial character that creates an effect that is alternately nauseat-
ing and numbing. If the narrator of “Meine Ortschaft” appeared to feel
guilty for not feeling anything as he visited Auschwitz, it very much ap-
ppears as though in *The Investigation* Weiss had sought to find a way of
bringing about the sense of shock and of pain so conspicuously absent dur-
ing his visit. It is true, the nearly intolerable catalogue of suffering and
death, which took place on an unheard-of scale, stands in sharp contrast
to the court’s preoccupation with the camp operations. But the court’s con-
tinual demand to learn more about the technical side of how the camp was
run is less an indictment of the judiciary’s disregard for the “human fac-
tor” than a means of intensifying the horror, precisely because it is treated
with such ostensible detachment. There is a second “counterpoint” to the
endless list of atrocities that makes up this play: it is the continual laugh-
ter and chuckling of the defendants, an effective contrast to the sense of
disbelief and shock the horrors depicted cause us.

As I remarked at the beginning of this section, *The Investigation* ex-
hibits a similar ambivalence vis-à-vis the representation of suffering and
pain as the Laocoon speech or *Vanishing Point*. Although the author
clearly marks his distance from any rendering of the camps that would
suggest a kind of immediate access, the ban on images that is issued in
the prefatory note to the play is effectively undercut by the very form of
the trial. For what we get in the testimonies that make up the play are the
most vivid and indeed shockingly graphic accounts of suffering and vio-
ence. The power of these descriptions is increased by two factors. On the
one hand, there are the accumulative tendencies of the testimonies: the

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depictions confront us with a seemingly endless series of atrocities. On the other hand, owing to the protocols of judicial testimony, the depictions are largely stripped of any affect or expressiveness. As a consequence, it becomes exceedingly difficult to respond with pity or empathy to the gruesome spectacles placed before us. The most likely reaction these spectacles elicit is a mix of unresolvable horror and shame. In this case, then, resistance to pathos is the resistance to any form of attenuation. Put differently, The Investigation forces the gaze on the spectacle of suffering without allowing it to rise above it or to transform it into anything else. It is certainly possible to read the play as a critique of the trial form or as a denunciation of the unacknowledged complicity of the military-industrial complex in the construction of the camps and, by extension, of the supposed continuity between “late capitalism” and the totalitarian system of Nazi Germany. But the way in which the play gives center stage to the cruelties and terrors of the camp makes it difficult to view the pain and the violence, presented with such a disturbing degree of detachment and detail, merely as an accessory feature.

The Pathos of Resistance in The Aesthetics of Resistance

In many respects, and in spite of the obvious generic differences, The Aesthetics of Resistance follows in the tracks of The Investigation. Depictions of suffering and pain, often fairly elaborate, constitute one of the central elements of the novel. Time and again, an almost compulsive attraction draws the protagonists to the spectacles of violence and terror, whether real or artistic. In ways similar to the dramaturgy of The Investigation, the novel stages a series of confrontations that appear to test the characters’ ability to sustain the sight of suffering. But different from the previous experiments with the urge to recoil before the utmost horror, the book’s lengthy engagements with scenes of death and destruction—all figurations of pathos of one kind or another—are no less about recreating the sense of pain and paralysis in the face of radical crisis than about transforming the shock of the image into a force, the experience of pain into passion: enlisting pathos in the service both of resistance and of commemoration. I want to begin with an episode in the novel that echoes the poetics of The Investigation like no other. But let me anticipate that the similarities
should not make us overlook the difference. The Plötzensee episode of *The Aesthetics of Resistance* does not only point back to the play about the Auschwitz trial but also refers us to the novel’s countless representations of violence and suffering that appear to exalt the *pathos of resistance*.

