

*Marxist and Formless:
Uncanny Materialism in Peter Weiss's
The Aesthetics of Resistance*

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From Form to Formless

The Aesthetics of Resistance is a novel in search of form. Yet countervailing forces that subtend this search foreclose its completion. In his foreword to the English translation of volume 1, Fredric Jameson contends that making sense of the novel's perplexing form—its “endlessly suspended arguments and exchanges” framed by a “strangely abstract space” seemingly outside the time of history—can proceed only when its otherwise inconspicuous dialectical oppositions are pried out with the help of semiotic squares and therewith rendered into a “veritable system.”¹ To readers familiar with Jameson's outlines for a dialectical criticism of literary form from 1971, his case in 2005 for the contemporary afterlife of *The Aesthetics of Resistance* should look familiar. In fact, Jameson's reading of *The Aesthetics of Resistance* looks like a long-lost outtake from *Marxism and Form*.² But is the dialectic the beating heart of this novel's form? While convalescing after a heart attack in the summer of 1970, Weiss mused in his journal *Rekonvaleszenz* from that same year just how “broken, disfigured, obscured and

1. Jameson, “Monument of Radical Instants,” xv, xiv, xxxi. See also xliii.

2. A key admission suggesting this affinity is Jameson's assumption that Weiss's “conceptual imagination” in *The Aesthetics of Resistance* had remained unchanged since his 1964 play *Marat/Sade*. See Jameson, “Monument of Radical Instants,” xv.

antagonistic” dialectical materialism had become.³ Not only had Weiss’s increasingly politicized aesthetic unwittingly neglected the subjective factor—the realm of “mediation, fantasizing, poetic invention”—in favor of objective concerns (like society, economics, and politics), but the dialectical nature of Cold War European geopolitics proved illusory as well.⁴ This was the case especially in the wake of the Soviet bloc’s denunciation of Weiss on account of his attempt in *Trotsky in Exile* to rehabilitate Leon Trotsky’s reputation and his involvement in the October Revolution. Consequently, dialectical materialism no longer seemed capable of delivering anything definitive or of producing cohesive historical perspectives on the past or future.⁵ Far from discarding the dialectic altogether, however, Weiss began forging his own peculiar understanding of the concept, one uncoupled from methodological pursuits of truth, let alone objective reality. While he did insist on retaining thesis, antithesis, and synthesis as tools for constituting a subject-centered aesthetic alternative to the chaos of the external world, the “fundamental characteristic of . . . skepticism” turned out far more indispensable for countering what he thought to be the “seething mush of reality,” in which actually existing socialism’s bureaucracies turned out to be no better than capitalism.⁶ What forms suit such a skeptical disposition?

In light of Weiss’s damning reappraisal of dialectical materialism on the eve of his embarking on *The Aesthetics of Resistance*, Jameson’s long-ago declaration that literary form is the working out of social and historical content on the level of superstructure requires revision if it is also to accommodate something like “seething mush,” or what Georges Bataille more generally called *informe* in his critical dictionary *Documents*. Adopted by art history as a key to unlocking visual art’s other underground current, overlooked by modernist myths of progress, *formless* is, however, neither a static concept nor an aesthetic category (like the blob) imbued with finite meaning. Rather, it is a performative operation that Bataille himself described as able to “bring things down in the world.”⁷ Not to be confused with states of formlessness, what *formless* does is declassify, disorder, decompose, and even dismember existing forms. Neither metaphysical nor idealist, *formless* reduces material to its basest level: spit, mush, shit. Unlike visual studies that has at times come perilously

3. Weiss, *Rekonvaleszenz*, 170. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are mine.

4. Weiss, *Rekonvaleszenz*, 7.

5. Weiss, *Rekonvaleszenz*, 170.

6. Weiss, *Rekonvaleszenz*, 179, 161. See also Kammler, “Selbstanalyse,” 116.

7. Bataille, *Visions of Excess*, 31; see also Bois and Krauss, *Formless*, 16–18. I italicize *formless* following the English translation of Bataille, Bois and Krauss, and Crowley and Hegarty, all of whom intentionally refrain from assigning it an article, which would erroneously confer on it object status.

close to neutralizing the powers of *formless*, literary studies has approached *formless* qua literary texts as a “figure of *absence*.”⁸ In such instances, *formless* is understood as ceaselessly active even though it is not formally present.⁹ Capable of structuring and destructuring texts simultaneously, *formless* precedes literature and language. (This, incidentally, is why Jameson claims “literary raw material . . . never really is initially formless”; in other words, his dialectical criticism begins with language, but never before it.)¹⁰ The source of *formless* lies neither in metaphysical truths nor in ontological conditions but in unprocessed experiences of chaos and rupture that a great many authors seek to banish using poetic forms that describe, name, and order.¹¹ *Formless* works, therefore, beyond the realm of intention and cannot be mobilized. Far from simply opposing the virtues of one specific kind of form, the force of *formless* threatens all forms regardless of their formal politics. For all its destructive force, *formless* can fuel critical processes both within and against the fictions of form, processes that can even turn on themselves. In contradistinction to works of literature convinced of their own ordering powers, then, *formless* may operate (as antiform) within a literary form by generating juxtapositions and collisions such that ordered form is thwarted from ever taking shape. Equally disruptive, *formless* may at the same time manifest itself negatively in the form of interpretative movements that readers make in reaction to the destabilizing forces outside the text, which the text’s forms strive to resist.¹² As I will establish in the following pages, tracking the prominence of reading and writing in *The Aesthetics of Resistance* will assist with bringing the absent force of *formless*, especially as it impacts the novel’s search for form, into greater view.

