

After we achieved political understanding

On the poetics of Peter Weiss's Aesthetics of Resistance

Danny Hayward

In 1965, the poet, editor and polemicist Hans Magnus Enzensberger published an article in *Kursbuch*, the journal of the German New Left he had founded with Karl Markus Michel earlier that year. Attacking what he called 'pronoun thinking' on the European left, its tendency to speak loosely of an 'us' and 'them' without specifying more precisely the real, 'objective' conditions of division, his article progresses to a broader criticism of the tendency, equally pronounced in the decolonising South and the rich world, to identify novel subjects in a bankrupt idiom of commonplace and inherited cliché. The entire idiom of the left is in fact a kind of pronoun thinking, Enzensberger suggests, because its purposes are mostly perlocutionary, rhetorical and identitarian.¹ Alongside an anonymous German trade unionist 'X', he deprecates by name the major theorists of decolonisation, in particular Frantz Fanon, whose 'On Violence' he had published, for the first time in German, as the lead article in the same issue:

The tone in which they speak of fraternity reminds us of Rousseau; their conjurations of the nation appear to us as a final rehash of the speeches of General de Gaulle; they speak of stooges and henchmen like Joseph Stalin; their entire rhetoric seems to us as antiquated and as incredible as the appearance of a mime artist ...²

A 'pronoun' is a word substituting for another phrase, clause or sentence: to think *in* pronouns means to think *through* lexical substitutions. Who I am, who we are, who you are, are questions that cannot be answered at the level of grammar, Enzensberger thinks, and decolonial struggle founders on linguistics.

A few issues of *Kursbuch* later, the German-Swedish author Peter Weiss published a critical response to this

article, in which he directly addresses the tone of the latter's remarks:

He allows them [Fanon, Carlos Fuentes and Fidel Castro] to make their often despairing and aggressive arguments, only then in his afterword to turn their own claims against them, in that he points to the reader how 'threadbare and used up', how 'antiquated' and 'incredible' they sound to our ears.³

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Charles de Gaulle, Joseph Stalin, Frantz Fanon, Carlos Fuentes, a German trade unionist 'X' on the left of the SPD, Jesus Christ and Fidel Castro. All speak the same language, all use the same patrimony of poor used up stereotypes, a patter of conventionalities barricading its speakers from direct historical experience, from Gethsemane to the Tet Offensive down to the Al-Aqsa Flood. Enzensberger's literary curse on both your houses distances its author from all parties to such 'conflicts of interest', to cast its lot instead with the concrete and historically new: with the unarticulated distinctiveness of national liberation movements in the emergent decolonising present. Whether 'literature' can in fact offer such a perspective above the 'threadbare and used up' fray remains a subject of discussion.

Unlike Hans Magnus Enzensberger, Peter Weiss did his most focused thinking about the 'poetics' of the first-person plural underneath a mosquito net in North Vietnam, his body breaking down under the pressure of the climate and his need to affirm a position that his own personal circumstances seemed evidently to refute. Dying, or believing himself to be dying, in a camp bed in a jungle, a week and a half after a humiliating collapse during a screening of a propaganda film in the Ho Chi Minh museum ('focusing upon myself all attention and

willingness to help'), Weiss underwent a crisis of confidence:

Even though he carried out the mission with the help of his companion and co-worker [Gunilla Palmstierna-Weiss] and his Vietnamese advisors and comrades, and even though he succeeded in compiling the results of his explorations and publishing them in pamphlets, articles and books after many journeys through the devastated country, the real experience of his visit was the realisation of his frailty, his own limitations, the irrefutable fact of not getting anywhere.⁴

As a critic and as a reader, Weiss, at the time best known as the author of the play *The Persecution and Assassination of Jean-Paul Marat as Performed by the Inmates of the Asylum of Charenton Under the Direction of the Marquis de Sade*, was more interested than Enzensberger in language as a bodily phenomenon, a form of physical experience. 'Is a dream like this caused by a racing heart or vice versa?', he asked himself in 1972, two years after his first heart attack, a decade before the second that killed him. 'Physiological phenomena', he continued,

as causes of dreams. Investigate in which way the image-ideas, the isolated parts of images, are connected with the organism, the internal structure of the body.⁵

'The militant', Fanon dictated similarly at the end of the chapter of *The Wretched of the Earth* titled 'Colonial War and Mental Disorders', 'very often realizes that not only must he hunt down the enemy forces, but also the core of despair crystallised in the body of the colonised'.⁶