**PLÖTZENSEE**

The disturbing combination of detail and detachment by which *The Investigation* achieved its most excruciating effects is also one of the overriding characteristics of the famous Plötzensee episode, which recounts the execution of the members of Rote Kapelle, the resistance group at the center of Weiss’s trilogy.21 The violent deaths of Hans Coppi, Libertas and Harro Schulze-Boysen, Arvid Harnack, Horst Heilmann, and a number of others are rendered in painstaking detail. As in *The Investigation* a great deal of attention is given to the locale and to the procedure of the execution. For a moment one could think the focus on the factual circumstances was a way of distracting from the horror that is about to take place. But the tone of the description does not change as it depicts the execution proper and the metamorphosis to which it submits the bodies of the condemned men and women. Rather than veiling their agony, instead of hiding the instant of death itself, their suffering is brought into full view, exposed in the glaring light of the execution chamber, in which the unflinching gaze seems to zero in on every detail of their mangled bodies: “In the bright light [one could see] every wrinkle, every tear, every bruise on the faces, and the abrasions, the deep, round burn marks, the scabbing and festering wounds.”22 A few moments later, we are made to see the same bodies twisting in their final convulsions. It appears almost as though it was precisely through its absorption in the spectacle of suffering that the gaze is able to become oblivious to the agony before it.

On the face of it the execution is rendered in a remarkably unemotional key. It is treated as a process rather than as a tragic event. The description appears concerned primarily with the technical aspects of this process: its “mechanics” but also its physiological side, more specifically the physiognomic transformation to which it submits its victims. The focus on the precise circumstances and on the visual aspects of the event is grounded undoubtedly in the ideal of documentary accurateness, which has done away with any hierarchy of significance. Everything is of similar impor-
tance. As is well known, part of Weiss’s aspiration for his novel was to reconstruct the story of the resistance with the greatest possible precision, which meant, above all, not to omit anything. Yet in this instance the accuracy and the detail seem strangely excessive, not least in view of the fact that the episode of the deaths at Plötzensee concludes the story the book has been telling, at least in some sense. Given that this is the end, then, what is conspicuously absent from the episode is any kind of epitaph or any sense of closure. Instead, the last thing mentioned is the soiled bodies and the odors of blood and excrement that quickly start to fill the room. It is true that these deaths will be remembered in the subsequent and final sections, in Lotte Bischoff’s reflections on the future commemoration of the resistance movement, of which she herself is the sole survivor. But there is a studied restraint at work in the rendering of these deaths, and the silence that follows is palpable, as though the only adequate stance vis-à-vis this end was the meticulous and matter-of-fact recording of what happened. Like the glaring light that illuminates the scene, the episode speaks of these deaths in crude material terms, making a point of noting the blood and squalor that come with the physical destruction of the human body but also of resisting the temptation to mystify these deaths. In many ways such resistance seems to be the main objective of the troubling focus on detail and the ostensible detachment that characterize the episode.

But the sense of detachment is deceptive. A closer look at some of the specifics reveals a subtle inflection through which the Plötzensee episode is brought into alignment with some of the other episodes of extreme suffering and violent death depicted throughout the novel. For all the apparent reticence on the part of the narrator and the insistence on the prosaic character of these deaths, one can nonetheless discern a counter-tendency elevating the sentenced men and women above the sordid circumstances of their execution. Underlying the realism and literalness of the description is a network of motifs that counteracts, at least to some degree, the irreducible facticity of these deaths. On the one hand, we get a set of oblique biblical references, which liken the last moments of the condemned men and women to the end of Christ. The text notes the cross-shaped building complex (3:212); the wall around the prison structure is crowned with barbed wire; the executioner tears open the curtain concealing the guillotine (3:215; cf. Matt. 27:51); the site of the execution is referred to as “Hinrichtungsstätte” (3:217), as though it was another Gol-
gatha. As Libertas is taken into the execution chamber, the contours of her figure are said to dissolve in the dazzling light; she appears to be undergoing a kind of transfiguration in the “blinding brightness” (3:215) that is emerging from the room.23 The language of the episode is often strikingly archaic, especially in the way it describes those administering the execution: the terms Scharfrichter (henchman) and his Gesellen (assistants) or Burschen (lads) invoke figures stepping out of a medieval or early modern canvas. The veiled motifs borrowed from the Passion story are supplemented by references to medieval representations of martyrdom; in fact, some masters of the genre are mentioned explicitly.24 But these allusions to Christ’s death and to a certain Christian iconography are in a sense too oblique to countervail against the apparent futility of these deaths and of the struggle they embodied. It is basically two additional perspectives—one that is very much present in the episode itself and another that is more indirect—which transform these deaths, whose baseness is so much emphasized, into something dignified and meaningful. Unlike much of the rest of the book the executions at Plötzensee are not told from the point of view of the nameless first-person narrator nor any other member of the resistance itself but rather, at least to a large extent, from the perspective of the prison priest, Harald Poelchau.25 The clergyman is torn by feelings of solidarity and compassion and an overwhelming sense of his own powerlessness. He performs his task as best he can, but he is clearly at a loss and helpless in view of what he is about to witness. His attempts to offer some comfort are either rejected or met with a sense of calm and serenity that seems to have risen above the circumstances whose horror the witness feels so keenly. In some way the priest himself, the survivor, which is how he thinks of himself, seems to be more in need of comfort and consolation than those condemned to death. Their persistence and “Unbeugsamkeit” (3:211) in the face of the end makes a profound impression on the distraught Poelchau, and it is almost as though the men he is accompanying to the execution chamber were silently comforting him rather than the other way around. As a last favor, one of them, Harnack, asks Poelchau to read him Plato’s Apology—the paragon of a death accepted without regret or lamentation, a death without pathos.