If Weiss is indeed “alone among the late modern writers . . . to confront the dilemmas of the historical novel as form,” as Jameson suggests, then it should follow that *The Aesthetics of Resistance* strives in its confrontation with *formless* to give rise to forms unlike those typical of older modernist or avant-gardist styles.¹³ But what exactly are these forms, and how are they

8. For this critique of Bois and Krauss, see Noys, *Georges Bataille*, 34; see also Bataille, “Molloy’s Silence,” 104. Translation modified according to Crowley and Hegarty, *Formless*, 13.

9. In what follows, I rely on Crowley and Hegarty, *Formless*, 13–14, 107–11.

10. Jameson, *Marxism and Form*, 402.

11. Bataille, “Baudelaire,” 31: “It is quite true that poetry has always corresponded to the desire to recuperate, to mould in a tangible, external form a unique *existence* which was first unformed [*informe*].” Translation slightly modified according to the French original.

12. Crowley and Hegarty, *Formless*, 110.

13. Jameson, “Monument of Radical Instants,” xiii.

impacted by *formless*? Where, for that matter, does *formless* come from? For Jameson, the novel's recuperation of classical modernism's "narrative bravura" and "cross-cutting montage" count together with the aforementioned flow of discussion and debate and their complimentary opposite, the oneiric, as the novel's real formal innovations.¹⁴ Conversely, Weiss's "postmodernism of resistance," Andreas Huyssen has argued, reconstructs countervailing "avantgardist writing strategies," in particular Brecht's and surrealism's, so as to subject them to "retrospective critique."¹⁵ This, Huyssen concludes, is how Weiss "recreate[s] the epic out of the failure of the avantgarde."¹⁶ For all their attention to two principal parts of modern aesthetic history, neither Jameson nor Huyssen considers just how captivated Weiss also was by the formal experimentation underway above all in contemporary American art. Nor do they recognize that the utility of pre-avant-garde painting, like Théodore Géricault's *The Raft of the Medusa*, lies in the value of its lessons on *formless* for the present.¹⁷ Regarding Weiss's search for form, it was the minimalist Donald Judd whose early work Weiss eagerly adopted as his novel's totem. In his 1965 essay "Specific Objects," which heralded minimalism's emergent aesthetic sensibilities, Judd underscored how "new three-dimensional work" like Dan Flavin's fluorescent lights, Claes Oldenburg's soft objects, and even Judd's own floating vertical stacks—neither painting nor sculpture—abhorred "set forms."¹⁸ Operating within real three-dimensional space, this heterogeneous corpus resisted the logic of enclosed, static forms like the painting's rectangle by opening itself up to and moving into the environment around it. Early traces of Weiss's admiration for minimalism's geometric abstraction can be found, for example, in the author's correspondence with Suhrkamp's Siegfried Unseld, in which Weiss outlines his vision for the book's long, dense blocks of prose devoid of paragraph breaks.¹⁹ Speaking with Burkhardt Lindner the year volume 3 was published, Weiss confirmed that it was his sensibilities from his days as a painter that brought him to adopt, early on, the solid block as literary form. "I want to see a complete picture," he explained, yet this totality, he also divulged, reveals itself only when "the constant flux of life" contained in the notebooks he

14. Jameson, "Monument of Radical Instants," xxviii.

15. Huyssen, "Memory, Myth, and the Dream of Reason," 119, 137.

16. Huyssen, "Memory, Myth, and the Dream of Reason," 137.

17. On the function of pre-avant-garde works of art incorporated into the novel like the Pergamon frieze, Géricault's *Raft of the Medusa* and Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Huyssen rightly points out that they serve neither "postmodern historical pastiche" nor "socialist East European *Erbetheorie*" (136).

18. Judd, "Specific Objects," 181, 184.

19. Wagner, "Peter Weiss's bildnerische Wahrnehmung in der Literatur," 131, 129.

kept during the nearly nine-year writing process also stands alongside the novel.²⁰ While it may well be possible to read Weiss's novel and notebooks together for the ways the former extends into the latter, much as Judd's three-dimensional minimalist works radiate outward into their surrounding space, the following essay takes a different tack.

Writing the same year Judd published his seminal essay on minimalism, the antiminimalist and Bataille admirer Robert Smithson argued that for all their emphasis on the hardness and weightiness of their matter, Judd's three-dimensional works are "elusive and brittle," hollow antimatter that threatens to disappear altogether.²¹ In her reading of Smithson's coinage "uncanny materiality" as it applies to Judd's work, the art historian Rosalind Krauss calls on Sigmund Freud to explain that what is uncanny for the subject viewing one of minimalism's geometric abstractions is actually the sense that because of how its open form extends into space, the work's resulting lack of substance evokes something lost that resists one's control: a broken-off piece of oneself (like one's shadow), a missed encounter (due to a trauma), or a supernatural return (like the living dead). All these kinds of losses figure into how reading and writing in *The Aesthetics of Resistance* oscillate between the ability of *formless* to bring matter down in the world and the uncanny weightlessness that Weiss's writing actually strives to kindle. Gone missing, however, is not the materiality of language so much as the materialism that succumbed to the "seething mush of reality" Weiss decried in *Rekonvaleszenz*. For Weiss to retain the dialectic's political relevance under such unfavorable, postmodern conditions, writing in the last decade of his life meant seeking out a materialism uncanny in nature, one intent on reanimating through form a historical perspective onto both the past and possible futures without resorting to transcendence. Reading and writing operate as the primary engines in *The Aesthetics of Resistance* for regenerating such perspectives. Unsurprisingly, reading and writing work against each other. One minute the writing that results from reading denudes a text of its form, while the next it seeks to simulate effects of an omnipotent form not yet attained. Above all, reading and writing seek out sublime forms, especially when confronted by the entropic powers of *formless*. Accounting for these tensions within the novel (the political desire for form and the *formless* critique of all politics) will first require making sense of a variety of traditional forms (the report and the painting) to set the stage for establishing how Weiss's novel strives to advance an uncanny materialism hovering between *formless* and form.

