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## The Linguistic Outlaw: Peter Weiss's Return to German as Literary Language

In 1948 Peter Weiss makes his first public entrance into the postwar German literary landscape – not as a writer, but as a translator. The short story 'Der Verurteilte' [The Convict] was published in the spring issue of *Die Neue Rundschau*, a literary journal of the Bermann-Fischer publishing house, whose main office was at the time still located in Stockholm.<sup>1</sup> Originally titled 'Den dödsdömde' [The Man Condemned to Death] and written by the Swedish literary prodigy Stig Dagerman (1923–54), the story features human isolation and failed communication, themes close to the heart of the 31-year-old Peter Weiss.<sup>2</sup>

- 1 Stig Dagerman, 'Der Verurteilte', trans. Peter Weiss, *Die neue Rundschau* 10 (1948), pp. 174–84. All translations by the author unless otherwise noted. In 1936 the publishing house Samuel Fischer Verlag in Berlin was divided into two companies, due to the increasing pressure from the Nazi regime: Samuel Fischer Verlag, led by Peter Suhrkamp, and Bermann Fischer Verlag, led by Bermann Fischer. Fischer was allowed to leave Germany with the legal rights to authors banned by the Nazis, such as Thomas Mann, Hugo von Hofmannsthal, and Carl Zuckmayer. He established himself in Vienna, while Suhrkamp continued to work with authors whose work was still tolerated in Germany, among them Hermann Hesse. Due to the *Anschluss* of Austria in 1938, Berman Fischer Verlag was re-established in Stockholm, where it would remain until 1948. The publishing house's history is covered in Murray G. Hall, *Österreichische Verlagsgeschichte 1918–1938* (Vienna, 1985), also available online: Heading 'Band II', 'Bermann Fischer Verlag', accessed 22 April 2013. <[http://verlagsgeschichte.murrayhall.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=73&Itemid=86](http://verlagsgeschichte.murrayhall.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=73&Itemid=86)>
- 2 Included in the collection of short stories *Nattens lekar: Noveller* [1947] (Stockholm, 2002), pp. 253–68. Because Dagerman also wrote a play with the same title, future references to 'Den dödsdömde' will be cited using the title of his short-story collection,

In this essay, I argue that Peter Weiss's linguistic re-orientation from Swedish to German shapes the aesthetics of his literary works from the 1940s up to and including his magnum opus *Die Ästhetik des Widerstands* (1975–81; *The Aesthetics of Resistance*, 2005).<sup>3</sup> It is an aesthetics produced by the intersection of two languages and two literary traditions, but it also stands at the intersection of artistic media. Weiss's geographic and cultural displacement is played out on the level of language and thus forms a linguistic exile in which the sense of loss and difference constantly triggers new literary attempts.

In order to understand this process, however, we need to look into a period in Weiss's artistic production dated before his literary breakthrough in West Germany with *Der Schatten des Körpers des Kutschers* (1960; *The Shadow of the Body of the Coachman*, 1998), namely the late 1940s and 1950s.

In 1948, as a matter of fact, Weiss experiences something of a linguistic crisis. Despite the fact that he, a German-speaking migrant from Czechoslovakia, had acquired Swedish citizenship and published two acclaimed books of short prose in Swedish, his adopted literary language had come to a full stop.<sup>4</sup> This at least is the image that is presented in the correspondence between Weiss and the publisher Peter Suhrkamp dated the same year. In the summer of 1947 they met in Berlin, where Weiss was temporarily working as a correspondent for the daily newspaper *Stockholms-Tidningen*, writing about the cultural life in postwar Germany. A year after his return to Stockholm, most likely in the beginning of July 1948,<sup>5</sup> Weiss

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*Nattens lekar*. English translations from 'The Man Condemned to Death', trans. Joan Tate, *Swedish Book Review* (1984, supplement), pp. 21–5.

3 To date only the first of the novel's three volumes has been translated into English: Peter Weiss, *The Aesthetics of Resistance: Volume 1*, trans. Joachim Neugroschel (Durham, NC, 2005).

4 *Från ö till ö* [From Island to Island] was published by Bonniers in 1947 and received acclaim from many critics, among them the well-known Swedish modernist writer and critic Artur Lundkvist, who described Weiss as a Swedish Henri Michaux. In the following year, a literary adaptation of the article series by Weiss in *Stockholms-Tidningen*, *De besegrade* [The Conquered], was also published by Bonniers.