Weiss was born in Germany in 1916 to a Hungarian-Jewish father and a Swiss Christian mother. Resident for most of his life in Sweden, he continued to reflect on the exchange with Enzensberger for many years. Over the same period, he published a number of significant articles and plays on the Vietnam war; on the idea of culture within anti-imperialist movements (*Notes on the Cultural Life of the Democratic Republic of North Vietnam* [1968]); on the Stockholm Tribunal on US War Crimes in Vietnam; on the lives of Trotsky and Hölderlin (*Trotsky in Exile* [1968–69] and *Hölderlin* [1971]); and on the history of resistance to European fascism. The main outcome of that last object of research, the sprawling and unclassifiable three-volume 'novel' *The Aesthetics of Resistance*, was published in instalments in 1975, 1978 and 1981 respectively – the last just a year before his

death in 1982 at age 66 – and in English in 2012, 2021 and 2025, in translations by Joachim Neugroschel and Joel Scott. Famous for its grand ekphrastic descriptions of an eccentric assortment of works of Western visual art, including Gericault, Picasso and the Pergamon Altar constructed in second-century BC Greece and brought by nineteenth-century colonialism to imperial Berlin,⁷ the *Aesthetics* is, among many other things, a massively extended treatment of the problem of *Pronomendenken*, which is to say of the problem of solidarity as it appears at the level of speech, in the ability to use and transform the words 'I', 'us' and 'we'. Cannibalistically metabolising an entire zigzagging lifetime of artistic output – expressionist paintings, works of existentialist *Trümmerliteratur*, Freud-modernist autofiction, Leninist documentary theatre, free-verse experiments, private journal writing and revolutionary oral history – the text widens the first-person speaking-position into a historical terrain, a series of zones of experience, and then fills it with a sequence of hypotheses posed by bodily experience and the differentiated experience of class struggle, in part, perhaps, as an answer to the German poet for whom attention to 'literary language' has the merely critical function of exposing inherited clichés. 'It occurred to my consciousness', Weiss wrote, about his first physical collapse, on that solidarity trip to North Vietnam in 1968, 'that this was the basic situation for a book, and by a book what is meant by a sign of life, for in writing I exist, it is my type of existing'.⁸

The narrative of *Aesthetics of Resistance* at first appears to have relatively little to do with debates in the anti-imperialist solidarity movement of the 1960s. Its opening volume depicts three central characters, at the start aged between 15 and 20, as they educate themselves in communist theory and art history, participate in the European political movements of the 1930s, engage in the defensive war for the Republic in Spain, and undergo exile, hardship and brutal political defeat. The novel begins with a dramatic discussion of the Pergamon frieze in the Museum of Berlin, depicting the crushing of the revolting giants by the Roman gods, and establishes the work's iterative method of development, in which historical interpretations of cultural objects appearing within the novel as the 'opinions' of characters, are modified by those characters' subsequent experience, and then repeated anew. The book's own formal status as an 'epic',

defined by mythic tropes and a cycle of exodus and return, is itself implicated by this approach, since the novel both mythifies its central figures and plays out an argument between them about the suitability of that mode – as well as the epic structure more generally – as a form of thought and militant representation. ‘Reading’ is depicted as a linchpin of struggle. At the beginning of Volume I, the absent figure of Heracles in the Pergamon frieze is interpreted by the novel’s characters as an allegory of popular revolt, a folk hero, and after their experience working with mental patients in the rear of the Spanish Republic, listening to the Moscow Show Trials on the radio, they wonder if he wasn’t a rapist deranged by a sexually transmitted disease. All readings are revised by experience, even as they determine our relation to it. The ‘aesthetics of resistance’ as a practice is guided by this endless work of beginning again, of recursive reinterpretation and return.

Weiss first overcame his own aesthetic education as an author of painfully honest but unoriginal Joycean bildungsromans through an orientation to internationalist struggle in the mid-1960s. His turn to ‘objectivity’ in writing, to the ‘documents of a technical literature ... excerpts, newspaper clippings, libraries, scientific archives, correspondence ... folders with notes and sketches ... the sheets with preparatory exercises’, was consolidated by his increasing investment in anti-colonial movements in Lusophone Africa and Central America, as well as anti-apartheid struggles in South Africa, and especially by the resistance war in Vietnam.⁹ The results of this period of work, including his play *The Investigation* on the Frankfurt Auschwitz Trials of 1963–65, the 1967 *Song of the Lusitanian Bogey* on resistance to Portuguese colonialism, and the self-explanatory 1968 *Discourse on the Progress of the Prolonged War of Liberation in Viet Nam and the Events Leading up to it as Illustration of the Necessity for Armed Resistance against Oppression and on the Attempts of the United States of America to Destroy the Foundations of Revolution*, culminated with his solidarity trip to North Vietnam and the breakdown I have already described. This encounter with his ‘Grenzlinie’, or the limit-point of his own ‘I’, is latent in almost every sentence of the ‘epic’ novel he went on to write, and this is true not only in the sense that it can be retrieved through a scholarly understanding of ‘context’, but also because the novel’s sentences are themselves often literally appropriated from,