20. Lindner, "Between Pergamon and Plötzensee," 121, 114.

21. Smithson, "Donald Judd," 6.

Paraphrasing Savigny and Corréard and the Search for New Form

It was clear to Weiss as early as October 1972 that there could be no resistance until the matter of form was resolved. About a year into the work in progress that he originally titled just *The Resistance*, Weiss recorded in his notebooks the shattering realization that “the novel is no longer viable in the form I’ve worked on since July. . . . The struggle for an objective realism produces exactly its opposite, namely, subjective ambiguity.”²² Weiss went on to address the primacy of form in terms of a search (“das Suchen”), a trial-and-error process typical of scientific experiments (“Versuche”). Of utmost importance was avoiding the ineffectual experimental forms of bygone revolutionary art.²³ In other words, his search sought a new form commensurate with Weiss’s contemporary moment. The search for forms is also prominent at the outset of volume 2 when the restless narrator-cum-writer, struggling to find a way to unify art and politics, assigns text and image to a teleological hierarchy. His readings proceed from the presupposition that one generative form can effectively be bracketed, if not cleared altogether, to make room for the search of another. Reading begins the sequel’s narrative by sheer coincidence but quickly ends up denigrating what is read in favor of reading’s effects. Unable to sleep after his discharge from the “collapsing Spanish Republic,” the novel’s unnamed narrator pulls from a bookshelf in his temporary Parisian lodgings the German-language translation of J. B. Henri Savigny and Alexander Corréard’s autobiographical account *Narrative of a Voyage to Senegal* published in 1818.²⁴ It is no coincidence that the identity of Savigny and Corréard’s book is initially a mystery to the narrator’s readers, for the original text matters only insofar as it serves as the basis for the narrator’s paraphrase. Literally a word or speech (*phrasis*) located alongside (*pará*) or close to another, the paraphrase of Savigny and Corréard’s original text begins faithfully with the repetition of words and phrases lifted from the translation’s preface and main narrative. But as it progresses, it drifts farther away from the source material, such that what is told becomes an amalgam of free circumlocution, passing references to the catastrophe’s historical milieu, and the narrator’s extratextual judgments.²⁵

22. Weiss, *Notizbücher*, 1:171.

23. Weiss, *Notizbücher*, 1:413, 174, 173.

24. Weiss, *Aesthetics of Resistance*, 2:3 (hereafter cited as *AoR*).

25. Kilian, “Paraphrase,” 556. On the striking resemblance of the narrator’s paraphrase, compare, for example, the first sentence of his paraphrase—“Den siebzehnten Juni Achtzehnhundert Sechzehn, morgens um sieben Uhr, bei gutem Wind, hatte das nach Senegal beordnete Geschwader, unter Anführung des Fragattenkapitäns, Herrn von Chaumareys, die Reede der Insel Aix verlassen”—with the German translation of Savigny and Corréard: “Am 17ten Juni 1816, Morgens um 7 Uhr, verließ das nach

Addressing the role “strategies”—that is, “the immanent structures of the text”—play in the “acts of comprehension . . . triggered off in the reader,” Wolfgang Iser has argued that such paraphrasing erases a text’s form by reducing it to mere content. Paraphrase evacuates a text of its defamiliarizing structures essential for the dialectics of text-reader communication. “The strategies of the text,” he explains, “are replaced by a personal organization, and more often than not we are left with a peculiar ‘story’ that is purely denotative, in no way connotative, and therefore totally without impact.”²⁶ It would nevertheless be premature to conclude that the narrator’s denotative paraphrase disregards the question of impact entirely. On the contrary, not only do we learn how Savigny and Corréard’s “sentences on the yellowed page emanated an extraordinarily calming effect” when the narrator reads the eyewitness account in late September 1938, but he also interrupts his own paraphrase by directing his imagination at the text’s historical reception (*AoR*, 2:3). After invoking generic readers who consumed the report when it took Paris by storm in November 1817, the narrator invokes Géricault, who in all likelihood also read Savigny and Corréard’s book later that year and elevated it as a basis for his masterpiece *The Raft of the Medusa* (1818–19).²⁷ But whereas the tragic story of the shipwreck calms Weiss’s narrator, it thoroughly unsettles Géricault: “The suffering of the castaways on the raft of the stranded ship had left him shaken” (*AoR*, 2:5). The grounds for this discrepancy between the reconciliatory effects from reading in 1938 and the horror felt in 1817 are puzzling only if we fail to recognize that the former strategically expunges form while the latter seeks it out. It is the effects of this latter reading, Géricault’s reading, that point the way forward for the narrator’s search where the operations of the *formless* leave their mark.

