

**Pre-Visions of Terror/After-Images of Love.
Gudrun Ensslin, Bernward Vesper and the Roots of West German Terrorism.**

Thomas Krüger

Synopsis

This paper examines the pre-life of West German terrorism through the recently published correspondence between Bernward Vesper and Gudrun Ensslin, *Notstandsgesetze von Deiner Hand* (2009). I claim that as historical and literary documents, these texts offer a unique insight into the relationship between art and the historiography of West German terrorism before its climax in the 1970s. This historiography is heading backwards into the future, while surveying the destruction and barbarism of the past, while the personal and public spheres collide. Using the concept of the after-image, the essay analyzes the narrative residue of that collision.

Biography

Thomas Krüger is part-time professor of German at the University of Ottawa. His research focuses on the West German student movement after 1968. He is author of: "... *macht die blaue Blume rot!*" Bernward Vesper's *Die Reise* and the Roots of the 'New Subjectivity'" in the July 2011 issue of *Seminar*.

Essay

The most conspicuous lacuna in the recently published correspondence of Bernward Vesper and Gudrun Ensslin is the missing discussion of the significance of the Frankfurt department store fire-bombing.¹ This incident is the foundational act of what would later become the Red Army Faction (RAF) in which Gudrun Ensslin played a crucial and active role, and clearly marks a fragmentation of the 1960s protest movement, as a small group shifted its means of protest toward terrorism. In a 1968 response to this shift, Ulrike Meinhof, not yet in the underground or even associated with terrorism writes in her column in the widely read left-wing journal *konkret*: "[t]he progressive aspects of setting fire to a department store do not lie in the destruction of goods, but in the criminal act, in breaking the law" (Meinhof 246). The action was meant to shake people into awareness of the Vietnam War; it was an idealist protest, which as Karin Bauer points out resulted in a guilty verdict and a three year prison term for the perpetrators.

She notes: “[t]he severity of the sentence was surprising to most observers and set in motion the chain of events that eventually led to the founding of the RAF” (Bauer 50). It is against this political and juridical background that the letters play out.

While the letters exchanged between Bernward and Gudrun from January 1968 to June 1969 could not have predicted the decade (and more) of terrorism to come, there does not even appear to be a coded reference to the violent turn and its potential implications. Naturally, any direct discussion of the details of the case pending against Gudrun could not have been discussed, and moreover as she writes in her first letter from prison, “die Briefe werden zensiert, von Norden nach Süden und von Süden nach Norden, was kann man dann noch und was mag man dann noch schreiben” (“the letters are censored from north to south and south to north. What then can one and what then does one want to write”)² (2009 23). But the letters do reveal the intense personal struggle of the two protagonists to come to terms with their new circumstances: a new baby, a break-up, and jail. The question is, what images of the ur-scene of West German terrorism and its after-effects emerge from the story of Gudrun and Bernward? A partial answer is that whatever images do emerge are fragmentary, alluding to the impossibility of totalized historiographical reconstruction, and furthermore, that the texts must thus be read through a literary lens, because understanding the trope of the fragment, especially its Romantic resonances, sheds new light on part of the story of West German terrorism. I do this not to justify it or explain it away, but to illustrate an instance of the confluence of politics, history and the literary tradition at this specific historical site.

An image most often requires a story for its explication and interpretation; the imagery of terrorism complicates and politicizes this task. After-images generate stories out of history: they simultaneously confirm historical narratives and appear out of time, alien to the broader story. They are ghost stories comprised of phantom images, but after-image stories can expose pre-visions in their visual residue. In the case of Gudrun Ensslin and Bernward Vesper, this residue is both a metaphor for the wreckage of their personal relationship and that of the student protest movement of the 1960s, out of which West German terrorism grew. When we order and analyze the residue of Bernward and Gudrun’s stories, we recognize that their after-images are in fact about authorship and writing: writing a love story, writing a family, writing literature, writing history and out of frustration with it, finally, writing violent resistance in the form of terrorism. The pre-visions of terror are not clear pictures, but rather sketches that appear through the after-images as the roots of West-German terrorism and illustrate the frustration with words, words that do not result in actions, the classic German hamstrung dynamic of *Wort und Tat* (word and deed). So it does seem ironic that a movement dedicated to exploding – figuratively and literally – the stasis of words, the revolutionary *Geschwätz* (empty rhetoric) on the left, the reactionary narrative of the status quo on the right, as in the tabloid newspaper *Bild*, would be so fundamentally dependent on its own story authored by its key founding members and sympathizers. Gudrun Ensslin and Bernward Vesper are both crucial authors of the foundational

narratives of German protest and terrorism, she from the inside, he from the outside. I will engage in a close reading of the story of their after-image, through letters the two wrote to one another and which are collected and recently published in the volume, *Notstandsgesetze von Deiner Hand. Briefe 1968/69 (Emergency Laws from your Hand. Letters 1968/69)*.³