That there is nonetheless something profoundly moving in the serene detachment with which some of the members of Rote Kapelle meet their death is also evident in the second eyewitness account. It is by one of the
prison supervisors named Schwarz. Although unlike Poelchau, he is not particularly sympathetic to the condemned men and is concerned above all with the proper procedure, he cannot help being affected by the men standing before him in the dark. Schwarz reassures himself that he bears no responsibility for their fate. Reading out their names, he even feels vindicated because he is asserting their lives one last time. But as with Poelchau, an odd reversal occurs: the passage creates the impression that the living need to justify themselves before these men and women who are about to die and that, in fact, it is the latter who absolve the former from their guilt and commit them to their example. For all the insistence on the absence of any signs of transcendence or redemption and for all the stylistic matter-of-factness of the episode, the description nonetheless pays homage to these dead who seem to confer a sense of obligation on those they leave behind.

The Plötzensee episode quite evidently inherits the poetics of The Investigation: its graphic precision and the tacit ban on commentary or any attempt to aestheticize the violence and the suffering. What is paramount is the acknowledgment and recognition of these deaths, without allowing for empathy or identification with the victims nor for any sort of cathartic relief. Yet the ostensibly “anaesthetic” aesthetics of the execution scene needs to be viewed not only through the episode’s internal focalization (Poelchau and Schwarz) but also in conjunction with the long series of other representations of violence and suffering that have contributed so considerably to the book’s reputation. The ban on the image issued in Vanishing Point apropos of the first pictures from Auschwitz, the turn from painting to writing advocated in the Laocoon address, and finally, the antimimetic dramaturgy of The Investigation—all this seems to be reversed in the often elaborate ekphrastic passages of The Aesthetics of Resistance.

The resistance to pathos that I have traced thus far is the resistance to representations that allow, and invite, the beholder to transcend or sublate the spectacle of suffering and pain to which they expose him or her. The disturbing appeal of The Investigation consisted in forestalling such a solution. It is quite evident that throughout The Aesthetics of Resistance the author revisits and experiments with the same configuration, albeit in a modified way. In a discussion about Dante’s Inferno in the first volume, one of the characters, Heilmann, invokes the concept of anaesthesia, which has often been regarded as one of the keys for understand-
ing the novel’s preoccupation with violence and suffering and their representation. Taking another look at the novel’s ekphrastic descriptions, I want to suggest that the antipathos of the earlier work is superseded by the return of, and to, pathos, not only literally by recalling the pain and suffering but also in its attempt to recuperate the passion of those who committed themselves to the resistance. It is this passion that the book both mourns and exalts.

