

‘Staying Anxious’: Encountering Ulrike Meinhof in Silvia Kolbowski’s *A Few Howls Again?*

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“A sort of walking miracle, my skin/ Bright as a Nazi lampshade/ My right foot/ A paperweight./ My face a featureless, fine Jew linen./ Peel off the napkin/ O my enemy. Do I terrify?——”. So declares the female narrator of Sylvia Plath’s poem *Lady Lazarus*, who, identifying herself with Jewish suffering in what we might take as a gesture of profound imaginative trespass or one of profound ethical attentiveness, ascends from the grave to rail against the repressive machinery of the Fascist State. “Herr Lucifer/ Beware/ Beware./ Out of the ash/ I rise with my red hair/ And I eat men like air” she proclaims, with a morbid and ferocious energy that moves perilously close to the tormentor’s own rage-filled rhetoric; so, whilst claiming retrospective allegiance to the Jewish victim, lashing out against the memory of an oppressive past and the assaultive rituals of state terror, she also forges, at the level of fantasy and via the imaginative trajectory of the voice, a vexed identification with the Nazi perpetrator; a perpetrator whose crimes she springs from death to avenge. The body returned, the subject revived, *Lady Lazarus* conjures the spectral figure of the speaking corpse, a figure whose attribution of voice and consciousness enables her strident return to the land of the living and to the identificatory lures and dark imaginings of a psyche in troubled times. For performing her own fraught relation to a recent and violent history, the corpse of *Lady Lazarus* also testifies to the identifications – those terrifying or idealized “revenants of the unconscious”¹, phantasmal relics from the past – that in George Eliot’s words, “moved within her like ghosts”.² (Identification is, as Diana Fuss reminds us, a ghostly affair: to “be open to an identification, is to be open to a death encounter, open to the very possibility of communing with the dead”).³ There are some ghosts that refuse to lie down, that trip and sway across our political identities and destinies, and - whether consciously summoned or appearing unheralded like the return of the repressed – find their way back to haunt, stalk and unsettle the precarious mental topographies of political and cultural life.

Developed in response to what the artist has characterized as the “near-complete breakdown of democratic institutions in the U.S [...] and to the rise of a kind of corporate/fascist condition here”, Silvia Kolbowski’s 2010 video project, *A Few Howls Again?* is haunted by one such fantasy of resurrection; a fantasy in which the human cadaver is made the subject of prosopopoeiac speech, abandoning silence and deathly repose to enter an anxiously liminal realm of exchange and intention. For in *A Few Howls Again?*, ‘Ulrike Meinhof’, the journalist and notorious founding member of the radical left wing group, the Red Army Faction, stages a return; she rises; her corpse revived by the vitalizing agency of the voice – in the form of captions with recurring sequences and incantatory phrasing (“I had the feeling that my head was exploding”; “I had the feeling that the cell was moving”) – and by the erratic corporeal rhythms of a representational double, whose living and breathing body lodges and calls forth the West German militant, or rather, the many effigies - the voices - that speak in her name. Meinhof’s arrival on the scene is far from smooth; this is not a blithely optimistic or redemptive dream of reanimation and regained utterance. Her mutely speechifying corpse (we witness her visibly speaking mouth, the gestural specificity of her speech, yet there is no audible vocal emission) is weary, introspective, one might even say, anxious. Beleaguered by the relentless voices of the living: “since my death I haven’t been allowed to rest either”, “even after my death, they declared war on me”: which, in their attempts to assign some singular origin to Meinhof’s turn to violent protest, bombard their target with an endless and punishing scrutiny: “she was a cold-blooded sociopath”, “she wasn’t strong enough”, “she couldn’t see reality clearly”, “she had an unfulfilled need for love”, “she was irrational”; Meinhof’s agonized cadaver in fact beats a hasty if somewhat awkward retreat from the frenetic noise of the living and the beat, beat, beat of its accusation and blame.

Indeed, as if in flight from her own reanimation, Meinhof’s corpse - rematerialized in the body of the living actress - soon resumes the position of deathly fixity and secure remove that Gerhard Richter immortalized in his series of paintings, *October 18, 1977* only to return – through the video’s looped repetition – shortly thereafter to life,

¹ Diana Fuss, *Identification Papers: Readings on Psychoanalysis, Sexuality, and Culture*, Routledge, 1995, p.1

² George Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, William Blackwood and Sons, 1876, p.94.