grounded in and built on the top of the self-narrations of anti-imperialist subjects, in the movement of anti-colonial resistance of the ‘Third World’.

This can be seen most easily by simply setting blocks of text alongside one another. Weiss’s *Notes on the Cultural Life of the Democratic Republic of North Vietnam* (1968):

[At first] we simply transcribed events. In their raw, unorganised form. We kept to the surface of things. We still did not know enough about the thoughts of the people with whom we were living ... [Today] we go beyond the immediate event ... we see the goal, the objective ... [We wrote out of hate] and sympathy. We wrote about the lives of oppressed people.¹⁰

The narrator of *Aesthetics of Resistance*, Volume I (1975):

[At first] this hatred had expressed itself subjectively, it had targeted a diffused and total superior force, a society that wanted to prevent us from studying, from advancing. [Later], after we achieved political understanding, [our hatred grew more intense], we began purposefully fighting those who tried to hold us down, annihilate us. We were guided by a cold, homicidal repulsion. [Very seldom did we find that sensation articulated in art, in literature]¹¹

The Vietnamese communist Bui Hien, Weiss’s interviewee in the passage of *Notes* quoted above, speaks through the Weiss-like narrator of the German anti-fascist resistance of the 1930s; and the Weiss of the early 1970s, the Weiss who after his heart attack had resolved to reinterpret the artistic experiences of his youth, speaks through the communist militant Bui Hien. Through both of them, squeezing its way between the debris, you can hear a distinct echo of Fanon, the Fanon of ‘*pulsions homicides indifférenciées*’, of random homicidal impulses, the Fanon who Hans Magnus Enzensberger thought sounded ‘threadbare’ and ‘used up’ and who is now suddenly speaking as if he had actually been there: as if *The Wretched of the Earth* had been written in front of the ‘hard cold despotic face’ of ‘the warrior heroes of Greek sculpture’ in the Pergamon Museum in 1930s Berlin.¹² ‘At this moment’, Weiss’s narrator says, in a central passage of the novel’s second volume, ‘I only knew that I had to continue on through a glut of sediment that had been pressed and woven together so densely that every moment produced as it were a grinding and a cracking, and I was not just surrounded by webs of images, tangles of events, it was as

if time had also burst, and as if I, by rummaging through its layers, had to crush it between my teeth'.¹³

This recursive dynamic of reading-experience-reading undergone by the novel's central characters is also the principle of construction of the speaking position of the author Peter Weiss. *Aesthetics of Resistance* both is and is not a book about the German fascism of the mid-twentieth century, because Weiss's 'characters' both are and are not historical personages. The book's displacement of periods and tones constitutes less a work of 'collage' than an exercise in style conducted through an experimental medium, which is the *Pronomendenken* itself, the abstract first-person speaking pronoun associated with the subjectivity and the physical body of the author Peter Weiss, evacuated or turned inside out as the carrier for other, 'nameless' figures, whose identities can nevertheless usually be reconstructed from a reading of Weiss's notebooks and journals: Frantz Fanon, Bui Hien, Truong Chin, To Huu, Te Hanh, Angela Davis, George Jackson, Bernadette Devlin, etc.:

From July 1968 [to 1970] 107,000 attacks dropped 2,282,876 tons of bombs on all provinces of the DRV. It's not necessary to recapitulate the total and already frequently described desolation, which, since it concerns the entire basis of life of a people, can be described unambiguously as genocide.¹⁴