EKPHRASIS

Famous as the ekphrastic descriptions of *The Aesthetics of Resistance* are, they remain somewhat of an oddity in the book. Although there are more artworks mentioned than one is likely to recall, at least after a first reading, and although the ones that stand out—the Pergamon frieze, Géricault’s *Raft of the Medusa*, Picasso’s *Guernica*, several paintings by Brueghel, and Delacroix’s *Liberty Guiding the People*—have invariably preoccupied the critical literature, the ekphrastic is not the novel’s predominant “key.” To be sure, in a general sense the descriptive, not only descriptions of artworks but also of places and settings, is an important register of Weiss’s narrative, but the book’s more prominent registers are those of discourse and dialogue, for to a large extent the narrative is made up of discussions and debates among an ever-changing set of characters convened in different locales all over Europe: Berlin, various places in Spain, Paris, Stockholm. The text is thus woven by a chorus of voices pitted against one another in an attempt to secure common ideological ground in the midst of the historical turmoil of their times. The topics touched on in these conversations are wide-ranging, relating for the most part to the political situation of the mid-1930s to the early 1940s in Europe: Germany’s failed revolution of 1918, the contentious relationship between Communists and Social Democrats during the years of the Weimar Republic, the possible reasons for the Republican defeat in the Spanish civil war, the Moscow trials, questions of self-censorship, party loyalty and dissent, and so forth. Though limited to the point of view of a few key protagonists, many of which are historical figures, the book’s account of communist resistance, first in the Spanish civil war and later against the Nazis, is both refracted and amplified in this echo chamber of voices, extended and further elaborated in countless historical flashbacks.
and digressions. As a result, what we get is less of a narrative in the con-
ventional sense—in fact, character psychology and plot are conspicuously
absent from the work—than an intellectual and discursive space in
which the resistance movement is struggling, both with the external cir-
cumstances it is facing and with itself, with its own doubts, the conflicts
and differences that are threatening its unity from within.

In one sense the remarkable preoccupation with works of art is part and
parcel of the debates over the necessary commitments and positions in
the political struggle. The manifest reason for the characters’ unlikely en-
gagement with questions of art and art history (unlikely in view of the
exigencies of their time-consuming political activism) is the desire to gain
access to a cultural heritage from which they have been barred. As in many
of the other discussions that occur in the book, the primary impulse in
the face of art is to wonder how the works they contemplate might be en-
listed for their struggle. As a consequence, their approach quite often tends
to be schematic and deliberately anachronistic. Thus they invariably seek
for clues that would enable them to relate the work of art to their own
situation. Occasionally, there is some exploration of historical and cultural
context, as for example apropos of their discussion of the Pergamon frieze.
But in many instances the artworks are brought to bear more or less di-
rectly on the present. It makes little difference whether they date from the
second century BC (Pergamon), the twelfth (Angkor Wat), or the nine-
teenth and twentieth century (Géricault, Delacroix, Picasso). Most often
the works are co-opted without much ado for the interpretation of con-
temporary events. One of the preferred interpretive strategies in doing
so is to decipher the conflicts and antagonisms depicted as allegorical rep-
resentations of what is going on in the present. However, the search for
the antithetical forces that the protagonists presume to be at stake in some
of the masterpieces studied does not always converge in a persuasive ac-
count of the works. It is mostly in the instances in which the somewhat
forced readings cease to make any headway that the irreducible interpret-
tive openness of art is emphasized. Against their own forced allegorical
readings the discussants suddenly insist that the artworks need to be sit-
uated not only in their time (that is, most often in the politics of their time)
but in the artistic and generic traditions from which they hail. The dis-
cussion of Picasso’s *Guernica* may provide one of the best examples of
the shifting positions the characters take in the course of their engagements

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with artworks. But as in many of the political discussions that conclude in vaguely reconciliatory terms, the concessions made and the compromises on which they seemed to settle are invariably eclipsed by the need to assert political unity over the internal conflicts that the characters seek to resolve.\textsuperscript{32}