³ Diana Fuss, *Identification Papers: Readings on Psychoanalysis, Sexuality, and Culture*, Routledge, 1995, p.1

recovering her tentative bodily mobility and first-person narrative voice: “My name was Meinhof; first name, Ulrike. Mention of my name is always accompanied by the word ‘terrorist’; some insist I was murdered; others insist I committed suicide; I died”. Repeatedly gaining life only to lose it again, Meinhof is uncannily revived and reauthorized as a lurching and somewhat helpless Lazarean figure; her juddering and interrupted gait testifying to her having “passed through death and [been] born from death” whose “sensory-motor disturbances” she retains.⁴ Via the video’s stop-photo ‘animation’ technique, which holds the same frame on the screen for an extended period, ...and then the next, ...and then the next, Meinhof is pinned within an unsettling space of suspended animation: repeatedly awakened and then abruptly repressed, made mobile then immobilized, this disquieting collision of stasis and movement - of photographic stillness and cinematic flow - enforces a tense rhythm of suspense and anticipation, or a kind of “dreading forward”, to borrow a phrase novelist Henry Green coined to describe the affective tenor of an anticipatory future tense.⁵ Here too, we are caught within an interminably anxious temporality; caught, gripped, by the rhythmic pulse of the work’s perpetual freezing and unfreezing, its disjointed forward motion of inanimate stills, and the equally disjointed forward motion of Meinhof’s cadaver, as she is propelled – via the limited sequence of frames and their ‘petrified analogue’ of movement - into an evermore intimate, and unsettling, proximity with the viewing subject.

“Dread is just memory in the future tense”, wrote the psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott, and this enunciation might be taken as an apposite structural and thematic principle of *A Few Howls Again?*⁶ For the work’s mnemonic return to a traumatizing political history is impelled, also, by a certain modality of anticipation, an anxious temporality that – I would like to suggest - unlike the rigid unidirectional watchfulness of paranoia, affectively anticipates a traumatic futurity without necessarily scripting, or aggressively preempting, its course.⁷ Freud ascribes a peculiar temporality to anxiety, which he characterizes as “a particular state of expecting the danger and preparing for it [...] It is on the one hand an expectation of trauma, and on the other a repetition of it in mitigated form”. Anxiety is, then, riven by a doubled temporality; directing itself to the past and the future, it is ‘Janus-faced’; it “says” to the subject – the evocative ventriloquial tone is Freud’s own: “I am expecting a situation of helplessness to set in [...] The present situation reminds me of one of the traumatic experiences I have had before. Therefore I will anticipate the trauma and behave as though it had already come, while there is yet time to turn aside”.⁸ For Freud, then, staying anxious carries with it a certain psychic and political utility; it becomes a way of ensuring the mind can effectively endure – and respond accordingly to – the painful realities of contemporary life; conveying a protective ‘signal’ which alerts the ego to an impending menace, it is “a way of staying in relation to history without being consumed by it”.⁹ However, whilst guarding the ego against the threat of present and future anguishes, staying with anxiety can also plunge the psyche into disarray, shattering its boundaries and defenses, dismantling it from within: for in so far as the ‘warning’ anxiety delivers is predicated on the return to an earlier, analogically related trauma, keeping anxious risks thrusting the ego into a state of intolerable powerlessness, despairing contrition and potentially immobilizing anxiety anew; it risks reproducing the very condition the psyche is striving to react against.

This scripting of anxiety - and its distinctive historiography - resonates powerfully with the West German narrative of repressive politics, ‘blocked mourning’ and violent resistance that *A Few Howls Again?* revisits. For gripped by the looming anticipation of the Nazi past repeating itself, haunted by the failures of the extra-parliamentary Left, and witness to the increasing curtailment of civil liberties and militarized violence unleashed by the German State, Meinhof and the RAF were facing to the past and the future; they were entangled in, were responding to, were aggressively defending against, a profoundly anxious historicity: “The fascist state is planning to kill us all. We have to organize resistance ... we have to take action...” – was Gudrun Ensslin’s urgent assessment of the need to

⁴ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta, University of Minnesota Press, 1989, pp.207 - 208.

⁵ Henry Green, *London and Fire 1940*, quoted in Lyndsey Stonebridge, *The Writing of Anxiety: Imagining Wartime in Mid-Century British Culture*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2007, p.1.

⁶ Donald Winnicott, quoted by Margaret Little, 1985.

⁷ I am thinking, here, of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*, Duke University Press, 2003, and her theorising of a future-oriented paranoid practice: “No time could be too early for one’s having already known, for its having-already-been inevitable, that something bad would happen. And no loss could be too far in the future to need to be preemptively discounted ... There must be no bad surprises.” pp.130-1.

