



Peter Weiss

# The Aesthetics of Resistance

Volume II

*a novel*

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**The Aesthetics of Resistance**  
**Volume II**

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# THE AESTHETICS OF RESISTANCE

Volume II

PETER WEISS

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*Translated by Joel Scott • With an afterword by Jürgen Schütte*

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*Joel Scott*  
*Berlin, January 2019*



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**T**HE bearded ebony gnome held the lamp above me in his fists. Settees, enormous upholstered armchairs, tables topped with marble or adorned with intarsia were mirrored in the parquet floor, dark paintings hung on the damask-covered walls, maritime scenes, landscapes, in heavy golden frames. The fireplace mantel rose up like an altar, and from beneath the tripartite Gothic window a spiral staircase led up to the gallery which, with its balustrade full of chinoiserie, ran around the room, dividing the walls in two. Figures lay asleep on the sofas, hunched up on the fauteuils, threadbare items of clothing were tossed over the backs of the chairs, a naked foot jutted out from under a blanket, a flaccid, bloated hand hung down toward the dusty boots. Once again we were camped in one of those spaces that seemed to have no other purpose than to remind us of the dualism that defined our entire project. But this time we had not come to requisition and repurpose the sumptuous property of some temporarily ousted baron of finance but rather to be harbored by the landlord for the span of a few days, before we would move on, each seeking out his own path. Discharged from the collapsing Spanish Republic and having arrived in Paris in the evening, we had taken up quarters in the library of the Cercles des Nations on Rue Casimir-Périer, in this palace which had been erected during the Second Empire for the Marquis d'Estourmelle, and which under its current owner, the Swedish banker Aschberg, had been made available to the movement for world peace and the Committee for the Foundation of a German Popular Front. Utterly exhausted yet unable to sleep, I had walked over to the shelves and stumbled across a book which I pulled down to read. The sentences on the yellowed pages emanated an extraordinarily calming effect, even though the events portrayed



moved with certainty toward catastrophe. It was as if, reading of the by-gone events described here, everything that lay torn open within me could be brought to a reconciliation. On the seventeenth of June eighteen sixteen, at seven o'clock in the morning, in good winds, the squadron that had been ordered to Senegal under the command of the frigate captain Mr. de Chaumareys had left the roads of the island of Aix. Four centuries before the departure of the French fleet, Cadamosto, the Venetian, had already sailed up the river in Senegal on behalf of Portugal; the Portuguese had established their trading posts on the coast; they were relieved by the Dutch, who were in turn driven out by the French, who founded the city of Saint-Louis in the delta, making it the center of the slave trade. From this point on, the settlements between Cap Blanc and the Gambia River alternated between French and English rule until the area was left to the French in the Paris treaties of 1815. Having come through the long period of wars, defeated the French, and banished Napoleon to Saint Helena, Great Britain—having received almost all of the colonies they had sought—could afford upon the installation of Louis XVIII to grant France that semi-arid, steppe-covered promontory in the far west of Africa. With access to the natural resources of the south from their base at the Cape of Good Hope and in possession of the fertile banks of the Gambia River and the port of Bathurst, the English furthermore had reserved the right to run the trade in rubber together with the French and to secure it with their own forts and transshipment points. On board the flagship *Medusa* as it steered through the Bay of Biscay were the governor and other functionaries who were to administer France's new crown colony, several engineers, land surveyors, and settlers, five doctors and two pharmacists for the hospital, a portion of the officers and navy personnel from the three companies that had been assigned to the garrison—each comprising eighty-four men—four storekeepers, six clerks, two notaries, and thirty-one servants, including eight children. In total, three hundred sixty-five people had been sent to Senegal by the Ministry of the Navy—of which approximately two hundred forty went on the frigate, with the others on the corvette *Echo*, the barque *Loire*, and the brig *Argus*—a figure which seemed paltry considering Europe's growing stakes in the African continent and the likelihood of further disputes in the partitioning of the conquered areas. The undertaking, in its improvised, careless nature, mirrored the situation in which France found itself: crushed by the burden of war debts which were to be paid to the Bank of England yet at the same time delivered by England and the Allies to apparent stability out of anxiety over the reemergence of revolutionary impulses. The king, after

twenty years of exile, had bestowed the executive positions upon his cronies: aristocrats returned from emigration entirely lacking in experience, animated only by the compulsion to reacquire influence and property. These functionaries were concerned not so much with the task of turning a profit for the court as they were with the possibility of lining their pockets, hoping to find the veins of gold on the upper courses of the Senegal River that had once been reported by the Portuguese. The officers also hoped to gain income from their raids in the bush, from the sale of ivory, skins, and pelts, and the members of the battalions could, at any rate, count on the punitive expeditions against the Berber tribes for some diversion. Other than that, everything seemed to remain within the confines of petty administration, was almost idyllic, having neither the stuff of triumph nor tragedy. But the reader who in November eighteen seventeen delved into the recently published book about the shipwreck of the *Medusa* could see in it how the epoch in which they lived was unfolding out of narrow-mindedness, selfishness, and avarice; he saw an empire with provincial features rising up, he saw the profiteers, and he saw their victims. The suffering of the castaways on the raft of the stranded ship had left him shaken, as it had many others; the account written by the two survivors, Savigny and Corréard, which I read in the contemporaneous German translation on the night of the twentieth of September nineteen thirty-eight and into the twenty-first, introduced him to a wealth of scenes which, after a year of drafting, would result in the constellation that materialized in his great painting. The phases that the painter had gone through in the search for an expression of his indignation became clear to me. Immediately after rounding Cape Finisterre in good weather with a weak northeasterly, an incident occurred that placed the journey under the sign of calamity. Watching the leaping dolphins from the quarterdeck, a scream could be heard; a cabin boy, they said, had fallen overboard and, after having clung to a dangling rope for a few moments, had been carried away in the rapid movement of the ship. With the feel for precision that the authors had already displayed in their listing of the participants of the expedition, and because there was nothing further to report about the victim of the accident, they now described the rescue buoy that had been thrown out. Fastened to a hawser, cobbled together out of pieces of cork, measuring a meter in diameter and bearing a small flagstick, it was able to be sketched by Géricault. Its emptiness, and the emptiness of the water all around, foreshadowed the forsakenness that was soon to come. Madeira, which was reached after ten days, rose up in the reader's vision like a colored engraving, with the city of Funchal, the