From this angle, then, the works of art do not seem to differ all that much from many of the other topics covered in the ceaseless exchange of arguments that makes up the bulk of the novel. At the same time, however, the ekphrastic descriptions introduce a dimension to the text that is very much the obverse to the spirit of analysis and inquiry that drives the novel’s lengthy discussions. If the murmur of different voices, chronicled and orchestrated by the narrator, is like a slow and steady stream, seamlessly moving from one issue to the next, the ekphrastic passages open up like a vortex, absorbing the characters and undercutting their efforts of arriving at a clear picture of things. The descriptions can effect a kind of perceptual vertigo, a disturbing sense of disorientation and crisis. In a number of instances, perhaps nowhere as prominently as on the very first pages, the depiction of the Pergamon frieze, which both opens and concludes the trilogy, the spectators are placed in the midst of tumultuous action. Suddenly, they are confronted with a view of violence and agony, close-up. “All around us the bodies rose out of the stone, crowded into groups, intertwined, or shattered into fragments, hinting at their shapes with a torso, a propped-up arm, a burst hip, a scabbed shard, always in warlike gestures, dodging, rebounding, attacking, shielding themselves . . . a gigantic wrestling, emerging from the grey wall, recalling a perfection, sinking back into formlessness” (\textit{AR}, 3; cf. \textit{AW}, 1:7). In contradistinction to the multiple layers of discourse and commentary covering, but also effecting a certain distance to, the events and the experiences that preoccupy the protagonists, many of the ekphrastic moments are marked by a sense of immediacy and exposure, suggesting an imminent threat. The artworks thus become the site of an excess otherwise absent from much of the rest of the book. The consistent attempts to identify the clashing forces, to distinguish, often in unapologetically schematic fashion, between the oppressors and the oppressed, are repeatedly troubled by the works’ power to seize and disturb the beholders, by the arrested energy that is contained in them and the curious tension between agitation and paralysis it produces. “With mask-like countenances, clutching one another, clambering
over one another, sliding from horses, entangled in the reins, utterly vul-
nerable in nakedness . . . grimacing in pain and despair, thus they clashed
with one another . . . dreaming, motionless in insane vehemence, mute in
inaudible roaring, all of them woven into a metamorphosis of pain, shud-
dering, persisting, waiting for an awakening, in perpetual endurance and
perpetual rebellion, in outrageous impact, and in an extreme exertion to
subdue the threat, to provoke the decision” (AR, 4; AW, 1:8). Although
in many instances the characters’ lengthy engagements with the visual arts
are legitimated, retrospectively, by the fact that they confirm their Marx-
ist views of history, what accounts for the force and appeal of these en-
counters is above all the confrontation with this kind of commotion and
stillness. Returning, time and again, to the representations of violent death
and destruction is to immerse themselves in, and to experience, if only
vicariously, some of the anxiety, shock, panic, rush, and turmoil captured
on the relief and, later, on the canvases they study.

The silent contemplation of suffering, the sense of numbness and the
extreme discomfort that marked the poetics of The Investigation and, to
a lesser extent, the description of the execution at Plötzensee, gives way
to a much more dramatic scene, a scene that engages the spectator in a
powerful yet often paradoxical manner. As though they were alternately
assuming the positions of Laocoon’s younger and his older son, the be-
holders both succumb to the violence of the spectacle and seek to come
to terms with it. This is possible in part because the sense of radical cri-
sis, triggered by some of the most celebrated representations of suffering
in Western tradition, is continually offset by an alternative perspective con-
tained in them. As much as these artworks feature moments of turmoil
and despair, the beholders frequently detect signs that suggest a possible
reversal of the situation. “We turned back toward the relief, which
throughout its bands demonstrated the instant when tremendous change
was about to take place, the moment when the concentrated strength por-
tends the ineluctable consequence. By seeing the lance immediately be-
fore its throw, the club before its whizzing plunge, the run before the jump,
the hauling-back before the clash, our eyes were driven from figure to fig-
ure, from one situation to the next, and the stone began to quiver all
around us” (AR, 7; AW, 1:11). In this perspective even the vision of im-
minent defeat bears the marks of its opposite: the pictures seem to an-
nounce a different turn of events, intimating an alternative course of his-
tory. Whether it is on the Pergamon frieze, Delacroix’s *La liberté mène le peuple*, or Goya’s *El tres de Mayo 1808*, which features a group of Spanish peasants before a firing squad, the gaze is invariably drawn to the peculiar temporality of these representations, oscillating between a heightened sense of presence, of a “now” about to open itself up to something else, and unending permanence. “The suspense of waiting for the salvo was unbearable because the tension would never end” (*AR*, 304; *AW*, 1:346). The pictures feature moments of suspended time, which produces a sense of doom and urgency, but also the strange feeling that the imminent catastrophe might be averted, that things might be turned around. Thus the beholders inevitably search for “die völlige Umstellung” (the radical shift) (*AW*, 2:22). The utterly dystopian experience to which the artworks give rise is shot through with utopian traces. This sense of a heightened temporality is nowhere as palpable as in the lengthy description of Géricault’s *Raft of the Medusa*.

