On Reconstructing One’s Abode: Peter Weiss on Auschwitz

When a publisher asked several well-known German writers to write about the place where they felt most at home, the German-Swedish writer Peter Weiss wrote a nine-page text called “My Abode.” The pronoun “my” suggests his own quite special relation to the place he chose. All other sites and places are for Weiss “blind spots and only one place, where I was for only one day, remains.” The place was Auschwitz and the day Weiss speaks of was December 13, 1964. That day he visited the holocaust camp in connection with the so-called Auschwitz trial in Frankfurt, which he attended as an auditor.

In his retrospective text about “the place I was destined for but escaped,” Weiss describes his encounter with the past during the hours he toured the camp area in the damp December mist. He inventories the mechanisms of Nazi terror and at the same time gives an exact topographical description of Auschwitz with its crematoria, gas chambers and other places of execution and torture. In his introduction he says that the abode he himself chose, nearly twenty years after the end of the war, is “unchangeable.” What he now sees in front of him in Auschwitz are “noisy freight trains,” “air that is heavy with drizzle,” “overgrown roads,” “bare trees,” “soot-covered factories surrounded by barbed wire and brick walls.” He sees as well a dead zone with tracks leading away “over empty fields to the end of the world.” The associations of what he hears intensify his visual impressions: “The jangling and rolling of the freight trains, the puffing of the locomotives’ smokestacks, their long drawn-out whistles, are constantly present.”

Present and past come together in the experience of the camp. The merging of what is and what was is especially evident in the passages that describe his impressions of nature, such as the following: “The sun, close to the horizon, breaks through the clouds and is reflected in the windows of the guard towers. To the right and left of the platform’s end there are clumps of ruins among the trees, the poplars by the fence behind the ruins are unmoving, far away in a farmyard geese cluck. To the right, a little forest of birch trees. In my mind’s eye I see an image of the women and children who had sat down there to wait, one woman holds an infant to her breast, and farther away a group moves off to the underground chambers.”
But in describing the camp and what happened there, Weiss doesn’t try to recreate what the people of the Holocaust experienced “then,” but instead takes what he had read as his point of departure for his description of his own encounter with the past in the “present.” He states: “One of the living has come but for the living what happened here is inaccessible.” He knows exactly which scenes were enacted at the notorious loading platform – “the ramp” – but he notes as well that grass grows now between the railway ties and on the coarse gravel that covers them.

On the one hand, it is evident that Weiss reconstructs Auschwitz out of the ruins of his “home” as a locus terribilis, a static mental landscape. In this landscape nature’s processes have come to a standstill, transformed into a military-bureaucratic residue whose only purpose is to foster death. This place is the polar opposite, for example, of Astrid Lindgren’s Swedish idyll, where people and animals live together harmoniously in the natural cycle of the seasons.

On the other hand, Weiss evokes his own state of mind when he reconstructs this landscape. Everything he’s read about Auschwitz and what happened there “says nothing, explains nothing. Only piles of stone remain, overgrown by grass.” He describes what he sees, but he doesn’t know how it really was. What he encounters is only “silence and the stillness of death.”

But parallel with the reconstruction of what Weiss sees as a dead landscape of remembrance and his reflections on this locus terribilis, a new consciousness comes into focus in his observations not only of “the present” but also of disintegration and nature’s progress in the ruins of the camp, especially in the buildings that were the inferno of the gas chambers: “These stone hollows, to which stairways led that millions of feet wore down, are turning back into sand and earth, resting peacefully under the sinking sun.” He notes, as well, among the laughing and playing schoolchildren on a field trip, a girl who “runs along a long dug-out track.” He identifies this track as “the one along which corpses slid in garbage carts.” Death’s former slide has now become a playground for the living. But Weiss’s observation is not only a representation of what happens at one moment in one place but also an image of the transformation of the vision of Auschwitz that takes place in his consciousness.
In this mental process of transformation the terse descriptions of nature in Auschwitz mediate between the past and the future. Thus Weiss shows in his reconstruction of his “abode” that nature’s cycles have not ceased, but continue to function in the “present,” in the real Auschwitz, “which now sinks back into the swampy ground.” He sees as well that there can also be a place for childish innocence in the experience of this dwelling place of terror.

It is at the point of convergence of the observations of nature, “the present,” and his identification with “the past,” that Weiss reconceives his individual self and his own history as a completely new “future” landscape of life. It is this new landscape that gives his chosen “abode” a meaning, in spite of everything.

This is how one should understand Weiss’s concluding words, when he ceases to speak in the first person and begins to speak in the third. “Now he stands in what is only a sunken world. He can accomplish nothing more here. For a while the most complete silence reigns. Then he knows that it’s not over.” In these sentences it is clear that a personal identification with Auschwitz exists, but that the ruins of the real landscape of terror can never be anything but “a sunken world.” Precisely for this reason, Auschwitz is for Weiss a cipher that is considerably “more than a setting.” It is a place where he understands that he cannot do anything for those who were annihilated there, but at the same time knows that “it’s not over.” He will never be able to shake off the images that have been projected onto this abode, they are a central and constant subtext in his entire authorship. Indeed, Auschwitz is, as he himself puts it, “a fixed point in the topography of his life,” but after the visit of Auschwitz his engagement will no longer concern the dead, the ones he cannot help, but all of the living who are weak, marginalized, and oppressed in our world.