cottages embedded in flower gardens and forests of date palms, bitter orange, and lemon trees, the slopes of the vineyards lined with laurel and plantain trees. On the following morning the Selvagens Islands were sighted and, at sundown, Tenerife, a spectacle which immediately roused the authors to depict the majestic form of the Pico del Teide, the crown as if wreathed with fire, whereupon they provided the exact height of the mountain and its latitude and longitude. In their mention of the entrance into the bay of Santa Cruz, passing Fort San Cristóbal, they made sure to reminisce on the victory that a handful of French had scored over a fleet of English there, after the drawn-out battle in which Admiral Nelson lost an arm. The squadron moored in the harbor, boats traveled to the city, as wines and fruits were to be bought, and filters in the form of a mortar, as were produced on the island from the volcanic soil. The observations from this visit inspired the painter to create sketches that revealed his tendency to break an event down into various stages. Just as he had been preoccupied with the betrayal and murder of the revolutionary Fualdès while working on the studies for the painting of the shipwreck, depicting the bestial minutiae of the deed in a series of sheets, he also mused over the chroniclers' accounts of the unleashing of passions in Santa Cruz. Fualdès was lured into a brothel, stabbed to death on a table, his blood slurped up by pigs, his body tossed into the river. So in this city, which lay in a swale between slaggy, fissured rocks and jungle-like flora from which cedars and dragon's blood trees shot up, in this city with the squat white houses under the burning sky, a peculiar excitement and lasciviousness began to spread upon the announcement of the arrival of the French. The women stepped out from the doors, hurried toward the strangers appearing in the narrow streets, and invited them to come in for a bite to eat and to make a sacrifice to the goddess of Paphos. Often this occurred in the presence of the men, who had no right to rebel against it, for the Holy Inquisition had once wished it to be so, and the numerous monks on the island took care to maintain the custom. The scintillating heat, the women, untying the strings of their bodices, lifting up their blinding white skirts, hemmed with lace, and flicking them back down, edging forward a pointed, polished black shoe; the naked, intertwined bodies on the beds, the old names of the island, playing on inaccessibility, felicity, the Gardens of the Hesperides, yet also reminding of a fatal danger, the threshold between day and eternal night, the emergence of the basalt columns and phonolite blocks of the foothills, the fragrance of the white-flowering broom at the foot of the crater mountain, the pitchy luster of the obsidian veins in the gray, yellow, and rust-red pumice walls,

the clumps of tuff, the smoking fissures and vents of the lateral craters, with congealed lava in iridescent, sulfurous hues, the glassy cone on high, all this conjured up visions in Géricault which caused him to perceive the isolation in which he had placed himself. He tore up what he had drawn, but an agonizing restlessness continued to mark every moment to which he gave pictorial form. Back on the open seas, the fleet passed Cape Bojador on the first of July, and at ten o'clock in the morning reached the Tropic of Cancer, where the passengers found amusement in the baptismal custom, the main purpose of which, according to the authors, was actually the tips that were given to the sailors on this occasion. On the second of July, they set out from Cap Barbas on course for the Gulf of Saint Cyprian. The shore was only half a cannon shot away, the coast clearly visible, with its stretches of desert behind the tall cliffs, onto which the sea broke violently. Following the route set out by the Minister of the Navy, the ships navigated between packs of lurking rocks, dismissing the warnings of some of the sailors; the commander of the frigate believed he had sighted Cap Blanc, but it was soon revealed to be a dense patch of cloud. During the night, the corvette *Echo* burned several charges of gunpowder and hoisted a lantern onto the mizzenmast, but it never once occurred to the officers on watch aboard the *Medusa* to respond to the signals. At daybreak, the plumb line revealed the continuing reduction of the water level; separated from the remaining vessels, the flagship floated toward the long sandbank off the island of Arguin. Even those least practiced in seafaring noticed the yellowish coloring of the waves. All the additional sails on the port side were hoisted in order to gather as much wind as possible for turning, yet the rudder ran aground. For a moment the ship became buoyant again; then, after another jolt, it became lodged at a point measuring only five meters and sixty centimeters deep—and the tide had just reached its highest level. For days on end the painter must have contemplated the events conveyed to him by the following pages of the book. The distress and desperation, the confusion and the torpor were portrayed so palpably that the reader felt as if he were in the midst of the castaways. He heard the screaming, the thundering of the waves breaking on the hull. The sails were lowered, the crow's nest taken down, the booms and bowsprit, powder barrels and woodwork thrown into the ocean; in the bilge, the bottoms were beaten out of the water barrels and they began to pump, but the ship could no longer be saved. The twenty-four cannons, the jettisoning of which would have considerably lightened the load, were left on board in the hope of being able to salvage them later. Since the frigate carried only six smaller boats,

