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Joel Scott, translator. *The Aesthetics of Resistance, Volume II*. By Peter Weiss. Duke UP, 2020.

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Joel Scott, translator. The Aesthetics of Resistance, Volume II. By Peter Weiss. Duke UP, 2020.

Abstract

Review of Joel Scott, translator. The Aesthetics of Resistance, Volume II. By Peter Weiss. Duke UP, 2020. x + 320pp.

Keywords

Peter Weiss, Aesthetics of Resistance, translation, Joel Scott

Joel Scott, translator. *The Aesthetics of Resistance, Volume II*. By Peter Weiss. Duke UP, 2020. x + 320pp.

Peter Weiss's *The Aesthetics of Resistance*, written between 1972 and 1981, is arguably one of the most comprehensive and complex German novels of the 20th century. At the same time, the text has gone largely unnoticed, at least by German Studies scholars in the United States. This may now be changing, for following Joachim Neugroschel's translation of Volume I (2005), Joel Scott translated Volume II into English in 2020.

What makes this translation special is that it follows Weiss's 2016 Berlin edition, as explained in the afterword in Volume II of the English translation. Based on this posthumously published version, the translation follows a strict fidelity to the author's vision (309), especially notable when compared to the earlier and different versions of the text published in the Federal Republic of Germany and the German Democratic Republic, serving the respective publishers' different ideologies and demands. This new translation, published in the spirit of Weiss, can now reach a wider audience beyond the German-speaking world.

Volume II begins in Paris, where the unnamed male first-person narrator, who resembles Weiss in many biographical experiences, thought patterns, and ways of acting, delivers an ekphrasis of French painter Théodore Géricault's 1819 painting *The Raft of the Medusa*. The idiosyncrasy of this description heralds the development of the narrator as a writer, who in Volume II autodidactically develops his writing style and breaks away from established writing conventions, yet remains true to his basic communist stance. Numerous real German-speaking authors of the Swedish exile appear in the text, including the journalists Sixten Rogeby and Otto Katz, the poet Karin Boye, and the playwright Bertolt Brecht, but neither these writers nor the narrator represent the protagonist of the text; rather, the work of writing and its potential form the focus of the novel as artistic resistance.

The narrator describes in detail how Brecht and his collaborators work on the drama "Engelbrekt" (fictitiously introduced by Weiss) during their Swedish exile, reappraising historical facts and applying them to the current political situation: the German invasion of Poland in 1939. He borrows from Brecht's techniques of epic theater and introduces himself as a narrator through whose lens readers experience an essentially plotless narration that formulates his poetics of writing resistance. He learns to conceive of writing as aesthetic work, as one form of practical resistance, whereby readers become witnesses to his development, following his theoretical reflections and practical realizations live in the text. Strictly homo-/autodiegetic, the narrator reduces his knowledge to personally procured information and personally conducted conversations. He never refers to himself as an artist, but as a communist worker with working-class poetics.

The seemingly unfiltered abundance of detail is an expression of his egalitarian narrative approach and the compact design of the print, which largely dispenses with paragraphs and uses reduced punctuation, complements this expression graphically, and Scott and the publishers of the translation adopt it accordingly.

The voices of the reported conversation receive equal attention and space in the text because their work—whether artistic, intellectual, political, or physical—is equally deserving of recognition; after all, it is both the process and the product of work that create value. This egalitarian attitude, with narrator and author hardly distinguishable from each other, justifies the extensive writing project and its style: the detailed account of work, life, and politics refuses a quick reading. Likewise, the absence of abstraction as a stylistic device to equalize writing and reading contributes to a decelerated, in-depth reception of the text. The inevitable absence of the present subjunctive in the English translation further contributes to this slowing down, rendering different voices even less identifiable.

The narrative forces readers to endure the cumbersome narrative, and enduring is therefore as cognitive work (on the part of both the writer and his readers). It exemplifies the effort to write in a communist/communitarian sense, and with these theoretical as well as practical demonstrations, the poetics of the novel is located exactly where it belongs: at the center of the three-volume work.

Joel Scott's translation of this volume is compelling because he does not attempt to bypass its unwieldy sound. He retains the original, convoluted sentence structures and their complexities. He does not abridge, does not comment, deliberately remains largely invisible. With his guiding principle of subordinating himself to Weiss's aesthetic in his translation, Scott endorses Weiss's at once difficult and sublime work (ix), and he succeeds. The useful glossary in the appendix, based on Robert Cohen's 1989 *Bio-Bibliographical Handbook*, forms a helpful tool; one wishes it were included in the appendix of the Berlin edition.

Hopes are that Scott also will translate Volume III with continued, excellent quality to make the entire novel accessible to a readership beyond the German-speaking world, especially Weiss and Brecht scholars, Swedish and German historians, but in fact anyone who deems themselves a literary political writer.

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