In an article on Walid Daqqa written in 2023, Abdul-Rahim Al-Shaikh remarks that each individual prisoner in Israeli jails undergoes their own personal genocide.¹⁵ Because each prisoner already contains within themselves and is the entire culture, Al Sheikh suggests, the destruction of the part is already the destruction of the whole. In the mid-sixties, Weiss's initial response to the cultural problem of *Pronomendenken* points in the opposite direction: his first reaction to Enzensberger's challenge is to strip away his own personal identity and take up a purely functional position within the wider milieu of anti-imperialist struggle. If 'I' cannot be in solidarity with 'them', then there will be no I: the writer appears as nothing but a conduit in a larger movement, as an ant or mole, as an actor in a network, a bearer of illicit materials, using their own unjust privileges to spread illicit information like the French Europeans who carried suitcases for the FLN. Later, Weiss appears to return to the 'subjective' position of his earlier writing, but in fact the hollowing out of the 'I' as the possession of a

sovereign subject continues even here, because writing itself becomes the means of transforming that 'I' into a location at which the historical experience of people in struggle can be layered and expressively located. 'The' self becomes a container or identifier for experience and modes of expression that are supra-personal, cultural, and emerge across long stretches of historical time, and the terroristic bombing campaign of the US government smashes away the last vestiges of resistance to this way of thinking the self, in whole or in part.



By the opening of the second volume of *Aesthetics of Resistance*, the narrator has travelled from the collapsing Spanish republic to Paris, where, after a chance encounter with the book *Narrative of a Voyage to Senegal in 1816* in the library of the *Cercles des Nations*, he becomes obsessed with the genesis of Gericault's colonial nightmare painting *The Raft of the Medusa*. The raft, with its crowd of part-cannibalised corpses, its 'faded greens and greys', becomes a metaphor for the fleeing anti-fascist internationalists themselves, into which they seem to project themselves, as well as a symbol for the much larger defeat still to come.¹⁶ The narrator's research into the life of Gericault articulates an effort to

bridge the gap between historical knowledge and the immediate or visceral sensation of tone, and in this sense Gericault is the anti-Bui Hien:

... the ten years of his artistic activity were from the outset characterized by the same condition of captivity and by the same intensity with which he sought redemption. There was no help or salvation for him ... during his brief stay, with madness hanging over him all the while, painting was the instrument with which he confronted the excess pressure building up within him as a revolt against entropy.¹⁷

This description of traumatic fixation again recycles language from Weiss's own earlier descriptions of himself:

After the first unsuccessful version of *Fluchtpunkt*, which I collected from the publisher for reworking, I fell into a state of profound functionlessness, barely 10 years ago, in the spring of 1962. I found myself in a hotel room, brought down by the criticism of the editor, and also agreeing with his criticism, because I saw how inadequate my means of expression were in the face of the huge, shapeless material.¹⁸

The three volumes of Weiss's novel *Aesthetics of Resistance* don't exactly map onto three 'stages' of an 'aesthetics of resistance', but it is possible to outline a provisional framework, a series of hypothetical modes, even still. The first stage presents an argument in favour of *progress* as a minimum condition for a revolutionary art, the second a new set of problems. In Gericault's painting there is no 'at first' and no 'later' – no image of progress, no intellectual discovery, no development, no collective work, just variations on the same primal scenes of unfulfillment, artistic failure, sexual alienation, childhood abuse, nondevelopmental fixation. Also, the *cause* of obsessive fixation seems to have been almost totally evacuated of significance. It's the quashed June Rebellion of 1832, it's the Spanish Republic smashed by Nazi carpet bombing, it's a hotel room in 1962 after a difficult conversation with your unsympathetic literary editor. 'Do you ever get the urge to just smash some glass?', asks Rosalinde Ossietsky, a few dozen pages after the Gericault episode, at the very beginning of a new chapter.¹⁹ This narrative depiction of despair complements or 'mirrors' Weiss's own account of his relationship to the anti-imperialism of the '60s, the 'core of despair' in his own

body following his breakdown in the last years of the decade: 'the irrefutable fact of not getting anywhere'. But it also raises a question about the constructive role of negativity, in the architecture of the subject who speaks:

All this, which for so long we have been cowed into viewing as something that was not worth being mentioned, could have become material for my writing, and everyone would have been able to recognise the power it possessed to bring about a change in their situation, but we never had the time to dig down into these deeper strata.²⁰

Weiss's belated 'discovery' after his Vietnam trip in 1968 was that 'the realisation of his frailty, his own limitations' was *itself* in some sense this 'deeper stratum': something we have been cowed into viewing as not worth mentioning, and whose excavation can bring about a change in situation. The 'state of profound functionlessness' becomes yet another layer of advance in *Aesthetics of Resistance*, a layer of inverted development mainly 'represented' in the novel by its female characters (the suicided Karin Boye and the almost suicided Rosalinde Ossietsky) but pushed in *The Raft of Medusa* episode to its boiling point of radiantly bleak intensity:

but as [Gericault] heard the cries of dismay over his coarse and naked attack on all conventions, as he saw their horror in the presence of this naked desperation and heard the disparaging remarks about the colorless, the clayey drabness of the painting, he was filled with satisfaction, with pride; it couldn't be more perfect, he thought, *the more black contained in it the better* ...²¹