which couldn't possibly hold all the passengers and personnel—together more than four hundred people—a raft was hurriedly constructed which, according to the calculations of the governor, was supposed to be able to carry two hundred people. The skies cast over, a storm approached from out at sea, the frigate rolled violently, its bilge burst in the night, the rudder broke off and was left hanging from the stern by nothing but its chain. On the fifth of July, early in the morning, it was decided to immediately clear the wreck, which was threatening to capsize. The soldiers were relegated to the raft, their request to take their muskets and some cartridges denied. They were allowed to retain only their sabers or carbines, while the officers carried shotguns and pistols. The raft—the design sketch of which was reproduced in the book as a copperplate print, and of which the painter would have a model fabricated—was twenty meters long and seven meters wide. Topmasts were fastened to the sides; between them, yards and topgallant masts of the foremast and the main mast were fixed and knotted thick with rigging; on top of these, boards from the decks were nailed at a right angle, broken up by five longer planks which stuck out on the sides by two or three meters; on the bow, two intersecting topgallant yards formed a kind of breastwork; and serving as a handrail—for this is what it was called by those who had the raft built but who had no intention of entrusting their lives to it—was an assortment of all kinds of timber lashed together, barely half a meter tall. At first glance it did seem possible that the two hundred people could fit onto the raft, yet scarcely had some fifty clustered together on it when it began to sink, right up to the railing, and even when the majority of the barrels of food had been jettisoned, after the addition of the remaining castaways they were left standing with water above their waists, pressed so tightly against one another that they couldn't move. There were one hundred forty-nine of them: one hundred twenty soldiers and twenty-nine sailors and passengers, a single woman among them. They had with them six barrels of wine and two barrels of drinking water. A sack of rusk was thrown to them and some sailcloth, even though there was no mast fixed to the raft, and no rudder either. The castaways did not receive the instruments and maps that the captain had promised them. Mr. de Chaumareys hurried away and boarded the officers' boat, which, in addition to twelve oarsmen, held forty-two men. The governor and higher functionaries went in the pinnace along with fourteen oarsmen, making thirty-five people in all, as well as significant baggage. The third boat, rowed by twelve men, was occupied by twenty-eight officers. Thirty people crowded onto the oarless shallop and thirty onto the eight-oared barge

which had been intended for the port service in Senegal; and lastly, fifteen ended up on the jolly boat. So at least thirty men must have drowned or stayed behind on board the *Medusa*. The thought of this embarkation, among the roaring and pummeling, while the waves shattered the bulwark and the mast stumps of the overturned frigate, climbing down on rope ladders, on rigging, the cries for help of those who had fallen into the sea, the distorted mouths, the eyes drawn wide with fear, hands straining up and splayed out, the effort of pushing the raft off against the slick side of the ship, the moment when the governor, sitting in an armchair, was winched down into the head boat, such impressions had absorbed the painter before he was overwhelmed by the image of the fully laden raft. It was towed along by the smallest and least seaworthy vessels, and when the oarsmen saw that the boats of the governor and captain were trailing off into the distance, they soon gave up towing and let go of the ropes, themselves battling against the worsening seas. While the flotilla headed for the shore, the raft, unable to be maneuvered, was carried out to sea by the tidal currents. Those gathered together on the raft still did not want to believe they had been abandoned. The coast was visible, as was the island of Arguin with the ruins of the old Portuguese fort; the castaways assumed that the boats would return for them, or that the *Echo*, *Loire*, and *Argus* would spot them. But night fell, and they had still not received help. Powerful swells swept over us. Hurling back and forth, struggling for every breath, hearing the cries of those washed overboard, we longed for the break of day.

9

There was nobody awake to whom I could have reported my emancipation from the usual daily chores. I stood on the empty Rue Casimir-Périer like a deserter, harried by the thought that I must turn around, return to those still asleep and wait to find out what was to happen next. But then I gave in once more to the pull that had seized me in the hall; I walked via Rue las Cases, past the brick building of Saint Clotilde, toward the small park where two years earlier my father had met with Wehner, where the sparrows were chirping, the pigeons cooing, just as they always had. In the square in the center of the grounds, under the chestnut trees, César Franck, who had been the organist in the church, sat in front of his marble instrument with his arms crossed, his foot resting on the pedal, listening intently to the angel which, resting on its stomach, stretched awkwardly over the back wall and lay his arms around Franck's shoulders while whispering into his side whiskers. Now, in the dim light of dawn, the sea had grown calmer, ten men had been swallowed by the



ocean, another twelve, perished, hung pinned between the planks and the boards. I walked down Rue Saint-Dominique, the guards at the entrance to the courtyard of the Ministry of Defense directed their gazes toward me. Suddenly afraid that I could provoke suspicion or be arrested, I slowed my pace. Turning into Rue de Solferino, far off in the distance, above the treetops of the Quai d'Orsay, up at the height of Sacré-Cœur, I saw a newspaper boy riding his bike from door to door; at each building he counted out a bundle and carried it inside: *Chamberlain to Godesberg*, I read on one of the front pages in passing. Rue de Lille marked the end of the gorge of tall, uniform residential buildings; it was followed by the two-story building of the Légion d'Honneur, with its rounded portal, a tricolor on the slanted flagpole above it, and closed shutters on the yellowish-gray, putti-covered façade. Alone or in small groups, pedestrians approached from the boulevard along the riverbank, walking hunched over, hurried; they might have been cleaning ladies, porters, who worked in the ministries where people had worked late into the night, having to empty the stuffed ashtrays and wastepaper baskets, dust off the desks, mop the floors; a restrained silence, a leaden exhaustion lay over the government quarter; these colorless figures, which in the morning mist still had something fluid to them, were familiar to me; they, who were the first inhabitants of the city I encountered, eased my passage into the metropolis, the arrival of these inconspicuous servants provided a familiar background for the impending arrival of the noises; in a moment, their swift and soft steps would be buried under the drumming that the slabs of stone would cause to vibrate on all sides. The actual venture into the unknown began when I had reached the street overlooking the Seine. I followed the railing to the right, suffering an attack of dizziness and delirium. A pole had been torn out of the base of the raft, erected as a mast and fastened with the tow rope, the clapping of the tatters of the sail could be heard and the torque was palpable, the irreparable twisting of the raft due to an overly long, laterally protruding piece of wood. By the second day the refusal to hand over the firearms to the sailors had already proven its purpose. Inebriated, having smashed and drunk a barrel of wine, the crew went after their superiors with axes and knives in a throng around the mast, where the officers held their ground with their pistols. In this burgeoning mutiny, the painter saw the possibility of a great composition arise. But there were still too many people clinging to the planks, their heads hanging down into the water, there was still too much confusion in this mutual onslaught, this struggle for dominance played out on a tiny territory, the antagonism had still not been converted into inti-