⁸ Freud, *Ibid.*

⁹ Lyndsey Stonebridge, *The Writing of Anxiety*, 2007, p.4.

forestall – by mobilizing defenses, seizing the moment and acting now – the fascist fervour that continued to lurk beneath the “hollow” façade of the federal government. “Police truncheons, hasty arrests, and administrative measures” ... “I really see no difference left between the police terrorist methods we have already seen in Berlin and that threaten us now, and the terrorism of the SA in the 1930s” announced a pre-underground Meinhof, who sensed – in the aftermath of the brutal repression of student protests in 1968 – the fascist endeavor returning with an alarming alacrity.¹⁰ If the new federal democracy was cast in the role of Nazi aggressor, then Meinhof and the protestors had become its new target; they had - to quote Adorno - “taken on a bit of the role of the Jews”.¹¹ Stalked by the murderous memory of Nazi crimes, and fearing - indeed, *already detecting* - their horrific repetition in the political present, Meinhof and the RAF were facing a “recognized, remembered, expected, situation of helplessness”¹², they were, to invoke Winnicott’s evocative phrase, ‘remembering in the future tense’: anxiously mapping the trajectory of an imminent future in the contours of a traumatic past, and implementing the necessary defensive measures, taking the necessary action, to ensure against catastrophe.

A Few Howls Again? is awash with anxious affect; enmeshed in the temporal paradoxes of anxiety and its logic of retrospective anticipation, it places the “anxiety of powerlessness” at its core: “In this project”, Kolbowski explains, “it was particularly important for me to present the spectator with a historical event that had a contemporary resonance – as if to say, look, this is one response of the powerless, or this is one response to governmental hypocrisy that is so much like our own ... I was drawn to the Baader Meinhof by trying to think through a sense of powerlessness that can feel maddening, and by reflecting on what responses can arise from that”.¹³ For Melanie Klein at least, the experience of unbearable powerlessness and the anticipation of acute negative affect is likely to mobilise the most regressive mental mechanisms and psychotic modes of behavior: for in its urgent attempts to evade anxiety’s persecutory or depressive charge, the ego – in what Klein calls the paranoid-schizoid position - responds with an artillery of defenses intended to “distort, deny and denigrate the awareness of our helplessness”.¹⁴ Within this account, failing to tolerate or attempting to “resolve” anxiety too quickly or with too much conviction, risks letting loose the schizoid derealisations of mania; it can result in the subject relating to her world via the defensive modes of splitting, projective identification, omnipotence and denial; can result, in fact, in the subject waging her own “war of psychic terror on the world”.¹⁵ When experienced as overwhelming or unmanageable, the “anxiety of powerlessness” – following this ‘scandalous’ Kleinian trajectory – is likely, via the ego’s unrelenting efforts to ward off the feeling, to engender the most primitive and unyielding of psychic and political states.

With their increasingly ruthless and intractable message of dissent, their absolutist worldview, and extreme emotional binarism, Meinhof and the RAF resonate tragically with the question posed recently by Jacqueline Rose: how can the dispossessed, mired in anxiety, “claim their legitimate rights without taking on the psychic trappings of the oppressor?” Without, that is, regressing to the manic defenses, those rigid modalities of thought and behaviour which, driven by a fierce self-righteousness and militant resolve, banish anxiety by providing a sense of mastery in the face of a ‘powerlessness that can feel maddening’. In stark contrast to the more nuanced statements selected for *A Few Howls Again?* and scripted by Meinhof in the years prior to the Faction’s formation, the RAF’s slogans and gestures were increasingly brutal and triumphalist in tone: “We delight in the death of every cop that gets killed”; “The guy in uniform is a swine not a person”; “Either you are part of the problem or part of the solution. There is nothing in between”.¹⁶ For many on the West German Left, it was this narrowed mindset, rhetorical cruelty and anti-theoretical stance, that evidenced a kind of “totalitarianist” zeal or Leftist Fascism: it was as if, to quote the writer Klaus Theweleit, “the spirit of their parents’ generation they had tried to escape from, had slipped back into them in a kind of reversed exorcism”; as if, in their project of announcing and defending against the scenario of fascist

¹⁰ Ulrike Meinhof, quoted in Stefan Aust, *Baader-Meinhof: The Inside Story of the RAF*, Oxford University Press, 2009., p.xiv.

¹¹ Theodor Adorno quoted in Wolfgang Kraushaar. *Frankfurter Schule und Studentenbewegung: Von der Flaschen-post zum Molotowcocktail 1946-1995* 3, Hamburg, 1998, p.254.

¹² Freud, *Inhibitions*, p..92.

¹³ Kolbowski, 7th February, 2011.