5 The first letter sent to Suhrkamp is undated, but considering the initial phrase of Weiss's second letter dated '28. Juli [1948]' [28 July [1948]], the first one was most

sent his first letter to the publisher, in which he described his bilingual existence in Sweden as exhausting and troublesome:

Lieber Herr Suhrkamp,

ich sitze hier und schreibe in deutscher Sprache und das ist als kehrte ich in ein seit langem nicht mehr gesehenes und doch vertrautes Zimmer zurück. Während der Jahre in denen ich eine fremde Sprache schrieb war mir immer, als fehlte mir etwas Wesentliches, als läge unter jedem Wort ein schwer fassbarer Schatten. Ich bemühte mich sehr um die neuen Worte, es war ein furchtbar schwieriger Prozess, alles durch diesen komplizierten Sprachregulator zu leiten vor allem, wenn ich an Dinge der Kindheit dachte sah ich wie sehr diese mit den allerersten Wortbegriffen zusammenhingen. Seit einigen Monaten aber wurde mir diese Dissonanz immer unerträglicher. Ich begann deutsch zu schreiben, doch um mich her surrte ja die Luft von fremden Worten; selbst war ich gezwungen, tagtäglich die andere Sprache zu sprechen und in all meinen Begriffen lebte dieser ständige Wechsel zwischen den Tonlagen. Ich hatte den Weg in ein wesentliches inneres Gebiet verloren, teils weil mich die neue Umgebung dazu gezwungen, teils weil ich mit dem Deutschen allzuvieles verknüpfte, was ich gerne vergessen wollte. Immer wieder schrieb ich diese anderen Worte die doch nur fremde Spiegel für innere Gedanken waren und immer wieder, vor allem in Träumen, näherte ich mich den vertraueneren Lauten.<sup>6</sup>

[Dear Mr Suhrkamp,

I am sitting here writing in the German language, and it feels as if I have returned to a room that I have not seen for a long time, but that is still familiar to me. During the years that I wrote in a foreign language I always felt as if I were lacking something substantial, as if underneath every word there lay a shadow difficult to grasp. I struggled hard for new words, it was a terribly difficult process to channel everything through this complicated language regulator, in particular when I thought about things from my childhood and I saw how very linked these were to my earliest verbal notions. In the last few months, however, this dissonance has increased to the level of the unbearable. I began to write in German, but around me the air was buzzing with foreign words; I myself was daily forced to speak the other language and the alternation between pitches was present in all my perceptions. I had lost access to

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likely sent a few weeks earlier: 'Liebe Herr Suhrkamp / Ich schrieb Ihnen vor einigen Wochen einen ausführlichen Brief ...' [Dear Mr Suhrkamp / I wrote a lengthy letter to you a few weeks ago ...]. Siegfried Unseld and Peter Weiss, *Der Briefwechsel*, ed. Rainer Gerlach (Frankfurt am Main, 2007), p. 12.

6 Ibid., p. 9. The quotation renders Weiss's sometimes idiosyncratic punctuation as in the original.

a crucial inner territory, partly by force of the new surroundings, partly because I wanted to forget so much of what I associated with German. Again and again I wrote these other words, that really were only foreign mirrors of inner thoughts, and again and again, above all in my dreams, I approached the more familiar sounds.]

The quotation presents a literally disharmonic illustration of the author's bilingual writing situation, where 'the foreign language' (Swedish) is lacking in substance, but also distorting his efforts to return to German as his literary language: foreign words are theriomorphed into 'buzzing' entities that disturb his efforts. Moreover, Weiss's use of musical metaphors such as 'dissonance' and 'alternation between pitches' to describe the switching process between languages is particularly striking. Here, the languages seem to be dissolved into mere sounds and noises: in his 'dreams', he does not return to a familiar language, that is to the signifying, linguistic system of German, but to 'familiar sounds'.

In order to understand this use of acoustic terms in connection to language, we need to briefly highlight the specific historical conditions under which Weiss wrote. In an illuminating essay on noises in a selection of stories by Edgar Allen Poe and Franz Kafka, Arnd Niebisch defines modernity itself as a scene of noise, propelled by the industrial revolution with its technological innovations such as the steam engine and the railway, finally reaching its peak in the trenches of the First World War. Referring to works by the historians Wolfgang Schivelbusch and David Landes, Niebisch argues that the noise of modernity begins to permeate every sphere of society from the second half of the nineteenth century onwards, including the sphere of literature, paving the way for F.T. Marinetti's futurist manifesto in 1909, the most well-known example of the avant-garde zeitgeist. Niebisch's main point, however, is to stress the fact that modernity not only produces an ever-increasing amount of noise, but that it also foregrounds the acoustic sphere 'in allen ihren Dimensionen' [in all its dimensions]:

Die technisierte Gesellschaft zwingt ihre Bewohner nicht nur, ihre Sinnesorgane vor zu starkem Input zu schützen, sondern macht es auch notwendig, genauer hinzuhören, neue differenzierte Muster in beinahe chaotischen, akustischen Erscheinungen

wahrzunehmen. Es ist nicht nur etwa die Zwölftonmusik, die traditionelle Hörgewohnheiten in Frage stellt, es ist auch die Psychoanalyse, die darauf hinweist, dass man seinem Patienten genauer zuhören sollte.<sup>7</sup>

[Technologized society not only forces its inhabitants to shield themselves from inputs which are too strong; it also compels them to listen more carefully in order to perceive new, differentiated patterns in acoustic phenomena which are almost chaotic. Traditional habits of hearing are challenged not only, for instance, by twelve-tone music, but also by psychoanalysis, which emphasizes the importance of listening more carefully to the patient.]