macy, the collective need, the collective horror, had not yet united them. On the ledge of the wall, I opened the street map I had bought the previous evening upon arriving at Gare de Lyon. There would be a lot to do today, decisions would have to be made, important steps for my progression stood before me, yet I had drifted into a haze of multiplicity which made it impossible for me to follow the laws that had previously applied. My every thought was so beleaguered by contradictory impulses, the attempt to gain perspective now seemed so fruitless after this leap from everything solid and binding, that I shelved the question of what was rational and useful and gave myself over to impulses that, without ever revealing their meaning, sought to prevail within me. At this moment, 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 movement produced as it were a grinding and 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. But in this condition, which resembled a state of inebriation, of possession, the desire for a form of regulation, of measurement persisted. With satisfaction I realized that behind the boulevard on the opposite bank of the river lay the sculpture-filled Tuileries Gardens, leading up to the elongated façade of the Louvre. It would still be many hours before the museum's gates would open; it was not intended for those who were ready to pay it a visit at the break of dawn, it belonged to the long sleepers, who after a late and generous meal tended to their nightly repose, and were then able to do with their day as they pleased. Yet it didn't matter that I had to wait; I had stolen this day for myself, I could already see myself walking around in the storeroom, in which one after the other of those works of the imagination, of inventiveness, were hanging, where everything was present in the original colors and forms, everything that I had known until now only from second-hand accounts or dubious reproductions. Be not afraid, one of them cried, I am going to get help for you, you'll be seeing me soon, and stepped, amid the general ecstasy, out into the sea. Sixty to sixty-five men perished in the tumult, rusk and drinking water were exhausted, only a barrel of wine was left. What became of the woman, Géricault asked himself. Strangely, the authors had not reported anything further about her, though the fact of a single woman's presence among the men ought to have merited special consideration. He wanted to know whether they had fought over the woman, or whether carnality lost all meaning under the threat of death. He saw himself lying next to her, and he sketched this moment, the two of them

surrounded by corpses in the foreground of the raft. The woman was unconscious, he had draped his arm around her, in the other he cradled a naked child, even though there had been no mention of a child on the raft. More and more, the raft became his own world. He clasped the body of the woman, pressed the child against himself, at night, he slept like this, when he awoke, he sensed that his arms were empty, it was a long time before he was able to open his eyes and saw that the ocean had taken from him the woman, the child. As the number of people on the raft became smaller, the painter came closer to the concentration that he needed for the final version of his painting. After the fighting died down, the wish to carry on living for as long as possible underwent a strange transformation. The first people began to cut up the cadavers that were lying around with their knives. Some devoured the raw meat on the spot, others let it dry in the sun, in order to make it more palatable, and those who could not bring themselves to consume this new fare were forced by hunger to do so on the following day. The turbulence was followed by the period of total isolation. In this condition of being torn out of all relations the painter recognized his own situation. He attempted to imagine what it was like, the sinking of teeth into the throat, the leg of a dead human being, and while he drew Ugolino biting into the flesh of his sons, he learned to come to terms with it, as those on the raft had done after letting out a hurried prayer. The naked figures, huddled together on the raft, found themselves in a world deformed by fever and delusion, those still living merged with the dead by consuming them. Drifting about on the plank structure, in cloud-like waters, Géricault felt the penetration of the hand into the slit breast, the grasping of the heart of the person he had hugged goodbye on the previous day. After a week, thirty remained on the raft. The saltwater had driven the skin on their feet and legs to blister and peel, their torsos were covered with contusions and sores. Often they cried and whimpered, at most twenty of them could still hold themselves upright. In the counting and calculating from one day to the next, in the continual withering away of the heap of castaways, in the depictions of the thirst, the running dry of all that was drinkable, the drooling over urine—which bore various aromas, sometimes sweetish, sometimes acrid, of thinner or thicker consistency, cooled in a small tin container—in the description of sucking up the wine ration through a quill, which prolonged the drinking, in the incessant approach of death, the burning of one hour into the next, the painter too heard the seeping of time into infinity, and from this dripping, ticking, and flowing the painting's process of creation was set in motion. Without living through those thirteen

days and nights of anguish he wouldn't have been able to find that moment of finality and depict the remaining group in its indivisibility. He was still captivated by individual details, distracted from the conception of completion. There was that little, empty bottle, which had contained rose oil, and which one of them wrested from the other so as to inhale the sweet smell. The painter couldn't shake the thought of the tiny perfume bottle; it roused memories of long-forgotten experiences. For several weeks he took great pains to not portray the objects themselves but rather the emotions, the dream images evoked by the feel of the objects. He knelt on the floor, on top of the drawing paper, the door locked behind him, completely alone with his secrets; for a few days he didn't eat or drink a thing, crawled around on the floorboards, surrounded by hallucinations, his mother, whom he had lost at the age of ten, appeared to him, a violent longing to be close to her overcame him, he reached out to feel her features, drew Phaedra, and himself as Hippolytus, whom the sea monster sought to dash against the rocks, and who was then dragged to his death by horses. For him, existence was drifting around on the raft; he pined for the woman who had replaced his mother, the wife of the brother of his mother, he was torn apart by the guilt of having left her, having disavowed the woman who had borne him a child. I had a desire to learn as much as possible about him, and in the openness that I brought to this day, the expectation that his life would open up before me emerged. Relentless as the permeation of the hazy air by the heightened light were the mounting sounds, every now and then a car drove down the street along the quay, and behind me, the early trains were rolling into Gare d'Orsay. With its coats of arms, helmets, and crowns, its window arches wrapped in patron saints and gods, its clocks set in wreathes, fruit baskets, and cornucopias, its immense golden letters flanked by harps and anchors, the hulking edifice which I turned toward seemed to want to trump the palace above and its halls of artworks. The footsteps of the people exiting the main entrance, most of them dressed in dark hues, briefcases under their arms, were already being drowned out by a metallic buzz, a whirring singing ascending from the city. Compared with the tumors of the industrial age, the titans and muses, the heroes and angels snuggled in together in the niches and tower gables of the side building of the Louvre still had something reserved, chaste about them, and yet these refinements of feudalism were no more laudable than the mountains of pompous sculptures on this side. There was a greater purity of line to be found in the bridge I was walking toward. Its low walls were smoothly cut, the two halves ascended symmetrically to the sharp central