It's impossible to ignore the farcical aspect of the prose here, a drab raid across the border of black comedy. But the programmatic commitment to advance is nevertheless still here, only now inverted into a kind of frantic layering of clayey, morbid elements, in a sort of aesthetics of resistance of the sick. Think of Rainer Werner Fassbinder's roughly contemporaneous film *In a Year with 13 Moons*. The pseudo-autobiographical depiction there, of an actor playing a trans woman who screeches lines from Goethe, himself ventriloquising the seventeenth-century poet Tasso, in a slaughterhouse filled with the gratuitous spectacle of dead and dying cows, all bleeding out with portentous nonsynchronicity in the year 1977, occupies a similar expressive-formal space: an approach to subjective experience *as the maniacal accumulation of contradictory and yet mutually reinforcing layers*: a superimposition of historical selves,

only some of whom are 'human', as a way of producing what we might for the want of a better word continue to call expressive force. Weiss's breakdown in 1968 and his subsequent reassessment of it is already the anticipation of all of this; it confronts honestly and painfully the suspicion that Hans Magnus Enzensberger may have been right all along. But the tacit grammar of Bui Hien is impossible to eliminate: '[At first] we simply experienced defeat ... [Today] I turn this into material for my writing, and everyone would have been able to recognise the power it possesses to bring about a change in their situation.'

The author of this article, this particular 'I', first encountered Weiss's line about 'cold, homicidal repulsion' not during a reading of Weiss himself but in a basement theatre in a UK university in 2012, via the 'lyric I' ('yeh that thing') of the British poet Sean Bonney, who quoted Weiss's modified quotation in an early passage of his short artistic autobiography 'Letter on Poetics': 'Listen, don't think I'm shitting you. This is the situation. I ran out on "normal life" around twenty years ago. Ever since then I've been shut up in this ridiculous city, keeping to myself, completely involved in my work'.²² Sean Bonney edited Weiss's edit of Bui Hien for brevity and quickness, cut it back to the pure affective state and the idea of development, eliminated the touch of dutifulness in the idea of 'purposive' fighting, resituated the phrase in his own spoken idiom:

Because, you know, after we achieved political understanding our hatred grew more intense, we began fighting, we were guided by a cold, homicidal repulsion, and very seldom did we find that sensation articulated in art, in literature ...²³

And at this point a complex perspective opens up. The original 'sensation' that Weiss didn't find in 'art, literature' or anywhere in the Western bourgeois milieu in which he grew up was *not* the sensation of 'cold, homicidal repulsion' but the sensation of *advance*, of cultural unity as the basis of the will to advance. Weiss on Gericault (c. 1962): 'He had not been able to change his life through painting, even that which could be surveyed from his oeuvre showed no developmental arc, no decisive stylistic transformations'.²⁴ The 'aesthetics of resistance' first rediscovers this 'will' in the abandonment of institutionalised 'literature' and the commitment to revolutionary culture, in which writer and militant exist in close

developing symbiosis, and all differences are resolved at a higher level, because everyone is able to identify their respective 'functions' within the 'whole':

with every [paragraph] division [in the book] a change to a thematic that apparently doesn't belong with it. Breaks. Internal continuity is nevertheless shown there.²⁵

The experience of 'progress' from this perspective is initially the experience of the movement *from literature to culture itself*, the movement already implicit in the title of Weiss's book *Notes on the Culture of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam*; but once that step has been taken progress becomes as simple as breathing, it seems to diffuse into the basic grammar of self-reflexion and perception, into the bare fact of persistence, the ability to say *at first* and *today*, even when all there is to do is paint the whole canvas black. The will to endure and the belief in the possibility of advance are distinct aspects of a single cultural unity,

time and again, the piles of rubble had to be pushed aside to create tiny spaces in which to move, and this could never seem pointless, even when the avalanches started up again and the ground trembled, because then the forces of annihilation would already have gotten to you, would already have forced you to your knees ...²⁶