If the search for form subtended the composition of *The Aesthetics of Resistance*, then that search manifests itself predominantly on the level of content at precisely that moment when the narrator clears away one historical form to make room for the search of another. Rather than illuminating the microstructures embedded in Savigny and Corréard’s report that bring an implied reader to produce a text’s meaning, the narrator opts for one single historical reader—Géricault—who, we are told, found “a wealth of scenes” in *Narrative*

dem Senegal beorderte Geschwader, unter Anführung des Fragattencapitaens Herrn von Chaumareys, die Rhede der Insel Aix.” See Weiss, *Die Ästhetik des Widerstands*, 453–54; and Savigny and Corréard, *Schiffbruch der Fregatte Medusa*, 5, respectively.

26. Iser, *Act of Reading*, 86.

27. Eitner, *Géricault’s “Raft of the Medusa,”* 22.

of a *Voyage to Senegal*, leading him to draft a “constellation” of sketches and composition studies that ultimately resulted in his renowned painting (*AoR*, 2:5). Yet the path to *The Raft of the Medusa* was anything but a straight shot. The narrator explains that Géricault’s “search for an expression of his indignation” went through several phases that included detours, despair, and even failure (*AoR*, 2:5). Yet even though Géricault “tore up what he had drawn” initially, the self-doubt that his search unleashed failed to quell the “agonizing restlessness” that reading Savigny and Corréard’s book had ignited in him. Accordingly, everything to which he subsequently “gave pictorial form” would bear this lasting effect of feeling “as if he were in the midst of the castaways” (*AoR*, 2:7). The result of being “absorbed” by the suffering portrayed in the shipwreck narrative, combined with Géricault’s awareness of the “narrow-mindedness, selfishness, and avarice” of the coming Bourbon Revolution still in its infancy—this “sympathetic identification,” as Hans Robert Jauss would call it—is remarkable insofar as it swallows up not only the painter but Weiss’s narrator as well.²⁸ At the close of the second volume’s first text block, we read how “powerful swells swept over us,” as if the narrator and Géricault together transported themselves into the past to take their rightful place on the raft of the *Medusa* in the summer of 1816 (*AoR*, 2:9). (In the subsequent text block, we learn, in fact, that it is none other than Géricault who united all who ever identified with the Communist Party.)²⁹ This concatenated double identification is, to be sure, just one of several fleeting instances when solidarity with suffering telescopes time and space. Even though we do learn of several more instances when the narrator encounters Géricault spectrally either in his lifetime or in the narrator’s, it would be an overreach to conclude that the narrator’s account, spawned by reading Savigny and Corréard, simply “narrativizes” *The Raft of the Medusa* by homogenizing the three distinct historical times in play—the shipwreck, the reception of Savigny and Corréard’s book as reflected in Géricault’s work, and the narrator’s present—into one single metadiegesis.³⁰

After devouring Savigny and Corréard’s narrative in a night and then making his way to the Louvre the next day, the narrator eventually stands before the painting for the very first time. (Until then, he knew the painter and his work “only from second-hand accounts or dubious reproductions”

28. *AoR*, 2:9, 5; Jauss, *Aesthetic Experience and Literary Hermeneutics*, 172.

29. *AoR*, 2:21: “Géricault united us.”

30. Vogt, “Ugolino trifft Medusa,” 178–79. From the perspective of reading, I alter here Vogt’s three diegetic levels operative in volume 2 to accommodate precisely what Vogt leaves out, namely, the essential medium of Savigny and Corréard’s text.

studied together with Ayschmann in volume 1.)³¹ Standing before Géricault's masterpiece hanging in the Louvre's second-floor gallery, the narrator engages in a second act of reading. This time, it is not a book he reads but the "enormous, blackish-brown canvas" towering over him, the result of Géricault's own search based on the very same text that the narrator reduces to paraphrase (*AoR*, 2:17). Suddenly, the paraphrase preceding the narrator's search for form collides with the actual painting. As a result, all sympathetic identification arising from the hollowing out of form comes undone, and all because the narrator's reading, confronted by the larger-than-life catastrophe, shrinks away from the force of *formless* at work in Géricault's masterpiece.

How (Not) to Read a Painting: Poussin and Géricault

"What does it mean," the deconstruction philosopher and art historian Louis Marin provocatively asks, "to read a drawing, a painting, a fresco?" Advocating for neither a figure of speech nor the willful misuse of linguistic meaning, Marin's question departs from the conviction that visual works of art are sign structures that are as legible (*à la* texts) as they are visible. "In the *text* of the painting," he explains, "the legible and the visible are interwoven at all levels into a cloth whose woof would be the gaze's journey round the canvas and whose warp would be the painting's discourse."³² In addition to unlocking the layered processes of all reading as well as the semiotic conditions for a painting's visibility (e.g., its frame, perspective, and the movement of its figures), Marin grounds the historical validity of his argument in the originary status of the written word, especially for "painting (at least in the West) from early antiquity to the eighteenth century."³³ It is, however, not enough to recall that painters translated, for example, biblical scripture into icons that spectators then decoded according to their working knowledge of the urtext. Reading the "figurative discourse" of a painting involves more than just deciphering this double process; the full constitution of a painting's "symbolic plane," he concludes, must read for gaps between "what is shown" and "what can be said."³⁴ Taking Nicolas Poussin's *The Israelites Gathering the Manna in the Desert* (1637–39) as a model for such reading, Marin first follows the hermeneutic movements of bodily passions bound within the painting's frame and then assembles its "narrative matrix" out of the iconic synecdoche of its figure collections,

31. *AoR*, 2:11; see also the narrator's initial encounter with Géricault's painting in *AoR*, 1:300–307.