Weiss was, as previous research has shown, heavily influenced by psychoanalytical practices in his writing. Conceivably, this was a consequence of his own psychoanalytical treatment (in 1941 by Iwan Bratt in Alingsås outside Gothenburg, and during the period 1948–52 by Lajos Székely in Stockholm).<sup>8</sup> He was also artistically socialized into a specifically Swedish modernist context in Stockholm during the 1940s and 1950s, where modernist phenomena such as psychoanalysis, surrealism and existentialism were intensely discussed. Weiss contributed to the avant-garde literary journals *40-tal*, *Prisma*, *Utsikt* and *All världens berättare*, and the influence of the Swedish aesthetic debate on his works has been stressed by Weiss scholars, most pointedly by Axel Schmolke and Wiebke Annik Ankersen.<sup>9</sup> Even though my chief concern in this essay is to investigate Weiss's return to German as a literary language, it is important to keep the context in mind when trying to understand the particular development of his prose during the period 1948–60. It is precisely these general modernist practices that

7 Arndt Niebisch, 'Ticken vs. Rauschen. Geräusche bei Poe und Kafka' in Achim Hölter (ed.), *Komparatistik. Jahrbuch der Deutschen Gesellschaft für Allgemeine und Vergleichende Literaturwissenschaft* (Heidelberg, 2007), p. 77.

8 See for example Jens-Fietje Dwars, *Und dennoch Hoffnung: Peter Weiss; eine Biographie* (Berlin, 2007), pp. 292–3.

9 Axel Schmolke, *Das fortwährende Wirken von einer Situation zur andern: Strukturwandel und biographische Lesarten in den Varianten von Peter Weiss' Abschied von den Eltern* (Sankt Ingbert, 2006); Wiebke Annik Ankersen, 'Ein Querschnitt durch unsere Lage': *die Situation und die schwedische Prosa von Peter Weiss* (Sankt Ingbert, 2000).

allow Weiss to confront his biographical linguistic predicament and to begin to outline a literary aesthetic able to transcend conventional literary language.

Seen in the narrower context of Weiss's literary work of the 1950s and 1960s, the real significance of the above-quoted letter becomes clear. The novel *Der Schatten des Körpers des Kutschers*, written eight years prior to its actual publication, testifies to a linguistic *Stunde Null*, a point zero, from which the process of verbal comprehension of the world begins. An anonymous first-person narrator tries to register the totality of visual and auditory impressions in written language, but fails repeatedly. The two auto-fictive novels *Abschied von den Eltern* (1961; *The Leavetaking*, 1962) and *Fluchtpunkt* (1962; *Vanishing Point*, 1966) could also be interpreted as literary replies to the implied search for the 'earliest verbal notions' stated in the letter. But the most explicit account of a linguistic crisis, and an attempt to reacquire language, is articulated four years earlier than the conception of *Der Schatten des Körpers des Kutschers*, namely in Weiss's first literary text written in German after his first years in Swedish exile (1939–45). The manuscript had the title 'Der Vogelfrei' [The Outlaw] and was obviously influenced by Dagerman's short story mentioned earlier. The dictionary *Deutsches Wörterbuch von Jacob Grimm und Wilhelm Grimm* defines 'Vogelfrei' as 'exlex, dem angriffe jedermanns freigegeben, ohne gesetzlichen schutz, geächtet' [exlex, subject to any man's assault, without legal protection, outlawed].<sup>10</sup> The word, then, has the same legal connotation as Dagerman's 'Der Verurteilte'. The text also thematizes the insurmountable otherness of the protagonist in the face of the surrounding world. On the other hand, the two stories differ significantly in how this otherness is framed: in Dagerman's case, the bars between the protagonist and the world are existential in nature, whereas Weiss's prison house is constituted by language. Weiss sent a first part of the manuscript to Suhrkamp in a second letter on 28 July 1948, accompanied by the following hopeful sentences: 'Ich bin gespannt, was Sie davon halten, am meisten freuen

10 Entry 'Vogelfrei' in the online version of *Deutsches Wörterbuch von Jacob Grimm und Wilhelm Grimm*, accessed 16 January 2013. <<http://woerterbuchnetz.de/DWB/>>

würde es mich natürlich, wenn Sie Verwendung dafür hätten.' [I am very excited to hear what you think of it – I would of course be most delighted if you found use for it.]<sup>11</sup>

Weiss was strongly influenced by Dagerman's dense existentialist prose, which he considered to be European and international, as opposed to other Swedish literary works, which he described as being too specific to Swedish society, peripheral and provincial.<sup>12</sup> From his own position of self-declared outsider, he felt at home in Dagerman's literary universe, where protagonists struggle for meaning in an absurd world.