seam, four cast-iron lampposts protruding on each side. But Pont Royal also failed to inspire any harmony within me; it was more as if the air, though already flushed with a glow, had become a viscous, dull paste; I had to wring every step out of myself; seized by shivering, I clung to the railing. Only a few days earlier I had still belonged to an irrevocable order, had performed set tasks, had been connected with the actions of others. Now I found myself in a region in which there was a life whose existence we had forgotten just as completely as we had been ignored here. The battlefields lay behind us, the fighting raged on, but the charges, the retreats, the cries of the wounded, the dying voices of the fallen, none of that counted here, everything here was so different that even we lost sight of ourselves, that we could no longer remember what we had actually been fighting for. From our first steps on French soil we were regarded as ejecta; the demobilized soldiers, the masses of refugees were driven into ringed fences of barbed wire, only a small number, with valid passports, were able to evade internment, and this was a hidden path out of a desert, a field of rubble. The expectation of a greeting, a welcome, a sign of solidarity had evaporated, there was no Popular Front here, only the gendarmerie received us, the only place we belonged was in the police archives; henceforth we were to report to the prefecture daily and hold out to be stamped the scrap of paper that signified our existence. I had always seen my path in front of me, made my decisions, even back then, deep in the underground and surrounded by fascism, I had been able to see a way out; only here, in the capital of openness, of enlightenment, were we forced into blindness. On the first evening in Paris we had been suddenly overwhelmed by our sense of estrangement from one another. With the dissolution of our alliance, our natural sense of belonging together had also evaporated; a powerlessness had befallen us with the realization that our ranks had been broken up, that we had been made useless. Only the question of which party we belonged to, or intended to join, contained the suggestion of a continued permanence. Until now I had found my purpose on the side that I was fighting for; now I was confronted with the realization that this spontaneous community was only possible so long as I was among friends and allies, and that this natural cooperation had to be replaced by a binding commitment. At a point in time when the illegal, conspiratorial work in cadres demanded the strictest confinement, it was necessary to join the organized collective; it was only here that it seemed possible to demonstrate our reliability. Yet such a step had been made more difficult by the decentralization of the Party; I didn't even know which group, which country I was responsible for.

The only task now had to be that of rebuilding and strengthening the Party, and I was ready to follow the directives that I would again be receiving. At the same time though, I was drawn to the park gates behind the bridge, watched over by sphinxes, and an immense thirst for knowledge grew within me. I leaned on the stone railing, barges with bunting of colorful pieces of laundry trailed along beneath me; today, when there was a need for the most precise orientation in external reality, today, while the city was holding its breath, awaiting the decisive moves and blows of the protagonists in the diplomatic spectacle, I wanted to head over to the poplars on the upper bank, to that arsenal of images. The thought of being accepted into the Party coalesced with the desire for limitless discoveries; I could already see myself standing before those painted surfaces, see my encounter with Géricault, Delacroix, Courbet, Millet; I wanted to head into the closed organization, into uncompromising struggle, and at the same time, into the absolute freedom of the imagination. Surmounting Pont Royal, 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. As I passed the sphinxes, the last line of defense was broken. Here and there in the grounds with the crisscrossing gravel paths someone was walking their dog on a leash. Egyptians and Assyrians, Druids and Gauls, Romans and Goths had been hauled in, beaten into stone, cast in ore, to honor the princes on their warhorses; everywhere guards and rulers loomed, waving their swords and lances, and poets, philosophers, and artists swiveled on their pedestals, passing me along through their arms. No sooner had I leaned back on a bench than silver-gray women appeared before me like ghosts, in long robes, and chased me away with outstretched hands. I had time to ask myself what this actually was, this city, where did it draw its essence, its strength, with which it continuously exerted its influence upon me. It had always been my wish to come to this city, and now that I was here, scarcely tolerated, among the lowest of the low, the task was to not allow it to force me onto my knees. Faced with its buildings and streets, I had to assert myself, in this powerful conglomeration which received its life from all those people who lived within it or had done, I had to look for relationships that could give my consciousness something to hold on to. The architecture and avenues drew the wanderer into their expansiveness, and the light, reflecting off the water and the sandy yellow hues of the walls of the buildings, did its bit to transport them to a realm of levity and devotion. Looking through the central arch of the gate in the forecourt