32. Marin, "On Reading Pictures," 3, 16.

33. Marin, "On Reading Pictures," 6.

34. Marin, "On Reading Pictures," 16, 14, 16.

which in turn opens on to the pleasures of interpreting the work's symbolic dimension. Only when readers of the painting arrive at this third and final stage of reading do they ever stand a chance of discovering how their retextualization of Poussin's iconization of the story from Exodus about manna falling from heaven—"food . . . outside the field of visibility"—actually contains much more than meets the eye.³⁵ In Marin's reading, Poussin juxtaposes visible motifs of pagan morality from antiquity with the legible story of Jewish misery and divine charity, which in tandem lead a Christian spectator like Poussin's patron to read in this interchange between the visible and the legible the real "mystery which cannot be represented," namely, the Eucharist.³⁶ Marin's reading effectively opens up the deconstructive potential subtending the metaphysics of all representation and thereby exposes in this case the power inscribed in the legible and the visible.

Marin's compelling case for reading the mysterious gaps in paintings where the unrepresentable resides may initially seem helpful for unpacking the narrator's confrontation with *The Raft of the Medusa* in the Louvre, especially in light of Géricault's iconization of Savigny and Corréard's text and the narrator's own reading of the painting. Indeed, when the narrator writes that "only pain and desolation could still be *read* in the oppressively restrained composition," he leaves little if any doubt that what he does is read the painting (*AoR*, 2:17; emphasis added). Yet it is none other than Poussin who gives pause to reassess the limits of reading as it relates to the narrator's encounter with the painting. After considerable engagement in the third text block with Géricault's so-called scrap of cloth, his final years before his untimely death, and the narrator's own predicament in exile, the narrator carries on the painting's overwhelming darkness and, to this end, turns his attention to another two paintings in the Louvre: Géricault's own *Scene of the Deluge* (1820) and its urtext, Poussin's *Winter, or the Deluge* (1660–64) (*AoR*, 2:18). A translation of the story of Noah and the Flood from the book of Genesis, Poussin's painting (see fig. 1) faithfully includes the ark at the horizon of his nocturnal account of death and destruction. It is, however, not the missing vessel in Géricault's homage to Poussin (see fig. 2) so much as his stark deviation from the elder's use of color and light that consumes his reading of the painting. Poussin, the narrator remarks, "lent his colors—sparingly applied in a blackish grey—a melodic note, an almost soft light fell on the figures in their sequence around

35. Marin, "On Reading Pictures," 15.

36. Marin, "On Reading Pictures," 16.



Figure 1. Nicolas Poussin, *L'hiver ou le déluge* (*Winter, or The Flood*, 1660–64). Oil on canvas, 118 × 160 cm. Musée du Louvre, Paris. Photograph: Stéphane Maréchalle. © 2021 Réunion des Musées Nationaux-Grand Palais/Art Resource, New York.

the boat.”³⁷ Manifest in Poussin’s application of blues, reds, yellows, and white to the figures caught in the rising waters, the movement of passions within the painting’s narrative matrix, as Marin would call it, transpires by dint of the visible transparency, to speak again with Marin, in the foreground that interacts with the blackish gray opacity dominating the background.³⁸ Analogue to the interaction between visible representation and legible discourse described above, this play of transparent light and opaque darkness brings the narrator to conclude that for all its “hopelessness” and “damnation,” Poussin’s work actually indexes yet another unrepresentable mystery, namely, “melancholy devotion.”³⁹ Reminiscent of Marin, the narrator’s reading of Poussin’s painting is determined by a “syncopation of opacity and transparency”—in other words, an interchange

37. *AoR*, 2:27. Translation modified according to the German original.

38. Marin expands his account of a painting’s legibility and visibility in terms of opacity and transparency in “Opacity and Transparency,” 55–66.

39. *AoR*, 2:27. Translation modified according to the German original.



Figure 2. Théodore Géricault, *Scène de deluge* (1820). Oil on canvas, 97 × 130 cm. Musée du Louvre, Paris. Photograph: Michel Urtado. © 2021 Réunion des Musées Nationaux-Grand Palais/Art Resource, New York.

between reflexive form and transitive meaning—distributed between the work’s foreground and background.⁴⁰ In comparison, the narrator’s powers of reading find in Géricault’s *Scene of the Deluge* no such power capable of subduing death and violence typical of the sublime. Something at work in the painting, he concludes, “sent us into a panic” (*AoR*, 2:27). Despite their somber resemblances, the anxiety that foils the reading of *Scene of the Deluge* leads to a breakdown in the confrontation with *The Raft of the Medusa*. The previous search for painterly form motivated by the evisceration of literary form gets reversed. In an effort to master this panic, memory of the legible compensates for the deformation of the visible.

