Lost in Isolation: Ulrike Meinhof’s Body in Poetry

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Abstract

This essay investigates the political and strategic deployment of somatic vocabulary in Ulrike Meinhof’s letter/poem which she wrote while incarcerated in solitary confinement in Köln-Ossendorf Prison in 1972. It links the bodily dissociation described in the poem with the breakdown of syntax, identity, and self-perception. Meinhof’s poem brings the fragmented body into language—a language of repetitions, syntactic disruptions, parataxis, fragmentation, linguistic disorientation, and violent disassociation. The physical and psychic pain experienced in isolation and the imagery of the suffering body conjured up in the poem, suggest—especially to a German post-war audience—haunting associations with the Holocaust and the National Socialist treatment of unwanted persons and prisoners.

The feeling your head is exploding (the feeling the top of your skull should really tear apart, burst wide open)—
The feeling your spinal column is pressing into your brain—
The feeling your brain is gradually shriveling up, like baked fruit—
The feeling you’re completely and surreptitiously wired, under remote control—
The feeling the associations you make are being hacked away—
The feeling you are pissing the soul out of your body, as though you can’t hold water—
The feeling the cell is moving. You wake up, open your eyes: the cell is moving; in the afternoon when the sun comes in, it suddenly stops. You can’t get rid of the feeling of moving. You can’t figure out if you’re trembling from fever or from cold—you can’t figure out why you’re trembling—you’re freezing.
Speaking at a normal volume requires efforts as if you were shouting, almost yelling—
The feeling you’re growing mute—
You can no longer identify what words mean, you can only guess—
The sounds sibilants make—s, tz, z, sch, ch—are absolutely unbearable—
Wardens, visitors, yard, all seem to be made of celluloid—
Headaches—
Flashes—
Sentence structure, grammar, syntax—are out of control. When you write, just two lines, you can hardly remember the beginning of the first line when you finish the second—
The feeling of burning out inside—
The feeling that if you said what is going on, if you let that out, it would be like splashing boiling water into another person's face, boiling drinking water that would scald him for life, disfigure him—
Raging aggression, for which there is no outlet. That’s the worst. The clear awareness that you don’t have a hope of surviving; the utter failure to communicate that; visits leave no trace. Half an hour later you can only mechanically reconstruct whether the visit took place today or last week—
But having a bath once a week means thawing for a moment, and can last a few hours—
The feeling that time and space are encapsulated within each other—
The feeling of being in a room of distorting mirrors—
Staggering—
Afterwards, terrifying euphoria that you’re hearing something—besides the acoustic difference between day and night—
The feeling that time is flowing away, your brain is expanding again, your spinal column slipping back—down for weeks.
The feeling you’ve been flayed.

MEINHOF 2008: 78f

Above poem was written by Ulrike Meinhof, the journalist-turned-terrorist, co-founder of the Red Army Faction (RAF), and one of the most-wanted women in German history. Meinhof was captured in June 1972 after two years on the run and an intense wo/man hunt. She was incarcerated in Cologne-Ossendorf prison in an isolation cell located in a special isolated wing of the prison where no sounds from the outside or inside of the prison could be heard and no one could be seen. Meinhof was excluded from prison activities, was not allowed contact with other prisoners, and was subjected to visual controls by guards through a peephole every 15 minutes. The furnishings in her cell were almost

1 For the German original, please see the Appendix at the end of this chapter and Brückner (2001: 152f).

2 Founded in 1970, the RAF was a terrorist group that grew out of the militant segment of the 1968 protest movement. Its violent activities included murder, kidnappings and bank robberies. By 1972, the major protagonists—the so-called first generation of RAF—were captured. The second generation escalated the violence, culminating in the violence of the German autumn 1977. For a history of the RAF, see Aust (2009) and Peters (2011).