Aesthetics of Resistance transposes this idea of the 'will' back into the oneiric, hallucinatory realism of 'art' by transposing the structure of the self-narrations of North Vietnamese cultural workers into the expressive speech, equal parts Fanon and Gericault, of Weiss's semi-fictional, or semi-real, European anti-fascist narrators; and he needs Gericault, Fanon, Karin Boye and Bui Hien, the theorist of violence and the painter of obsessive nondevelopmental fixation, the suicided poet as well as the progressive writer of revolutionary will, in order to constitute a new 'I' ('yeh') as a new speaking position, to make something out of this otherwise dead artefact beyond the physical and mental limitations of his 'actually existing' self.²⁷ The argument is anticipated already in Weiss's first reflection on 'pronoun thinking' in *Leave-taking* (1959/60):

that 'I' that I carried around with me was used up, destroyed, worthless, it had to perish. I had to learn to experience with new senses. But how could I achieve that, how could I free myself from all that dragged me down, infected me, and suffocated me ... There was no other way but the way of disintegration and decay ...²⁸

As the 'narrative' draws to a close in Volume III, the narrator's mother, disturbed by the experience of fleeing through Central Europe and the evidence of the impending Holocaust, enters into a mute psychosis, the narrator's two closest friends are executed by hanging in the Plötzensee prison, one of them is shown his baby daughter one more time before he is killed and 'begins to wobble', the most convinced communists are murdered by Stalinists (Münzenberg) or driven out of the movement (Hodann), and the interpretation of the Pergamon Altar finishes with the recognition of an absence, a gap, that is still to be filled, though it rhymes across hundreds of pages with the 'terrifying void' of the wound in the side of the mare in Picasso's *Guernica*.

And at this point in Weiss's book, near to the end of Volume III, there occurs a final change in form. The third and final stage of the work is not so much about defeat as it is about absence, and it's in this connection that Weiss introduces, for the first and only time, the text of a fictional letter, the last letter of Horst Heilmann, the nineteen-year-old who was hanged by the Nazis for his espionage work as part of the Schulze-Boysen circle in 1942. The fictional Heilmann writes in the face of his own imminent execution:

Most of us who are now being done away with are leaving no guiding principles behind. What we wanted to reach could never be substantiated. We could only make mediocre statements about it. Our ranks included scientists, artists ... There was a sculptor among us, whose oeuvre was not large, and a writer, whose poems and novels will not go down in the history of literature ... What I mean by this is that their achievements cannot be evaluated according to recognisable standards, that someday a new system of measurement will need to be invented to gauge the significance of their lives.²⁹

His monologue is itself a complex series of reinterpretations and returns. Though it appears very near to the end of the work, much of the material in it is abstracted and recomposed from a notebook that Weiss composed immediately *before* he began work on *Aesthetics of Resistance*, after his heart attack in June 1970, when he first encountered what he called the borderline of his own physical mortality, and reflected on his experience two years earlier in Vietnam.³⁰ The concluding lines about what 'cannot ... be evaluated according to recognisable standards' in turn returns to and reinterprets

a remark in the *Notes on the Culture of the Democratic Republic*:

A woman's voice, full of hate, describes a raid on the village by mercenaries. A humming. A melody unfolds. ... *The kind of work being evolved here cannot be measured according to the usual literary standards.* It is the collective utterance of a people ceaselessly at war ... The training of a new kind of person can be recognised in these statements, these experiments, these images suddenly popping up, these scraps of melody, bits of dialogue, these questions and exclamations.³¹

In the 'core of despair in the body of the colonised' is contained the image of the 'new person' that already exists, the fictional Heilmann argues, if only we could develop a new system of measure to gauge the significance of their lives. The absence of 'quality' (expressive, formal) in 'nonliterary' speech (this 'humming') and the absence of affect/tone/entire psychic areas in 'literature' form a continuum in Weiss's work: his entire corpus as a 'political writer' crystallises out of their interrelationship. Even the word 'notes' appears everywhere in his writings: in the title of his Vietnam book, *Notes on the Culture of ...*; or in the claim in a late interview that 'notebooks' and diaries are 'what I like to read most';³² or in the notebook 'buried beneath the raspberry bushes' by the communist militant Elisabeth Bischoff close to the end of *Aesthetics of Resistance*,³³ or in the suicided psychologist Max Hodann's reference to 'experiences that, if they existed at all, could only be found in letters and diaries'.³⁴ Weiss published four volumes of his own notebooks. He wrote down the notes of others (Pavese, Kafka, Hodann), obsessively collected notes, accumulated them, described certain notes that he had found: a yellowed little bit of paper, inscribed with a childish hand, ripped out of a school-book, discovered under the pillow of a dead friend;³⁵ or a love note written by his father to his mother in a trench during the First World War, whose words echo strangely throughout *Aesthetics of Resistance*: 'if I were still alive your life would only just have begun, I should have arranged everything more beautifully than you could have ever dreamed of, my life too would only just be beginning'.³⁶ In the end, his 'epic novel' returns to its beginnings in the typical way that all epics do, but also in the additional sense that it itself returns to notes, disintegrates back into them, becomes them. His sentences are not themselves anymore; they point beyond them-