Reading, according to Marin, entails a three-step process of recognizing, understanding, and decoding. Yet from the get-go something is amiss. The reason why even the first step of reading “form, figure or trace” proves elusive for the narrator standing before *The Raft of the Medusa* lies with the

40. Marin, “Opacity and Transparency,” 66.

powers of *formless* he fails to recognize.⁴¹ Compared to the “unclear reproduction” of the painting that he and Ayschmann first contemplated in Valencia that clearly “hinted at the thought of . . . liberation,” the actual painting rebuffs the viewer’s initial advances (*AoR*, 1:302, 303). “I tried to find a trace of those first signs of luminosity,” he explains, using language reminiscent of Marin’s, but what he saw was a “seemingly monochrome surface of the image” (*AoR*, 2:17). After sustained scrutiny, however, he begins to discern “some yellowish, bluish, greenish tones,” but the dark canvas nevertheless remains hazy; unable to recognize its indistinctness as possibly deliberate, he muses that Géricault’s vision was “not yet solidified” (*AoR*, 2:17). If viewing predominates the first step of reading, then the second step—assigning signs to a comprehensible syntax—commences for the narrator flummoxed by the “blackish mass” only after he first recalls the biography of the painter and the calamity as told by Savigny and Corréard (*AoR*, 2:22). The very text whose form he previously eviscerated now becomes an indispensable crutch for dedifferentiating the painting’s obfuscated form. (Only then, he confesses, do “the facial features and gestures of the group, which seemed to meld into a single entity, gradually [emerge] out of the surrounding darkness” [*AoR*, 2:22].) Tracing the movement of the painting’s faint figures, just as Marin would, the narrator proceeds with tendering his account of its formal geometry despite its murky appearance. He understands the painting’s “arrangement of . . . forms” in terms of a “unity” and accordingly sees “balances” in the “contrasts” forged out of “dark” and “light” (*AoR*, 2:23). That he eventually assigns historical names to specific figures on the raft confirms once again that his paraphrase of Savigny and Corréard is what enables him to bestow on the painting a matrix of visibility and legibility and to produce a meaning he yearns to find. Convinced that he has extracted a narrative from the painting’s formal logic, the narrator finally lingers on how to decode the work. Satisfied with neither the “heavy sorrow” visible in the light reflected on the figures’ faces nor the faint “possibility of survival” legible in the painting’s overall narrativity, he instead points to a gap between the two, which he insists is indexed by the only figure in the painting who presents “himself entirely to the outside world” (*AoR*, 2:17, 23). Standing on a wooden barrel in the top right corner, the colonial Black soldier Charles waves the remnants of a flag at the tiny speck resting on the distant horizon we know from Savigny and Corréard to be the brig *Argus* (*AoR*, 2:17, 23). At this “highest point,” the contours of Charles’s otherwise “starkly” “sculpted” body appear as if to vibrate and blur; not just his body but the entire group threatens to evaporate and float upward “into the

41. Marin, “On Reading Pictures,” 5.

cloud” above him (*AoR*, 2:23–34). After grasping the top right corner as an “appreciable sign of the transgression of the limits of the perceptible”—Marin would call this a legible sign deployed to represent something absent from the field of vision—the narrator concludes that the pinnacle of the painting’s second pyramidal form is actually the source “where transcendence began” (*AoR*, 2:23–34). No longer concerned with the painting’s blackish mask or the wave of “extinction and death” that initially washed over him, all immanent suffering aboard the raft submits to the sudden magic of transubstantiation (*AoR*, 2:17). Huddled bodies dissolve into thin air and fear and panic become, in the face of death on the raft, the traumatic experience of worldly birth. Instead of exposing the power at work in acts of reading à la Marin, the narrator willfully reads Christian eschatology into Géricault’s painting out of his refusal to recognize *formless*, let alone accept it.

Marxist or Formless

Despite the narrator’s concluding interpretation of the colonial soldier’s “dissolution,” this atomization of material and form is undoubtedly antithetical to the operations of *formless*. “*Formless*,” Krauss reminds us, “is inimical to [the] drive toward the transcendental.”⁴² Whereas *formless* “serves to bring things down in the world,” Charles and the remaining crew on the raft are imagined like specters floating upward to the heavens, the source of all manna, the telos of all earthly melancholy devotion.⁴³ This verdict is, to be sure, as much a function of the narrator’s spectatorial perspective enforced by the gigantic painting towering over him as it is a function of the anti-*formless* desire he inscribes into his reading with the help of Savigny and Corréard. As he reads the painting from bottom to top—he begins with death (the severed corpse in the lower left-hand corner) just above eye level—he peers past its dark surface in search of symbolic meaning buried in the dark depths of the painting’s frame. After having arrived at its highest point, his vision-journey, as Marin calls it, settles on the unrepresentable mystery of corporeal transcendence but without ever accounting for how the painting’s surface casts off reading’s propensity to reconstitute form, let alone erect meanings atop of them. The fact that Géricault himself “was filled with satisfaction, with pride” on account of the Parisian public’s “disparaging remarks about the colorlessness, the clayey drabness of the painting”—“it couldn’t be more perfect,” Géricault is reported to have said, “the more black contained in it the better”—remains largely an after-

42. Bois and Krauss, *Formless*, 146.

43. Bataille, “Formless,” 31.

thought vis-à-vis the narrator's interpretation (*AoR*, 2:22). In fact, before he ever launches into his reading, he remarks that its "feeling of hopelessness" resulted from the way in which the painter applied his paint—he likens it to a scab or the waste produced from smelting—such that the surface extinguishes the luminosity of the narrative altogether (*AoR*, 2:17). Consequently, the narrator-viewer concludes more than once that what he sees standing before the painting is not so much a mimetic representation as an expression of the artist's own "personal catastrophe," his "impulse to paint . . . the intolerability of life" (*AoR*, 2:17, 26). Reading the painting superficially as a scab or slag proves impossible: "Suddenly, my efforts to understand the image became stuck; it seemed to contain too much of the painter's being" (*AoR*, 2:18). What the narrator attributes here to Géricault's being is the derangement of form—a partly transparent black haze—applied on top of the plane of representation such that it occludes the reader-viewer's discerning gaze. In other words, Géricault's *The Raft of the Medusa* really appears like a palimpsest retaining faint legible traces of the narrative culled from reading Savigny and Corréard. Not only does its black veil drain the narrative from the image, but its individual figures are melded "into a single entity," a "blackish mass" (*AoR*, 2:22). This is arguably where the operations of *formless* within the enclosed work of art leave their mark. Akin to Bataille's examples of spit and squashed insects mentioned in the entry on *formless* from his critical dictionary, Géricault's painterly technique, modeled after scabs (*Schorfe*) and slag (*Schlacke*), purposefully corrodes representation's forms derived from discursive reading to arrest reading's formal search for symbolic meaning within the image.