The short story by Dagerman can help us in our effort to understand Weiss's manuscript and his linguistic re-orientation. 'Der Verurteilte' is a story about a man who is wrongly sentenced to death, but who by accident escapes the scheduled execution. His innocence is finally revealed and the man is set free, but instead of feeling grateful for his newly won freedom, he finds his treatment and the arbitrariness of the legal process appalling: one day he is a hated criminal, the next a revered hero. When a curious crowd of people wonders at his negative attitude, he replies that he has left a life where his fate was certain in exchange for a life saturated by uncertainty. A questioning crowd that does not understand the answers of the protagonist recurs throughout the story. They want him to deliver exciting stories

11 Unseld/Weiss, *Briefwechsel*, p. 13.

12 See for example Peter Weiss quoted by Fredrik Benzinger in *Die Tagung der 'Gruppe 47' in Schweden 1964 und ihre Folgen. Ein Kapitel deutsch-schwedischer Kultur- und Literaturbeziehungen* (Stockholm, 1983), p. 106: 'Damals – in den vierziger Jahren – gab es ja sehr viel mehr, was ... auf dieselben Interessen ausgerichtet war, die auch ich verfolgte, etwa Stig Dagermans Linie mit der *Insel der Verdammten* ... Das war ja ein Buch, das uns sehr nahe stand, und der Krieg und das Erlebnis der Heimatlosigkeit, das alles war ja damals ziemlich total. Es hatte nichts mehr mit einer spezifisch schwedischen Welt zu tun, sondern war ziemlich europäisch.' [Back then – in the 1940s – there was so much more that was oriented along similar lines of interest, that I also pursued, for instance, Stig Dagerman's example with the *Insel der Verdammten* [Island of the Doomed] ... That was a book close to our hearts, and the war and the feeling of homelessness, all of that was quite massively present in those days. It no longer had anything to do with a specifically Swedish world, but was rather European.]

about his dramatic time in prison and the execution procedure, what he felt standing blindfolded beside the hangman. Contrary to their demands, the man replies by describing sensory impressions and observations; because of the long isolated existence in the cell, he could no longer think anything but 'korta tankar' [brief thoughts], he explains.<sup>13</sup> The feeling of the cold ring on the hangman's finger and the smell of sawdust are engraved in his memory. Various acoustic elements seem to be even more important to him: distant mumbling from the benches of the spectators, the sound of footsteps, the bouncing of a handball from the men in the guards' gym. In other words, the convict refuses to offer a conventional narrative and instead describes his surroundings by referring to various acoustic elements, sounds and noises. Visuality is turned into acoustics and narrative into description, reminding us of Niebisch's outline of modernity as the scene of noise, referred to earlier.

The same shift of narration occurs in Weiss's 'Der Vogelfreie': sensory impressions and especially acoustic phenomena are described throughout the text. In one scene, where the first-person narrator tries to talk to a potential employer, a character called The Lion (a boxing coach), he refers to a time when he was imprisoned, alluding to the prison theme in Dagerman's short story:

Ich bin lange gefangen gewesen. Dort konnte ich nur auf eine Weise überleben: in dem ich mehr und mehr meine Sinne schärfte. Die meisten verreckten dort in völliger Abstumpfung. Neben den täglichen Ordnungen lernte ich mit den Lichtstrahlungen umzugehen und mit allen Tönen, die ich vernehmen konnte, die Skalen sind unbegrenzt. Schließlich konnte ich mit ihnen die Mauern überwinden. Ich kam frei. Doch da, wo ich eingesperrt war, bin ich der geworden, der ich heute bin, ändern kann ich mich nicht mehr. ...

Die Sinnlosigkeit der Drohungen und Strafen hatte mich so verzerrt, daß sich jeder Gedanke erst aus einer zähen widerspenstigen Geschwür herauskämpfen mußte. Ich sagte, ich lernte sehen und hören, doch am besten sieht man das, was ich meine, mit geschlossenen Augen, und erst wenn die Ohren alle gewohnten Geräusche vergessen haben, hören sie die reinen Töne.<sup>14</sup>

13 Dagerman, *Nattens lekar*, p. 253; 'The Man Condemned to Death', p. 21.

14 Peter Weiss, *Werke*, ed. Suhrkamp Verlag in collaboration with Gunilla Palmstierna-Weiss (6 vols, Frankfurt am Main, 1991), vol. 1, pp. 156–7. In my interpretation of

[For a long time I was a prisoner. There I could only survive in one way: by sharpening my senses more and more. Most of the people there met a miserable death in a state of total dullness. Alongside the daily routines I learned to deal with the different rays of light and all of the sounds that I could perceive, the scales are infinite. With their aid I could finally overcome the walls. I broke free. Yet there, where I was imprisoned, I became who I am today, I can no longer change ...