¹⁴ Rachael Peltz, ‘The Manic Society’, in *Psychoanalysis, Class and Politics: Encounters in the Clinical Setting*, Lynne Layton et al (editors), Routledge, 2006, p.68

¹⁵ Stonebridge, *The Writing of Anxiety*, 2007, p.45

¹⁶ Holger Meins, quoted in *Changing the World, Changing Oneself: Political Protest and Collective Identities in West Germany and the U.S. in the 1960s and 1970s*, edited by Belinda Davis, Wilfried Mausbach, Martin Klimke and Carle Macdougall, p.184.

oppression, they had *internalized* the “oppressor”, assuming his quality and character as the only way to ensure his defeat. The dogmatic fervour and analytical reductionism that feature in Meinhof’s underground pronouncements are conspicuously absent from *A Few Howls Again?* Instead we encounter statements selected from her incisive, passionately argued journalism and from the later, viscerally-descriptive prison writings.

We are presented with an ‘Ulrike Meinhof’ who, in Kolbowski’s striking words, “says what I would like her to say. I have used some quotations and historical extrapolations, but she is my puppet, of course ... I’m pulling the strings”. So if the intervallic structure of the video creates - through its stalled succession of photographic stills - the effect of blinking, a delay or gap between images that corresponds to the closing of an eye, then here we can detect another register of blindness, a certain *blindspot*. For the boundless triumphalism and blindness to otherness, that marks Meinhof’s militant declarations is - as the artist has noted - missing, ... omitted, ... overlooked. Speaking instead from a position of grievance, as the tragic victim of a brutal and authoritarian state apparatus, Meinhof’s anxious corpse invites an empathic investment from the viewing subject; and thereby calls attention to the limits - and perils - of a more discomfiting identification: with a ‘Ulrike Meinhof’ resurfaced as vindictive and violent perpetrator: a position one is usually prepared to consider “only on condition of seeing [it] as something in which, psychically no less than historically, [one] plays absolutely no part.” For such gestures of ‘radical empathy’ would be decidedly fraught and formidably affective; would risk plunging the subject into a profoundly, perhaps intolerably anxious psychic space. In conspicuously absenting Meinhof’s violent militancy, *A Few Howls Again?* anxiously acknowledges that endeavoring to enter the mind of the perpetrator is sometimes deemed to risk one identification too far.

“The project is an incitement to understand the militancy of others and to dwell on one’s sense of powerlessness – something that is much easier to be in denial about”, the artist proclaims. Calling for the viewer - repeatedly, insistently - to “dwell on powerlessness”, to remain exposed to anxiety’s affective charge and not to seek resolution too swiftly or with too much conviction, Kolbowski’s injunction - it seems to me - far from counseling a stance of resigned passivity, bleak inertia or quietest despair, is used to summon another component of the Freudian model of anxiety: its “attentiveness” and apparent gesture of ‘keeping vigil’, of remaining critically alert. For we recall that within Freud’s account, tarrying with anxiety – dwelling within the contours of a pervasively anxious psychic space - is figured as a practical and purposive response to an expected (perhaps already present) danger; identifying the possible threat, locating the “direction and nature of the external stimuli”, this process is oriented both to “the past, since [the ego] cannot imagine or envisage the danger without recurring to memory and reproducing analogous situations; and to the future, since precisely the danger is always yet to come”.¹⁷ Backpedalling across the traumas of Germany’s political past, *A Few Howls Again?* registers the ceaseless, vigilant energy of “dreading forward” - towards the possibility of a traumatizing political history repeating itself; towards the possibility that one’s words, like Meinhof’s, will fall on deaf ears. It testifies (like the RAF) that to be caught in anxious, watchful anticipation of a real and imminent danger is to bear witness, also, to the return of past traumas - the return of those ghosts, or “revenants of the unconscious”, that anxiously stalk our inner landscapes, and ‘refuse to lie down’.

Anxiety, *A Few Howls Again?* reminds us, never simply intrudes on the subject from the external world of real, concrete events; or emerges, equally simply, from the realm of unconscious phantasy as a form of privatised, internalised Angst; it refuses the rigid polarity of inside and outside that so frequently becomes, as Jacqueline Rose has observed, the “guarantor of political space”¹⁸, and is so frequently invoked - just as rigidly - in assessments of Meinhof’s turn to armed protest. We must, then, acknowledge that anxiety “has no proper place”¹⁹; that there is never just an outside attacking an inside, but an anxious self burdened by the traumatic remnants of its own - and our collective - psychic and political histories.

¹⁷ Weber, *Towards a Politics*, page 29.

¹⁸ Rose, *Why War?*, p.104.

¹⁹ Samuel Weber, *The Legend of Freud*, University of Minnesota Press, 1982, p.96.