of the Louvre, in honor of the victory at Austerlitz and made of rose marble, the obelisk on Place de la Concorde and the large memorial to the Napoleonic armies at the end of the Champs-Élysées formed a straight line. This perspective, fringed by the gentle green of the rows of trees, drew the gaze into a flight to infinity, running from the symbol of one military triumph to the other, containing all the efforts at attaining absolute power, its format—accommodating the breadth of troops on the march and opening a vista onto unruly masses—was intended to lift our emotions and allow us to perceive imperialism, transformed into grand proportions, as a form of beauty. Considering how tearing down the old districts was supposed to hamper the building of barricades, create a clear field of fire, I saw Paris under the spell of its rulers, saw at all strategic points the mountains of wealth towering over the closed-off quarters of the tradespeople, the petite bourgeoisie, and the workers. But it wasn't this pattern that gave the city its appearance; the sense of being here, of the presence of all these buildings was instead evoked by the knowledge of the events that, all around, coming from below, had been set in motion again and again, the movements of outrage, of insurgency, which brought their own violence, their own power to fruition. Every building bore a more palpable trace of such actions than of the obligations that had been issued by the dynasties, and if to the nameless masses, who in the alleys had stacked up the stones into barricades, I added those who had entered into the life of the city with their artworks, then I was immediately thrust into a hot and bubbling mêlée that left me gasping for air. Almost all the people who had contributed to shaping my thought had resided here; the fact that their gazes had examined the scenes I was now seeing, that they had crossed this street, placed demands upon me for a moment that were scarcely bearable, but then it encouraged me, for none of these people had managed to transcend their beginnings in an instant either, and it was the ones who were most dear to me who had left behind evidence of their efforts and hardships. Amid the rumble of the traffic, in the chaos of the crowds who were rushing off to tend to their affairs, I approached from Place Vendôme, where I had seen how the column began to list, how it fell and burst. Even if it had also erected itself again like in a film in rewind, encoiled by its copper reliefs packed with nobles, breastplates, army flags, and fasces, which slot together to form a screw thread around the dense masonry of the base, with the spiral staircase inside; the fact that this column bearing Caesar in his laurel crown on the cupola had once been toppled, was still reason enough to leave the lavishly decorated square with confidence. Once, the tall steps to the entrance of the Nation-

algalerie in Berlin had sought to hinder our access to art; insignificant and worthless, we had scaled the steps up to the acropolis, which wanted to open itself only to the select few; before the entrance to the Louvre, however, we had only to advance across a threshold, and while the German troops were moving into formation on the Czechoslovakian border, Poland and Hungary were making their own demands for territorial gains, and in Hotel Dreesen on the Rhine preparations were being made for the arrival of the British delegation, the doors were flung open, and I charged in, in the stream of pilgrims, into the enfilade of the halls, bent down inquisitively to the sullen old men sitting on velvet seats with their peaked caps, saw incomparable sights with every step, left and right, gave them just enough time to ring out before continuing straight on, up and down the steps, until I finally ended up in front of the enormous, blackish-brown canvas, which at first conveyed the impression of a sudden extinction and death.

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In this first encounter, in those heavily darkened colors—mixed in with asphalt, turned mute and blotchy—I tried to find a trace of those first signs of luminosity that had been present during my conversation with Ayschmann. Gradually, on the seemingly monochrome surface of the image, some yellowish, bluish, greenish tones became discernible. No longer was the feeling of an extremely heightened tension upon discovering the ship on the horizon predominant, but rather an anxiety, a feeling of hopelessness. Only pain and desolation could still be read in the oppressively restrained composition; it was as if, with the sloughing and scabbing of the surface of the paint, everything with a tangible, documentary quality had drained out of the image, and only a mark of the personal catastrophe of the painter had been left behind. But more than disappointment over the dullness of the painting I felt sympathy for Géricault, whose achievements had been surrendered to weathering and decay. The haziness of the picture also led me to planes on which vision had not yet solidified; the appearance of the individual figures spoke of the brooding preparations, and through the shrouding of completion, effervescent, dreamlike elements emerged. The painter had spent a long time in the turmoil of the many, then among the dead and the fading. He saw the solution he was seeking emerge in that second when, with the shrill cry at the appearance of the brig, a complete turnaround occurred, and the bodies, which had been ready to surrender to their demise, sprung back up once more, becoming a wedge against the world of annihilation. He was already close to this conclusion as he read how the castaways, in the

midst of the horrors, had been capable of joking, how they forgot their situation for a moment and broke into laughter. If the brig is sent out after us, said one, may God grant it Argus eyes, a play on the name of the ship they were hoping would help them. This showed the painter that even in the most extreme despair, as long as a breath could still be drawn, a will to live persisted. And if he did ultimately end up under the yoke of Hades, and the strain of rebellion passed away, leaving only a necrotic husk, this made his determination, which had cost him all his strength, only greater still. His undertaking had been to paint the final few who had still been able to rise up. And while the raft was being swept around in the frothing, blue-green water, lifted slightly by one wave and drenched by the heavy swell of the next, in the perpetual to and fro, the day of the twenty-first of September intruded upon me from outside. Suddenly, my efforts to understand the image became stuck; it seemed to contain too much of the painter's being, of the uneasiness, the dissatisfaction that ate away at him, it was as if he were somewhere out in the city, as if I had to find him, to interrogate him about the meaning that he had invested in his work, and I left the palace and its imaginary riches. In my attempt to get closer to this tarry scrap of cloth, the inner conflict within me was reactivated. Géricault, son of the fourteenth of July, was familiar with the forces that needed to be directed against ruin, against disintegration; the revolution had been inscribed in him, like a scar; he had striven for the ability to be able to contribute to the establishment of a dominion of the common good, yet he possessed nothing but his artistic language, and even more than this language served him to represent the infirmity of an epoch, it marked the martyrdom that his own exposed nerves were suffering. During the years in which Géricault had developed his craft, the old conditions had been reinstated; in the time of the Restoration, nobody still asked about the First Republic. A passing glance at David's paintings sufficed to confirm how, following the classicist spirit of the revolution, after those soaring idealistic heights, the path to the megalomania of empire had immediately been found. That which was vital in Géricault stood on the side of renewal, which was expressed in his choice of subject matter, in his technique, in the application of paint, the treatment of forms; however, his life was that of someone who was pushed into a corner, isolated; his hatred of haughtiness and the vanity of society drove him to a breakdown. If in the end he spent his time almost exclusively in prisons, madhouses, and morgues, it was because he could only bear to be among the ostracized. They were his kin. Staring into the disillusioned face of the thief, studying the yellowish, pallid skin, the red-rimmed eyes