The absurdity of the threats and punishments had distorted me to such an extent, that every thought had to fight its way through a rubbery, resisting ulcer. I said, I learned to see and to hear, but the best way to see what I mean is by closing your eyes, and only when the ears have finally forgotten all familiar noises, do they begin to hear the pure sounds.]

Here Weiss adds a new layer of meaning to the act of listening, which the earlier text lacks. In Dagerman's case, a situation of failed communication between the former convict and the curious crowd is repeated – the outsider is unable to represent his experience by the conventional means that are familiar to the surrounding people; instead, he can only produce fragmented pieces of sensory impressions. In the context of Weiss's biographical situation of being a German-speaking exile in Sweden, Dagerman's text would surely have appealed to him. In 'Der Vogelfreie', however, the sharpening of the senses and the act of listening are not only elevated into an act of resistance against the immediate threat of death, but also against the surrounding familiar noises and sounds: by carefully listening to sounds beyond the 'familiar noises', the narrator hears something 'pure', something that is able to transcend the prison walls.

If we recall what Weiss wrote in his letter to Suhrkamp in 1948 regarding the difficulties that his bilingual state of mind caused his writing – the buzzing of foreign words, the change between pitches – many parallels to 'Der Vogelfreie' become apparent. In fact, the first-person narrator is surrounded by sounds and noises foreign to him throughout the text, acoustic phenomena that carry frightening and even enslaving implications.

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'Der Vogelfreie' I refer to the printed edition of the manuscript in Weiss, *Werke*, vol. 1, pp. 145–219. In contrast to the original manuscript, this printed version has the title 'Der Fremde. Erzählung' [The Stranger: A Tale] in accordance with the 1980 edition of the text published by Suhrkamp under the pseudonym 'Sinclair': Sinclair, *Der Fremde. Erzählung* (Frankfurt am Main, 1980).

In one scene, for example, the city is described as a ‘Gigantenorchester mit wühlenden Schlagwerken’ [an orchestra of giants with tearing percussion], whereby the pavements turn into resonating stones of various shapes and sizes, stepped upon by dancing pedestrians referred to as ‘Leibeigene im Sägewerk der Rhythmen’ [serfs in the sawmill of rhythms]. Collectively, they produce a rhythmic musical work, which in turn imprisons them all.<sup>15</sup> Thus, acoustic phenomena are associated with a violent threat. In Dagerman’s short story, the curious, questioning crowd poses a similar physical threat to the former convict. The surrounding people are described as a roaring mass encircling him like prison guards; questions are posed simultaneously and the man has difficulties understanding individual voices, because of their speed and volume.<sup>16</sup> Another scene, in which the protagonist is crammed between a group of men into the back of a black car, stresses the link between physical threat and verbal interrogation to an even greater degree. A man sitting in the front of the car kneels over and looks at him with ‘en outröttlig, om pinsam energi vittande blick’ [an untiring and irritatingly earnest gaze]. Finally, he exclaims:

– Skönt att vara fri, sa mannen med pälsmössan, en underbar känsla, eh?

Skönt att vara fri? Underbart, eh? Han försökte få plats för armbågarna, men han satt i en bur av kött, han försökte sträcka på benen, men en bred brottarraygg tog emot. Han var inte så fri att han kunde hejda bilen och lämna alla dessa nyfikna, druckna eller snart druckna pratmakare och försvinna in i det rena, ensamma snöfallet, han var fri från en fångvaktare som hette Claracson och som två gånger under månaderna mellan rannsakingen och domen lockat honom att skriva brev till en medfånge och sedan angivit honom för att få straffa honom med en liten brun piska

15 Ibid., pp. 161–2.

16 ‘... den larmande hopen slöt sig tätt kring honom som en skara fångvaktare. De pratade i munnen på varann, ibland blev det tyst: de väntade att han skulle svara, men han hade vant sej av med röster i ensamheten och hade svårt att uppfatta vad de sa när de talade fort och högt.’ [... the clamorous crowd closed tightly round him like a bunch of prison warders. They were all talking at once, but sometimes fell silent: they were waiting for him to respond, but he had become used to no voices in his solitude and found it difficult to grasp what they said when they spoke quickly and loudly.] Dagerman, *Nattens lekar*, p. 257; ‘The Man Condemned to Death’, p. 22.

i fängelsets källare, han var fri från fyra gråa väggar och ett blått sprucket tak som ständigt dröp av fukt och spindlar, men han var inte fri från åtta män som pressade sina murar av kött och tjocka kläder mot honom i en stor svart bil.<sup>17</sup>

['Nice to be free,' said the man in the fur hat. 'A wonderful feeling, eh?']