selves: language becomes film, film becomes painting, the paint on a nineteenth-century canvas becomes the sentences in his book, which become the spoken statements of Vietnamese militants struggling against American imperial genocide in the '60s, before reappearing again in the poem of a British anarchist poet talking about the war on the poor in the UK in the early 2010s.

In an important passage of his introduction to the first volume of *Aesthetics of Resistance*, Fredric Jameson argued that the 'cell' is the 'final form' of the room: '[t]he room becomes a kind of absolute ... the narrator dreams of an abolition of the room as such'.³⁷ On this account, which adumbrates a 'stageism' almost as unusual as Weiss's own, the centrality of the militant's cell changes the nature of the room 'as such', since 'the very nature of the room will be modified in clandestinity: or better still, a deeper feature of the room not normally accessible to legal or bourgeois or peacetime perception will in the new crisis situation be brought out'.³⁸ The subjective and personal 'I' of the last letter of Horst Heilmann undergoes a similar metamorphosis, becoming the collective utterance of a people ceaselessly at war, of pronoun thinking 'as such': its final form.

Zabana Hamida, 1957, Frantz Fanon's Algeria:

I am writing you this letter; I do not know if it will be the last ... You must not weep; on the contrary you must be proud of me ...³⁹

If, according to the suggestions of Jameson's logic, Heilmann's last letter can be considered the final form of language 'as such', the question posed in a more Fanonian register might be what 'deeper feature' of it 'not normally accessible to perception' can be somatically, physically elicited.⁴⁰ The style of leftist address identified by Hans Magnus Enzensberger as 'pronoun thinking' is a logic of substitutions, but then so is the style of the leftist writing developed by Peter Weiss in response. As so often, the body is the difference. In grammar, substitutions of 'relative' pro-forms for 'concrete' nouns carry us further from the sources of primary somatic experience, experience is replaced by function words nominally referring to it, and function words wash up like the weathered lexical pieces of an immense historical shipwreck on long beaches of banal, identity-affirming 'political' subjecthood: the aestheticised politics of the present. Between the stages of this progressive thinking in pronouns and the state-

changes of an 'aesthetics of resistance' crystallised in the body of the militant there exists a relation similar to the one between the Pergamon Altar in Weiss's novel, whose construction 'began eighteen years before our era and [lasted] twenty years',⁴¹ and the imperfect notes written with a pencil in the hour before the executions. In the body of this encounter, for which the whole of Weiss's 1,100 page book is really just one long preparatory study, the militant as a speaking subject does not evolve from its chrysalis as a final form of coherent symbolic subjectivity but crystallises into a single sentence whose blunt repeating words become the core of everything else that 'you' or 'I' might ever aspire to write: Words don't mean much to me now, well not very much, I am writing this letter and I do not know if it will be the last, what we wanted to reach could never be substantiated, I am going to use that marker to throw it at the soldiers, even if that is the last thing that I do, you must not weep, you must be proud of me.

Danny Hayward is a poet and critic based in London.

Notes

1. Hans Magnus Enzensberger, 'Europäische Peripherie', *Kursbuch* 2 (July 1965).
2. Enzensberger, 'Europäische Peripherie', 163. My translation.
3. Peter Weiss, 'Enzensbergers Illusionen', *Kursbuch* 6 (July 1966), 165. Translated by Julia Hell in *New German Critique* 49:3 (2022), 231–235. This issue of the journal is dedicated to Weiss's writing and contains the first extensive engagement with his anti-imperialism.
4. Peter Weiss, *Rekonvaleszenz* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1991), 26.
5. Peter Weiss, *Notizbücher 1971–1980, Erster Band* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1982), 74.
6. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 1963), 219.
7. The monument had already been described some years earlier in Weiss's work, in the narration of his own artistic development in his autobiographical novel *Vanishing Point* (1962). There, it appears as an object of visceral dislike. See Peter Weiss, *Vanishing Point*, in *Leavetaking / Vanishing Point: Two Autobiographical Novels*, trans. Christopher Levinson (London: Calder & Boyar, 1966), 111: 'The respect for this hard cold despotic face and for the warrior heroes of Greek sculpture was connected with the national intoxication with power and greatness'.
8. Weiss, *Rekonvaleszenz*, 14.