After coming across a reproduction of the painting at the end of the first book, the narrator sets out at the beginning of the second volume to look at the original in the Louvre. But before actually facing Géricault’s masterpiece, he immerses himself in a contemporary account of the catastrophic event on which the picture is based, and he imagines Géricault’s painstaking labor on his painting. The narrator’s interest in the artwork is ostensibly motivated by the experience of the Republican defeat in the Spanish civil war, from which he has just returned to Paris. But his attempt at a political reading is superseded by the fascination with the unimaginable conditions on the raft, especially the cannibalism of the survivors. Yet, what really captures the narrator’s attention as he finally stands before the painting itself is a tension in its organization. Like many of the other artworks featured in the novel, Géricault’s composition mounts a complex interplay between movement and stillness, defeat and salvation. In the lower left foreground the painting shows an old man holding the naked, immaculate body of a young boy, presumably his son. This configuration recalls that of the pietà; the old man’s posture is reminiscent of allegorical representations of melancholy; but the figure also brings to mind Ugolino, the father who presumably ate his sons, or an ogre cowering over his quarry.33 Entirely oblivious to the tumult around him, the man’s empty gaze seems absorbed by an unfathomable inner vision. The figure’s inwardness and the stillness that seems to envelop him form a sharp con-
trast to the commotion around him. Géricault’s painting is, above all, a picture of bodies rushing forward, pulled upward, as though by an invisible force, toward a point on the far horizon, the rescue vessel *Argus* that was indeed to save them but, appearing as hardly more than a dot, is very difficult to make out on the canvas. Rising from the beautiful corpses around them, the group, thrusting itself forward in one unified movement, appears to be seized by an experience midway between resurrection and revelation. It is surely no coincidence that the sculpted bodies of the shipwrecked have reminded critics of the figures on Michelangelo’s *Last Judge-
m ent*.

What strikes the narrator, above all, is this suspense between destruction and rescue, the possibility of sudden reversal, or rather the intense anticipation of such a reversal. It is in the experience of this intensity, and tension, that the painting appears to assume life, to become real, and it is as if its energy became available for the present, precisely in this “second of contradictory hopes” (*AR*, 302; *AW*, 1:343). Time and again, the beholders seek to seize this moment in which the forces captured on the artworks come to life and allow a glimpse of a different turn of things, the “radical shift” mentioned earlier.

If any kind of pathos was studiously avoided in the play about the Auschwitz trial, clearly it is very much at the center of the novel’s ekphrastic descriptions—not only thematically, in that these descriptions revolve around scenes of suffering and violence, but also in the responses they elicit from the novel’s protagonists. Far from the emotional restraint exercised in the earlier work, in a number of cases the protagonists become deeply engrossed by what they see, and they imagine themselves as being part of the world depicted, often assuming the role of victim. As the example of Géricault illustrates, this identification with the victims, which seemed so problematic to the author of *The Investigation* and of the *Laocoon* essay, is not without risk. But the immersion in the suffering of others serves as a kind of initiation into the very “aesthetic of resistance” that is announced in the title of the novel. Understanding its investment in the scenes of pathos is therefore tantamount to understanding the pathos sustaining the book itself.

On the diegetic level what takes place in the immersion of some of the characters in the countless representations of oppression and defeat is a kind of foreshadowing. The detailed accounts of violent death anticipate the defeat the resistance is going to suffer. In this perspective the execu-
tions at Plötzensee recapitulate and complete the long series of defeats captured in the artworks. In their continual return to the images of pain, the protagonists familiarize themselves with the sight of suffering. And the reader gradually comes to realize that looking at the works of art, the characters are contemplating their own death. The novel’s obsession with the representation of violence is a way of commemorating, proleptically, the fate of the resistance.

But the sustained engagement with the spectacle of suffering is not only in the service of expressing and thereby commemorating the horrors of those years. It is not just to endow the resistance with a lineage that would dignify it. The confrontation, staged in the text with such insistence, is also to recognize the ubiquity and persistence of violence and terror so as to learn how to withstand their impact and enlist their force. As Heilmann explains apropos of a discussion of Dante’s *Inferno*, the exposure is about transforming the paralysis with which the spectacle of suffering strikes those who witness it into aggression.37 If the beholders of the images were looking for the tokens of a reversal, the sudden shift that would turn around the imminent defeat, the continual confrontation with the visions of agony seeks to bring about a transformation in their attitude toward violence and its victims, including their own sacrifice. As much as it appears to leave the subjects disoriented and distraught, forcing their gaze to dwell on the sight of suffering and pain is not to instill guilt or shame but rather to commit them to the struggle in full awareness of the enormous toll in human life it is exacting. The recognition of the violence suffered and inflicted is no less about acknowledging its victims than about overcoming the urge to recoil before the horror of these innumerable deaths. As Bischoff puts it in her reflections apropos of the countless members of the resistance, arrested, tortured, and executed in Nazi camps and prisons, a movement like theirs cannot overly concern itself with individual deaths; it even requires a certain contempt for one’s own death.38