Nice to be free? Wonderful, eh? He tried to find room for his elbows, but found himself in a cage of flesh. He tried stretching his legs, but was met with the broad back of a wrestler. He was not free enough to be able to stop the car and leave all these inquisitive, drunk or near-drunken chatterers and vanish into the clean lonely snow. He was free of a prison warder called Clarkson, who during the months between the trial and sentence had twice tempted him into writing letters to a fellow-prisoner and then denounced him in order to punish him in the prison basement with a small brown whip. He was free of four grey walls and a cracked blue ceiling constantly dripping with damp and spiders, but he was not free of eight men pressing their walls of flesh and thick clothing against him in a large black car.<sup>18</sup>

Important to note is the rhetorical mode of speech in this passage: the man posing the question seems rather to be stating an ironic fact, whereby his silent gaze prior to the exclamation adds to the situation's ominous atmosphere.

In a similar manner 'Der Vogelfreie' involves numerous passages where not only noises or sounds, but particularly speech embody some kind of threat to the first-person narrator. When he approaches the Lion asking for a job, the reply testifies to a similar rhetorical attitude to that embodied by Dagerman's front-seat man. The Lion exclaims: '– Ich dir helfen! ruft er. Ich dir helfen! Was bist du denn für einer? Zu mir zu kommen! Hierher in diese Stadt zu kommen! Warum grade hierher?' [– I help you! He shouts. I help you! What are you, anyway? To come to me! To come to this town! Why precisely to this place?]<sup>19</sup> The monological dialogue ridden by rhetorical question marks is radicalized, finally ending with actual bloodshed, linking speech to blood:

17 Dagerman, *Nattens lekar*, p. 256.

18 Dagerman, 'The Man Condemned to Death', p. 22.

19 Weiss, *Werke*, vol. 1, p. 154.

– Was der alles fragt! Bin ich vielleicht ein Auskunftsbüro? Kann ich vielleicht alles wissen? Frag mich was anderes! Du hättest mich in meinen früheren Tagen sehen sollen, da konnte ich noch Auskunft geben!

Und mit aufgeblähten Fäusten schlägt er in die Luft, dunkel wird sein Gesicht, ruckhaft zischt sein Mund. Ich fühle, wie es warm über meine Lippen rieselt. Wie ich die Hand an den Mund lege, ist sie rot besudelt. Die Nase blutet mir, nicht daß sie getroffen worden wäre, sie blutet nur aus Schwäche.<sup>20</sup>

[– Can you imagine what this guy asks! Am I supposed to be some kind of information office? Ask me something else! You should have seen me in my early days, back then I could really provide information!

And with bloated fists he hits in the air, his face turns dark, his mouth hisses jerkily. I feel something warm dripping over my lips. As I place my hand on my mouth, it is smeared in red. My nose is bleeding, not because it has been hit, it bleeds only out of weakness.]

Weiss's pairing of language with violence is not present only in 'Der Vogelfreie'. In an article on antisemitism and linguistic traumatization in the works of Franz Kafka, Victor Klemperer, Peter Weiss and Georges-Arthur Goldschmidt, Jenny Willner refers to an open letter to Hans Werner Richter, the leading figure of Gruppe 47, in which Weiss explains his reluctance to resettle in Germany: 'Ich höre einen Lehrer zu seiner Klasse sprechen, eine Mutter zu ihrem Kind, einen Mann zu seiner Frau, und schon liegt der ganze generationenalte Wust da von Strafe, Willensbrechung, Gehorsam, Patriarchalismus.' [I hear a teacher speak to his class, a mother to her child, a husband to his wife, and I immediately hear that generation-old mess of punishment, breaking of the will, obedience and patriarchalism.]<sup>21</sup> German, as it appears in Weiss's notebooks, is a language whose mere sound is threatening, according to Willner: 'För honom [Weiss] var rasförföljelsen förvarande närvarande i det tyska språkets klang, orden förorsakade destabiliserande upplevelser.' [For him

20 Ibid.

21 Peter Weiss, 'Unter dem Hirseberg', quoted by Jenny Willner, 'Men vi hör döden i orden. Antisemitism och språklig traumatisering hos Kafka, Klemperer, Weiss och Goldschmidt', in Helmut Müssener (ed.), *Språket, makten och härligheten. Fem föreläsningar* (Uppsala, 2011), p. 110.

[Weiss], racial persecutions were still present in the sound of German, its words caused destabilizing experiences.]<sup>22</sup> Weiss's relationship to the German language is therefore marked by a hypersensitivity to the ring of verbal expressions and their connotations.<sup>23</sup> This tendency is also evident in *Die Ästhetik des Widerstands*, where various interfering noises coincide with descriptions of language as both construct and threat, also shown by Willner in an article on Peter Weiss and Terézia Mora.<sup>24</sup>

My analysis of 'Der Vogelfreie' has traced this aesthetical practice back to Weiss's linguistic re-orientation in the late 1940s, and will hopefully contribute to a better understanding of his later, better-known literary works. But there is also a much more evident continuity between the early manuscript and his later artistic production. In fact, 'Der Vogelfreie' resurfaces in different shapes spanning his artistic career for over 30 years, from 1948 to 1980. In order to sketch this continuity, we need to briefly revisit the correspondence between Weiss and Suhrkamp.