It is therefore no coincidence that we witness a remarkable shift in the narrator's relationship to Géricault during the third text block. After realizing that the painting contains a disturbing excess of Géricault's own being falling apart, he tries once again to compare the painter's predicament to his own. If his first confession in this text block ("the inner conflict within me was reactivated") were not explicit enough, the second ("The rupture within him called up something of the fragmentation to which my generation was also subjected") makes irrefutable his continued identification with the artist's suffering (*AoR*, 2:18, 19). Without ever saying as much, the narrator's language repeatedly suggests, in fact, that *formless* has also taken a toll on his own life. After his discharge from the International Brigades, where order was "solid and binding," life in Parisian exile becomes an unbearable "multiplicity" of "contradictory impulses" that verge on Dionysian "inebriation" and "blindness" (*AoR*, 2:11, 14). With the "dissolution" (*Auflösung*) of his unit's affiliation from the antifascist fight, his sense of belonging gives way to a sense of

estrangement, powerlessness, and uselessness (*AoR*, 2:14, 15). That he evokes Bataille's own language—he calls himself and his comrades “sputum” (*Auswurf*) and “the lowest of the low”—leaves little doubt that he sees his own fate in the very similar *formless* terms to which Géricault subjected his painting.⁴⁴ Amid this loss of form, place, and purpose, his political commitment nevertheless brings him to retain an obstinate “wish for control” as well as a thirst for “the most precise orientation in external reality,” especially in light of the disarray afflicting social democratic and communist parties battling fascism's ascendancy.⁴⁵ In short, his acts of reading constitute form as a precondition for any Marxist politics.

Even though he acknowledges the need to strive against states of formlessness threatening the Left's chances of political resistance, the narrator also confesses that he is drawn “into the absolute freedom of the imagination.” Walking across the Pont Royal toward the Tuileries Garden, he continues, “I envisioned the path into the Party and the path to art as something singular, something indivisible; political judgment, relentlessness in the face of the enemy, the power of the imagination, all of this came together to form a unity” (*AoR*, 2:15). The exemplar of such absolute freedom, Géricault's own search for form that ends in *formless*, proves politically antithetical. The problem the narrator has with Géricault, without ever realizing it himself, is that the painter settles on antiform. Instead of erecting forms capable of withstanding gravity and therewith affording the requisite orientation and control for politics, he takes recourse in *formless*, the effects of which are likened to asphalt, clay, and burned metal, and bows to the earth's pull. *Formless* inherently thwarts the very “rebuilding and strengthening” needed for any antifascist resistance (*AoR*, 2:15). Rather than directing his aesthetic energies against the “dissolution” and “downfall” of French society, Géricault champions the “dissolution” of all form.⁴⁶ Even though Bataille would very likely square this apparent contradiction by associating the degraded image with a form of resistance he calls “unproductive expenditure”—an affront to political economy's drive to accumulate—this double negation is too much for the narrator.⁴⁷ He speaks disparagingly of the artist's “addiction to death,” which Bataille, of course, defines as the “ultimate term of possible expenditure.”⁴⁸ By the end of the third text block, the narrator's sympathetic identification turns cathartic and

44. *AoR*, 2:14, 15. Translation modified according to the German original.

45. *AoR*, 2:11, 15. See also 19–21.

46. *AoR*, 2:23, 18. Translation modified according to the German original.

47. Bataille, *Visions of Excess*, 142.

48. *AoR*, 2:19; Bataille, “Attraction and Repulsion II,” 123.

therefore reconciliatory. He reassesses his hero to be a failure because his paintings neither changed his life nor guaranteed him any redemption or salvation, something his encounter with *The Raft of the Medusa* causes him to desire deeply. Even though the narrator admits that “solving the riddle of [Géricault’s] life no longer interested me,” he does see value in Géricault’s valiant attempts to surmount his feelings of being closed in and forsaken (*AoR*, 2:28). By concluding, however, that without Géricault there would be no Van Gogh, the narrator effectively diminishes the significance of *The Raft of the Medusa* and with it the operations of *formless* for the novel’s own search for form. What then are we to make of what Lindner aptly called the novel’s “densely arranged, endlessly long blocks of narration without paragraphs” that literally weigh down the act of reading?⁴⁹