One will find little evidence of such “contempt” in *The Aesthetics of Resistance*, at least not after a cursory survey. On the contrary, there is, as we have seen, a great deal of concern over the question of how to do justice to the countless dead of those years—after all, the story of resistance is the story of its failure and of its dead. The description of the executions at Plötzensee can be viewed as the paradigmatic attempt to wrest a few of those deaths from anonymity and to place them before our eyes.
But in its tacit proximity to the book’s numerous other representations of suffering and dying, this portrayal of individual death is also a portrayal of a collective experience. To be sure, whether individual or collective, it is an experience that the book laments. At the same time, insofar as these deaths exemplify a collective experience, they take on a different valence. Set against the foil of centuries of oppression and slaughter, which can be glimpsed in the works of art, individual death and suffering are inevitably put into perspective. “Has the history of mankind not been a history of murder?” asks Hodann, one of the protagonists. “Haven’t men been enslaved and slaughtered by the hundreds of thousands, by the millions, from time immemorial?” (AW, 3:47). Time and again, telescopic flashbacks open up world-historical panoramas, dramatic tableaux featuring history as an unending succession of carnage that dwarfs the sacrifices of the moment. Perhaps the most explicit recognition of the necessity to accept and even affirm certain sacrifices is made in connection with the Moscow trials. During their last days in Spain some of the characters discuss reports about the exchanges between Bukharin and the Soviet prosecutor. They do seem concerned about the legitimacy of the trials, but the latest news from Moscow is juxtaposed and contrasted with news of Germany’s annexation of Austria, the advance of Franco’s troops, and the Western states’ tacit approval of these developments—all of which eclipses the concerns both about the trials and the fateful divisions among the Republican forces: they are, as it were, the lesser evil.

The two voices that conclude the book are those of the narrator and of Lotte Bischoff. They assume the charge of giving testimony, delivering from oblivion some of those who gave their life for the resistance. Like Dante’s pilgrim, Bischoff and the nameless narrator return from a katabasis to speak of, and for, the dead they have encountered during their years with the resistance. Conversing with the dead, lending them a voice, is part lamentation and part exaltation. On the last pages of the novel, what was prefigured in the works of art proves to be the universal fate of the resistance. But remembering the dead and shouldering the burden is not to be bowed down in grief but, paradoxically, to be driven on and sustained by their commitment. Bischoff is said to have “absorbed” the dead, whose long procession passes before her inner eye (AW, 3:232). She carries their deaths within herself and can’t think of it other than as a collective experience. Curiously enough, the thought relieves and encourages her. The
same seems to be true for the narrator. In one of his final reflections he joins together grief and hope, feelings of loss and endurance: “Grief would overcome me whenever I would think about them, they would accompany me day and night, and with every step I would ask myself where they found the energy for their courage and stamina, and the only possible explanation would be that trembling, tenacious and daring hope, the hope that is found, to this day, in all dungeons” (AW, 3:266).42

The “pathos” of resistance is not just the suffering of the resistance but also its “passionate” perseverance, its persistence. It is a persistence not only in the face of the tremendous amount of suffering it has incurred in its course but one that appears to draw its strength precisely from this strange capital. This is the ambiguity of the pathos of resistance and hence of the pathos that sustains and animates the novel itself. It is, I believe, at the root of the very different reactions the work has generated: the sense of wonder and estrangement, on the one hand, and the enthusiastic and impassioned reception, on the other. Although The Aesthetics of Resistance is very much at pains to tell the story of the communist resistance from a contemporary perspective, from the beginning the movement’s efforts and struggles are inevitably overshadowed by its end, that is, its failure. In this respect the story told is a tragic story, a story of noble aspirations and their defeat. But the novel is not only mobilizing the pathos of compassion, of sympathy with a noble but lost cause. Its project is not merely that of commemoration and lament, even though that is the predominant theme, especially of its last pages. There is also the desire to recover and to reappropriate some of the perseverance that sustained the resistance. It is the pathos of dedication and resolve, against all odds, as it were, which, in turn, set The Aesthetics of Resistance against its own time.