In his reply to Weiss's letter and manuscript, the publisher stated that he found the text too abstract and self-absorbed to be considered for publication, and consequently that he had to turn it down.<sup>25</sup> This however did not stop Weiss from publishing it. A year later a Swedish translation was made by Weiss himself, entitled 'Dokument I', which was published in an author's edition, all in all 350 copies. Finally, at a time when Weiss had been an established author, playwright and public figure for three decades, the text was published at Suhrkamp with a new title, 'Der Fremde. Erzählung' [The Stranger: A Tale] under the pseudonym 'Sinclair' – in all likelihood a homage to Herman Hesse's novel *Demian*.<sup>26</sup>

22 Willner, 'Men vi hör döden i orden', p. 111.

23 Ibid., pp. 110–11.

24 Jenny Willner, 'Störgeräusche. Grenzerscheinungen der Sprache bei Peter Weiss und Terézia Mora', in Jürgen Schutte et al. (eds), *Peter Weiss: Grenzgänger zwischen den Künsten* (Frankfurt am Main, 2007), pp. 149–65.

25 Unseld/Weiss, *Briefwechsel*, pp. 13–6.

26 Sinclair, *Der Fremde. Erzählung*. See note 14. Hesse's novel *Demian* was initially published in 1919 under the pseudonym 'Emil Sinclair', followed by an edition without pseudonym: Hermann Hesse, *Demian. Die Geschichte von Emil Sinclairs Jugend* (Berlin, 1920).

But the most intriguing development of the manuscript was Weiss's adaptation of it into the motion picture *Hägringen* [The Mirage], filmed in 1958 and premiered the following year.<sup>27</sup> The making of *Hägringen* took place during a period in Weiss's artistic production characterized by work in various artistic fields: writing prose in Swedish and in German, making avant-garde films and producing collages. In 1948, in parallel with the publication of the Dagerman translation and 'Der Vogelfreie' being sent to Suhrkamp, Weiss's draft for a short film entitled 'Början' [The Beginning] was published in the cinematic journal *Biografbladet*.<sup>28</sup> The narrative differs somewhat from that of 'Der Vogelfreie', but the thematic similarity is striking: acoustic effects, punishments and feelings of alienation are interlinked and organize the story as a whole. The fact that this cinematic draft was intended to be screened also sheds new light upon 'Der Vogelfreie' and its focus on acoustics. In the following concluding notes on *Hägringen*, I would like to develop this intermedial connection.

In the book *Avantgardefilm*, written by Weiss three years before the first screening of *Hägringen*, he shows a particular interest for the use of music in filmmaking. The chapter 'Filmisk musik' [Filmic music] passionately argues for making music, a term which Weiss here tends to equate with sounds and noises, an integral part of the filmic artwork, as opposed to the conventional role of music as mere ornament or illustration.<sup>29</sup> With reference to a number of American avant-garde films that employ sounds, noises and fragments of music in their narrative, Weiss calls for 'en sorts inresekretorisk musik' [a sort of new inner-secretory music] to be developed in the sphere of avant-garde filmmaking.<sup>30</sup> The curious choice of words – 'inner secretory' stems from the sphere of medical anatomy – points to Weiss's tendency to link sounds and noises with the inner corporal sphere; a link also evident in the physically violent conversation between the narrator and the Lion in 'Der Vogelfreie'. Weiss's description of Sidney Peterson's

27 Peter Weiss (dir.), *Hägringen*, perf. Staffan Lamm, Gunilla Palmstierna, Birger Åsander, Lars Edström, Tor-Ivan Odul [Film] (Stockholm, 1959).

28 Peter Weiss, 'Början. Skiss till kortfilm', *Biografbladet* 2 (1947), pp. 93–7.

29 Peter Weiss, 'Filmisk musik', in *Avantgardefilm* (Stockholm, 1956), pp. 125–9.

30 *Ibid.*, p. 128.

short film *The Lead Shoes* (1949) illustrates this corporeal connection Weiss claims to identify, which is also revealing for his own filmic practice:

I Petersons *The lead shoes* är den brutalt deformerade bildvärlden uppfylld av orgias-tiska klangkaskader; det hamrar, sjuder och skriker i själens ekogrotta – rösterna är förvrängda, de sjunger besvärjelser – den stampande takten är som en primitiv ritual – ljudet tycks sammanhänga med det dunkande hjärtat och det susande blodet.<sup>31</sup>

[In Peterson's *The Lead Shoes* the brutally deformed imagery is charged with orgiastic clang cascades; pounding, seething and screaming in the echo chamber of the soul – the voices are distorted, they sing chants – the stomping beat resembling a primitive ritual – the sound seems connected to the beating heart and the hissing blood.]