Writing the Uncanny: Between Heavy Blocks and Weightless Shadows

Weiss’s widow, Gunilla Palmstierna-Weiss, shared in interviews on more than one occasion how much her late husband admired one of Judd’s early stacks. “This is what I want my book to look like,” Weiss is reported to have exclaimed upon seeing the work.⁵⁰ A holding at Stockholm’s Moderna Museet since 1966, Judd’s untitled work from 1965 (DSS 65) is composed of seven cantilevered boxes made of unfinished gray galvanized steel arranged horizontally to form a tower (see fig. 3). Not nearly as colossal as Géricault’s sixteen-foot canvas, Judd’s stack nevertheless exceeds human proportions; standing nearly ten feet tall, its discrete boxes forty inches wide, thirty inches deep, and nine inches high occupy only half of the sculpture’s total gestalt. With its lowest box positioned about a foot off the ground, each and every subsequent box is affixed such that the work comprises an equal volume of negative space. While others have rightly called attention to the resemblance between Judd’s gray forms and Weiss’s insistence that the printed book look exactly like “the pure, enclosed written page, the undisturbed block[s]” found in his manuscript, there is much more at work in Judd’s minimalism relevant for grasping Weiss’s search for form.⁵¹ Writing the same year Judd completed the sculpture Weiss found so inspirational, Smithson deftly recognized in Judd’s works an elemental concern for working “the very *form* of matter” in such a way so as to render

49. Lindner, “Hallucinatory Realism,” 136.

50. Gram, “Evacuated Totality,” 98n42, also 98–104; Wagner, “Peter Weiss’ bildnerische Wahrnehmung in der Literatur,” 131.

51. Weiss, *Notizbücher*, 2:701; whereas Gram identifies a working contradiction in the minimalist impulse of the novel’s text blocks and their expansive internal digressions, Wagner points out the relevance of the color gray as well as the spectator’s ability to bring the static sculpture into motion by changing her vantage point.



Figure 3. Donald Judd, *Untitled* (DSS 65, 1965). Galvanized steel, seven units: each 297.7 × 101.6 × 76.2 cm. Moderna Museet, Stockholm. Photograph: Albin Dahlström. © 2021 Judd Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

it into “anti-matter.”⁵² At odds with action, energy, motion, and the unconscious so instrumental for abstract expressionism, Judd’s aesthetic deplored attendant painterly concerns like mass and weight, figure and ground, and the interchange between light and shadow essential for Marin’s prescriptions for reading the sublime in painting.⁵³ Remarkable for Smithson was how Judd, certainly no proponent of *formless*, produces weightlessness by dissolving all substance: “Ups are downs and downs are ups. . . . What is outside vanishes to meet the inside, while what is inside vanishes to meet the outside.” At the same time, Smithson underscored that the sculpture’s sediment-like layers—its geological deposits—also brought “space down into an abstract world of

52. Smithson, “Donald Judd,” 5.

53. Krauss, “Material Uncanny,” 7–8.

mineral forms.”⁵⁴ Whereas the stack’s ability to defy gravity clearly opposed Smithson’s own proclivity for entropy (a component of *formless*, to be sure), its geology clearly indexed that very same force he so admired in Bataille’s writings.⁵⁵ Might not Smithson’s perceptive reading of the uncanny illusionism at work in Judd’s stack—open forms capable of resisting the downward pull of *formless*—name exactly what Weiss aimed for in *The Aesthetics of Resistance*?

To bring things down in the world, Bataille insists, is to yield to the laws of gravity and conform to the horizontal plane.⁵⁶ Conversely, to erect a rigid upright form along a vertical axis is to defy gravity’s pull and float heavenward. To float in between requires just the right amount of counterforce capable of offsetting the downward pull of *formless* without drifting away entirely. In other words, floating in midair entails striking a middle ground between form and antiform, matter and antimatter, substance and the void, life and death. If this is to succeed, *formless* must persist as a figure of absence that form must strive to resist. Despite its overwhelming verticality, Judd’s stack hovers by dint of its gravity-defying powers. Far from synthesizing opposites dialectically—namely, the resistance fighter’s political judgment and the artist’s power of the imagination—into a unified whole as Weiss’s narrator is wont to do, *The Aesthetics of Resistance* achieves resistance by way of its uncanny weightlessness. In the end, how this levitation evolves is ultimately a matter of both reading and writing in and of the novel. On the one hand, the novel’s organization into ninety-nine long, unwieldy blocks of circuitous discourse do weigh down the act of reading much as Géricault’s blackish veil foils the narrator’s attempts at reading the painting triumphantly. By the end of volume 3, however, we learn that the narrator commits himself to a future of writing the content that presumably becomes *The Aesthetics of Resistance*. Underscoring his intentions in the conditional, he refers to his childhood friends who accompanied him to the Pergamon Museum back in September 1937 when exclaiming:

They would retain their shadowiness were I to describe what happened to me in their midst. By writing, I would try to acquaint myself with them. Yet there would remain something uncanny about them. With some of them I would never rid myself of the fear they aroused in me, for they could have put me against the wall. With my writing I would get them to speak. I would write what they never said to me. I would ask them what I never asked them.⁵⁷

54. Smithson, “Donald Judd,” 6.

55. On Smithson’s admiration for Bataille, see Bois and Krauss, *Formless*, 187, 279n6.

56. Bois and Krauss, *Formless*, 97.

57. Weiss, *Die Ästhetik des Widerstands*, 1193.

Not so much a return to the traumatic shadows characteristic of Weiss's earliest prose experiments, these plans for recounting the past as shadow play seek rather to reanimate the dead for the purpose of mastering missed experiences. In contradistinction to both Géricault's *formless* operations and the sheer weight of the novel's blocks that yield to gravity, the narrator yearns to raise up the dead with his prose. In keeping with the vexing nature of the uncanny, this desired mastery proves elusive, for the narrator-cum-author's acts of reading and writing continually waver between finding form and abandoning it altogether in his search for a materialism capable of reinvigorating utopian hope.

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