of the madwoman, things fell into place, and his addiction to death found reflection in the sight of the dismembered limbs on the dissecting table, in the bloody heads, severed from their torsos. The rupture within him called up something of the fragmentation to which my generation was also subjected. It was as if we had a gag in our mouths that turned every word we wanted to utter about Spain into a sinister moaning. For more than two years—an eternity for us—people had been fighting there; but here, every thought about the distress in which the Spanish Republic found itself disappeared into padded indifference, dull silence; here, the unspeakable effort of resisting the enemy was covered over by the husk of a false peace. This peace had become a kind of mystical bliss whose preservation lay in the hands of a few people who were equipped with supernatural abilities. The city was indeed pervaded by a tension that encompassed world affairs; people clustered together on all sides discussing the latest news, but the reports they were following with such excitement were nothing more than the story of their own plight distorted into a cheap thriller. Spellbound, the mysterious intrigues kept them on tenterhooks, they were instilled with hope; awaiting a solution, they didn't notice that the threat to Czechoslovakia was a result of the ignorance shown toward Spain; beguiled by the speeches declaiming the honorable character of England and France, they didn't see how interwoven the crimes were. Spain was written off, the threat to Czechoslovakia made into an isolated problem. While in the Spanish vacuum the outcome was still being contested, the mass media of the West served up the maneuvers and countermaneuvers to their audience as a sensational game in which the heroes were the diplomats; they robbed the militant vanguard of the working class of its impact and assigned influence only to the cardboard cutouts of the governing politicians, with no mention of the powerful forces of high finance behind them. The impending advance of a popular movement was drowned out by the flood of rhetoric from the consolidation process of the reactionary forces; the struggle against enslavement was left atrophied beneath distortion and lies. Only recently it had still seemed as if insight and reason could prevail over the forces of destruction; now, dark-clad gentlemen were solemnly and corruptly determining the fate of the nations. They had rejected any and every offer of collaboration from the Soviet Union, had ignored their appeals and warnings, yet they had hurried to the head of the Fascist League, willing to make any concession to avoid getting a raw deal in the redistribution of the markets. Even in the uncertainties and missteps that had been made in Spain, in the doubts and weaknesses that may have overcome us there,

for us, that which had been attempted in the Republic took on a luminosity that ought to have singed the rest of Europe; but here, people allowed themselves to be blinded by the salacious reports of shady business dealings, betrayal and plunder were deemed magnanimous efforts to maintain peace. On every street corner we were confronted with the glorification of cynical self-interest; why, we asked ourselves, didn't the workers take to the streets with their flags to express their rage about the betrayal they had been subjected to. Perhaps, we said, they had been exposed to the same shock, the same powerlessness as we had, having been cut off from our tasks, perhaps they too were only now beginning to realize how maliciously their actions had been undermined and weakened over the last few years. Exposed to the forced contingencies of exile, among the escalating instability and panic, we discussed places to which we could emigrate. If you were presented with the chance of getting to Mexico, North America, Scandinavia, it came with a ban on political activity; you either had to find external support, a guarantee, in order to vegetate abroad with reduced rights, or you had to creep into an unknown country on your own via an illegal border crossing, with counterfeit papers, and then go underground. Beneath the candelabras, the lead-lined window-panes, at the exquisite tables, the groups sat discussing, gesticulating. The host, with an oddly radiant, satisfied face, paced back and forth among them. For a moment, Hodann could be seen talking to Branting, the Swedish politician; Hodann was viewed with suspicion now, it was known that he was friends with Münzenberg, and though no one knew whether Münzenberg was still a member of the Party or had already been expelled, nor even what he had been accused of, anyone who still had anything to do with him was cut off, neutralized in some vague way. In the upstairs rooms of the house, despite this friction, the Committee for the Foundation of a German Popular Front was meeting, chaired by Heinrich Mann. Since the government would not go along with any Communist initiatives, the gatherings of this small, seclusive circle had something unreal about them, and yet this was the only place where an attempt was being made that could have had any effect on the catastrophe which cast a pall over all of our emotions. Merker, Dahlem, Ackermann, and Abusch were among the spokespeople of the Communist Party; Mewis was in Czechoslovakia at the time; of the Social Democratic functionaries, Braun, Stampfer, Breitscheid, and Hilferding were in attendance, though without authorization to make decisions, unless of course they had been tasked with delaying every possible decision. The structure of the Social Democratic Party, with its executive committee