9. Weiss, *Rekonvaleszenz*, 7.
10. Peter Weiss, *Notes on the Cultural Life of the Democratic Republic of North Vietnam* (London: Calder & Boyars 1971), 62. The speaker is the Vietnamese scholar of Russian Bui Hien, who died in May 2025. I've rearranged the order of his comments as they appear in Weiss's transcription: the point is that these phrases seem to have been in Weiss's mind when he wrote the corresponding passage of *Aesthetics of Resistance*.
11. Peter Weiss, *Aesthetics of Resistance*, Volume I, trans. Joachim Neugroschel (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 147.
12. Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*, 190. The passage is from the chapter 'Colonial War and Mental Disorders'.
13. Peter Weiss, *Aesthetics of Resistance*, Volume II, trans. Joel Scott (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020), 11.
14. Peter Weiss, 'Die Luftangriffe der USA am 21.11.1970 auf die Demokratische Republik Viet Nam', *Rapporte 2* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1971), 135. My translation.
15. Abdul-Rahim Al-Shaikh, 'Parallel Place: Drawing Time in Walid Daqqa's Thought,' *Majallat al-Dirasat al-Filastiniyya* (2023), <https://www.palestine-studies.org/ar/node/1653995>. I came to this essay via Kaleem Hawa, 'Like a Bag Trying to Empty: On the Palestinian prisoner and martyr Walid Daqqa', *Parapraxis*, <https://www.parapraxismagazine.com/articles/like-a-bag-trying-to-empty>.
16. Hannah Proctor, 'Lost at Sea', *Radical Philosophy* 212 (Spring 2022), 69–75. See also Proctor, 'Resistance I', in *Re-: An Errant Glossary*, eds. Christoph F. E. Holzhey and Arnd Wedemeyer, Cultural Inquiry, 15 (Berlin: ICI Berlin Press, 2019), 113–20: 'Is it possible for a damaged subject to damage the damaging world?'
17. Weiss, *Aesthetics of Resistance*, Volume II, 28.
18. Weiss, *Rekonvaleszenz*, 108.
19. Weiss, *Aesthetics of Resistance* II, 108.
20. Peter Weiss, *Aesthetics of Resistance*, Volume III, trans. Joel Scott (Durham: Duke University Press, 2025), 43.
21. Weiss, *Aesthetics of Resistance* II, 26.
22. Sean Bonney, 'Letter on Poetics', in *Happiness: Poems after Rimbaud* (London: Unkant, 2011), 65.
23. Bonney, 'Letter on Poetics', 63.
24. Weiss, *Aesthetics of Resistance* II, 27–28.
25. Weiss, *Notizbücher 1971-1980*.
26. Weiss, *Aesthetics of Resistance* III, 43.
27. The coinage 'hallucinatory realism' comes from Burkhardt Lindner, 'Hallucinatory Realism: Peter Weiss' *Aesthetics of Resistance*, Notebooks, and the Death Zones of Art', *New German Critique* 30 (Autumn 1983), 127–56.
28. Peter Weiss, *Leavetaking*, in *Leavetaking / Vanishing Point: Two Autobiographical Novels*, trans. Christopher Levinson (London: Calder & Boyar, 1966), 85.
29. Weiss, *Aesthetics of Resistance* III, 200.
30. Weiss, *Rekonvaleszenz*, 7.
31. Weiss, *Notes on the Cultural Life*, 87–88. My italics.
32. Burkhardt Lindner and Christian Rogowski, 'Between Pergamon and Plötzensee: Another Way of Depicting the Course of Events an Interview with Peter Weiss', *New German Critique* 30 (Autumn 1983), 114.
33. Weiss, *Aesthetics of Resistance* III, 222.
34. Weiss, *Aesthetics of Resistance* III, 240.
35. Weiss, *Rekonvaleszenz*, 68.
36. Weiss, *Leavetaking*, 32.
37. Fredric Jameson, 'Foreword: A Monument to Radical Instants', in Weiss, *Aesthetics of Resistance* I, xxx.
38. Jameson, 'Foreword', xxix.
39. Quoted in David Macey, *Frantz Fanon: A Biography* 2nd ed. (London: Verso, 2012).
40. Weiss, *Vanishing Point*, 111.
41. Weiss, *Aesthetics of Resistance* I, 8.