In *Hägringen*, because of the filmic medium, Weiss has the chance to use actual sounds, noises and song in order to accentuate the acoustic thematic of the literary precursor 'Der Vogelfreie'.

*Hägringen* opens with a view of a cornfield covered in fog. The camera slowly moves along a road next to the field, accompanied by the sound of footsteps, the twittering of birds and a mumbling, singing voice, belonging to the film's main actor Staffan Lamm. In fact, Weiss lets Lamm's character sing an old American folksong, 'Come and Go With Me To That Land', famously interpreted by the legendary Blues singer Odetta Holmes as part of her 'Freedom Trilogy', one of the tracks on the record *Odetta Sings Ballads and Blues* (1956).<sup>32</sup> The lyrics, as sung by the young man in the film, correspond to Odetta's version:

Come and go with me to that land  
Come and go with me to that land  
Come and go with me to that land  
Where I'm bound

There's no kneeling in that land  
There's no kneeling in that land  
There's no kneeling in that land  
Where I'm bound

31 Ibid.

32 Odetta Holmes, 'Freedom Trilogy', *Odetta Sings Ballads and Blues* [LP] (n.p., 1956).

Weiss was at this point in time influenced by blues music, which two entries in his notebooks attest: one mentions the legendary American blues singer and guitar player Huddie William Ledbetter (1888–1949) – commonly known as Leadbelly –, and another describes Weiss's meeting in Paris with his friend Hugh Satterfield in the end of the 1950s: 'Ich traf ihn Ende der Fünfzigerjahre in Paris, in jenem Herbst, als wir bis zur Bewußtlosigkeit Miles Davis, Odetta und Sarah Vaughan spielten.' [I met him in the end of the 50s in Paris, during that autumn when we listened to Miles Davis, Odetta and Sarah Vaughan almost into oblivion].<sup>33</sup>

Weiss's reference in *Hägringen* to the blues tradition, with its origins in the work songs sung by black fugitives in the American South, is of particular significance when seen in the context of Weiss's persistent pairing in his literary texts of language and violence, acoustics and threats. By letting the protagonist entering the hostile city sing the blues song, Weiss inscribes him into an American musical tradition sprung from racial oppression and slavery. As Robert Switzer writes in his article 'Signifying the Blues', blues music has strong elements of protest, dating back to the secular songs 'of the slavery and early post-slavery eras', including so called 'work songs', as for example practised in a 'chain gang'.<sup>34</sup> The songs' practical function was to 'synchronize the efforts of workers', and was thus condoned by the white prison guards and slave owners.<sup>35</sup> More important, though, was the songs' subversive potential as a last resort of protest for the convicts:

[W]ork songs ... participated in a general trend of using song for social comment and protest. In part, this is expressed through the music: the rhythmic interaction and continual interplay of the call and response pattern make this music a participatory social activity of a unique kind. The words too were generally an improvisatory mode of 'signifying'. As Hirsch writes, 'The singer creates a mask of address to the

33 'Leadbelly negro sång [sic]', in Peter Weiss, *Die Notizbücher: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, ed. Jürgen Schutte, Wiebke Amthor and Jenny Willner [CD-ROM] (Berlin, 2006), pp. 16209 and 12632.

34 Robert Switzer, 'Signifying the Blues', *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics* 21 (2001), p. 46.

35 Edward Hirsch, 'Reverberations of a Work Song', *The American Poetry Review* 28:2 (1999), p. 43. Quoted by Switzer, p. 46.

so-called “captain”, the white boss, and at the same time satirizes and undercuts that very voice, thus building morale by subversively talking back to power’ (a well known example is the song ‘Take This Hammer’).<sup>36</sup>

Recalling the parallel drawn between Dagerman’s convicted and freed man and Weiss’s linguistic prison in ‘Der Vogelfreie’, a metaphorical connection between chains and language, oppression and expression, is created by the lonesome blues singer, the linguistically outlawed outsider approaching the hostile city in *Hägringen*. By letting Lamm sing the tunes of the oppressed, however, Weiss evidently also wishes to create a subversive aesthetics powerful enough to strike back, and through, the linguistic bars. Still, the utopian land invoked by the singer, where no one has to kneel in humility, is also a land to which he is ‘bound’, both destined to and tied down.<sup>37</sup> Interpreted in the context of Weiss’s linguistic re-orientation, the land of the new language thus still posits an ambiguous threat to the outsider. If the function of the work song according to Switzer is to subvert oppression into morale by satire, Weiss’s evocations of the blues instead seem to testify to a state of doubled isolation: either you are outside language as an outlaw, or you are inside, incarcerated.

36 Switzer, ‘Signifying the Blues’, p. 46. Hirsch, ‘Reverberations of a Work Song’, p. 43.

37 My thanks to Aris Fioretos for pointing out the ambiguity of Odetta’s lyrics to me.