members in Prague and London, had become just as faceless and formless as the French and Spanish socialist parties. It only remained tangible in its craven commitment to the interests of capital. If the Communist Party appeared more amorphous still, it was out of the need for camouflage, the continuation of the struggle in the underground; at the same time, though, for all the emphasis it placed on the efforts to form a united front, it was riven by internal strife. A general mobilization in Czechoslovakia was to be expected; swastika flags, which had been hoisted in Bohemian cities, were taken down; weapons that had been amassed in apartments were seized. I saw before me the kitchen in Warnsdorf, tried to imagine the room empty, in the hope that my parents had gone to Prague. With Katz, Münzenberg's former employee, I discussed whether I should sign up for military service at the Czechoslovakian Embassy, but he advised me to wait. He was living in Paris, and at first I saw him as my father had described him, invoking Wehner's account, but after a short while that description lost all force, the elegance of his clothing inspired no antipathy in me toward him, they seemed to offer him a kind of protection. He was in the city at the behest of the Comintern, among his many tasks was to tend to the members of the International Brigades as they arrived in Paris. In conversation he seemed open, experienced. I had told him about my wish to join the Party, and also mentioned that my awareness of the urgency of the practical issues that needed to be resolved did not preclude my desire to engage in artistic or academic work. Géricault united us. In the afternoon, we walked from Boulevard de Clichy, at the foot of Montmartre, down the narrow yet busy Rue des Martyrs and stepped into the doorway of the building at number twenty-three. The entranceway led us to a paved courtyard. The walls of the formerly elegant building were of a worn gray, the plaster was riddled with cracks; windows, doors, and thresholds were set askew in the masonry. The side wings of the building extended past the garden, which adjoined the courtyard and was populated with a few tall acacias, a copse of maples, and a fence entwined with ivy. Between the iron gates was a fountain with a short trough extending from it for the horses whose stables had been added on the left-hand side at the beginning of the previous century. Katz pointed at the two arched windows and the central, square window in the floor above; there, from November of eighteen seventeen until the autumn of the following year, Géricault had sketched out his picture; to execute the large-scale painting he moved over to a workshop on Rue Louis-le-Grand in Faubourg-du-Roule; then, following the exhibition and his two-year stay in England, he returned to the garden cottage where, on

the twenty-sixth of January, eighteen twenty-four, he died as a result of riding accidents. Back then the street had been located in a rural area on the outskirts of the city: passing gardens and scattered country houses, the livestock market and farmsteads, it continued on to the ruins of the Benedictine monastery, to the mills, vineyards, and chalk pits on the Mont des Martyrs. It wasn't until a few decades later that the sprawl of the city reached over the hills, but right up until the early twenties of our century, between the houses in the coiled alleyways and steep steps stood sheds and shacks, shoved on top of one another on the scrubby slopes: this was the Maquis, the sanctuary of the most impoverished. Not far from Place Blanche, Géricault's horse had shied at a fence and thrown him off. The abscess which he developed through the injury burst a few days later when, despite his condition, he took part in the derby at the Champ de Mars and fell once more. The infection attacked his spine, the vertebrae began to disintegrate, his living body rotted away from within. There he lay, stretched out flat on the bed, partially curtained off in the room with its arched ceiling, surrounded by his paintings and drawings; *The Raft of the Medusa*, taken out of its frame, filled the longer wall; no one had wanted to buy the work, a dealer had suggested cutting up the canvas to sell off the parts as freestanding studies. When Delacroix visited him at the end of December of '23, Géricault weighed no more than a child; the head of the thirty-two-year-old, however, was that of an old man. He had sought out this death as if he had wanted to punish himself, the drive to annihilate himself also made itself evident in his remarks about his work: bah, a vignette, he responded to praise, turning his skeletal face toward the castaways. And yet, right up until his final seconds, he was planning great compositions dealing with the horrors of slavery, the liberation of the victims of the Inquisition. And though the only thing that remained tangible to him was enduring pain and suffering was the only thing that still seemed real to him, he had nevertheless repeatedly overcome death by devising images and had extracted the most acute fervor from his infirmity. Standing under the blackish mass of his work once again on Thursday the twenty-second of September, I noticed how the facial features and gestures of the group, which seemed to meld into a single entity, gradually emerged out of the surrounding darkness. Even though none of the castaways turned their gaze toward the viewer, the painter had intended for the viewer to feel as if they were right next to the raft, it should seem as if they were hanging, with cramped fingers, to one of the boards jutting out from the raft, too exhausted to live to see the rescue. The events taking shape above him no longer concerned him.

You who are standing in front of this picture, said the painter, are the forsaken ones, hope belongs to the ones you've abandoned. The arm of the corpse on the left had originally extended right to the foot of the perished youth on the foremost edge; traces of the painted-over forearm and hand could still be made out. Beneath the ribs, the torso seemed to be torn off: either he had been caught between the planks, folded back into the cavity, or half of him had been devoured. Four corpses lay up front in a row; behind them, three figures were crouched, facing away from the rest; one by the mast, his face buried in his hands, followed by four bodies, half-upright, intersected by one who had fallen back down, then four standing up, huddled close together, and then the last three, two of whom were holding up the one who was highest of all. A greenish-yellow shimmer lay over everyone's skin. As I had examined the reproduction of the painting with Ayschmann in Valencia, much of what was now revealed had already been discernible, but it wasn't until I was confronted with the work, when I became an eye-witness and took in the event in its original character, that I came to comprehend the magnitude of the act of painting it. I began to understand how the arrangement of the forms resulted from creating balances within a process of intensification, how the unity was pieced together out of contrasts. Precisely drawn, dark met with light: the illuminated contour of a profile, a back, a calf muscle, always led to fabric, wood, or flesh lying in shadow, or the black outline of a head, a hand, a hip was set against shimmering cloth, sky, water. That which was contained, controlled in this entanglement conveyed a sense of endurance, this quality being amplified by the fact that the perseverance seemed to be at the same time enveloped by a heavy sorrow. This emotion, the most abiding of all because of its connection with the irretrievable, found expression in the foreground in a full figure, and appeared here and there with its shimmer on a brow, on a temple, a thrown-back cheekbone. And now the expression that had turned toward the possibility of survival with so much energy changed as well; the expectation of rescue was marked by apprehension, waiting held sway, as in the situation in which the anxiety of a dream is to be broken through and waking induced. Those who believed they had seen what was approaching were turned away from the viewer; the few recognizable faces bore the rigidity of inward contemplation. The only one who presented himself entirely to the outside world, who had open space in front of him, was the dark-skinned man, the African; here, the outline also vibrated, the lines of the shoulder, of the cheek seen from behind, of the hair, were in the process of flowing into the cloud, at its outermost, highest point, the dissolution,