Gudrun Ensslin and Bernward Vesper met at the University of Tübingen in 1962, and quickly fell in love. They were engaged in 1965 – although they never married – and in the fateful spring of 1967, just few weeks before the shooting of Benno Ohnesorg, their son, Felix, was born. Soon after his birth, Gudrun left Bernward for the charismatic and rebellious Andreas Baader and eventually the terrorist underground. Bernward's reaction to this loss, expressed in the first of his letters in the collection, sets the tone for what is a recurring theme of accusation motivated by his suffering:

“immerhin finde ich die altdeutsche weisheit bestätigt, dass alle schwüre der liebe falsch werden, sobald sich etwas besseres findet. in unserem fall ist das weib der skrupellosere teil. aber das ist ja auch egal” (“anyhow, i find the old german saying that all vows of love become false as soon as something better comes along, confirmed. in our case, the woman is the more unscrupulous part. but that no longer matters”) (2009 8-9).⁴

This statement is rich with bitterness and irony, and typifies what I am calling the “literariness” of Bernward's letters, in particular. This “literariness” is the poetic and allusive character of his writing, for instance, when he refers to an old German saying, then uses the anachronistic and offensive term “Weib” for woman, a term which roughly corresponds with “wench” in English. The bitterness is obvious but actually turns out to be emotional suffering at the loss of Gudrun – even though he had certainly been anything but monogamous with Gudrun⁵ – and the family he had hoped to re-build with her upon her release from prison. Bernward channels this suffering into sometimes Romantic tones, and with his vacillating mood, as the letters progress through her incarceration until her temporary release in June 1969, after the launch of an appeal for the arson conviction. Gudrun, of course, would not return to prison to serve that sentence once the appeal failed, rather her return to prison would be in 1972 when she and the other members of the first generation Red Army Faction were caught and ultimately landed in the Stuttgart-Stammheim correctional facility. The period of the letters also marks a pivotal period in Bernward's life, as he loses his beloved Gudrun, becomes a single father, sees his editorial and publishing career falter, then finally, in the summer of 1969, begin writing his magnum opus, the iconic generational novel *Die Reise (The Trip* or more literally, *The Journey*), which he would never see published. It appeared in 1977, six years after Bernward's mental breakdown and suicide in Hamburg.

Felix Ensslin, for whom Bernward lived in this period, referring to him as “*die kleine Sonne*” (“the little sun”) in the novel, writes in an afterword to the published volume of his parents’ letters, “Leben ist narrativ, nicht biologisch” (“to live is narrative, not biological”) (2009 285). It is in this spirit of narrativity, then, that I read the after-image of love, although it is more than just any story, for this one and its ghostly residue show how these two channel some paradigmatic themes of post-World War II West German history, bringing the discourse of memory politics and utopian activism to a point. What arises for the generation of ’68 as they reach university age is, on the one hand, a qualitative problem, namely a childhood education wanting in the historical details of Germany’s recent past, and on the other, a quantitative one, the confrontation with so much historico-political information. This is to say, the story is about a generation struggling with a surfeit of history.

This was particularly acute for Bernward, for whom the correspondence surveys the wreckage of his personal relationship and is moreover marked by his family history, which was especially onerous within the external political context of the 1960s. His father, Nazi poet Will Vesper, embraced the national socialist ideology until his death in 1962, raising Bernward under the auspices of a temporary setback for the movement in the postwar years. In the context of the New Left protest movement, Bernward had to navigate the political and personal contradiction of missing his father, whose politics and association with the Nazi past he reviled.⁶ The protest movement was fuelled in large measure by anger at the parental generation’s complicity in the crimes of the past and the latent fascism of the new German republic, and of course terrorism was the extreme and frustrated expression of that anger. The anger is also the result of being haunted by the wreckage of Germany’s recent history, as seen through Benjaminian eyes, where the narrative is one of constant and self-nourishing barbarism. For instance, in texts such as “Über den Begriff der Geschichte” (“On the Concept of History”), where Benjamin criticizes positivistic notions of historical progress in his analysis of Paul Klee’s painting *Angelus Novus*. He argues that the backward-facing angel of history is looking at a catastrophe where rubble heaps itself upon more rubble, but that a stormy wind forces the angel forward, and that “[d]as, was wir den Fortschritt nennen, ist *dieser* Sturm” (“that, which we call progress, is *this* storm”) (Benjamin 255). But perhaps Bernward’s surveillance of his personal history, so eerily representative of the fears of his generation about the Nazi father-generation, reveals the barbarism of history in miniature. His complex and controversial biography, dominated by the relationship with his father, is unfortunately too broad a subject for my paper today, moreover it has been treated with aplomb by Gerd Koenen in his thoroughly researched 2003 study, *Vesper, Ensslin, Baader. Urszenen des deutschen Terrorismus*, upon which Andres Veiel’s very recent film *Wer wenn nicht wir* is based. What I am attempting here is a brief view of the letters’ narrative which reveals a Romantic impulse characterized by a utopian nostalgia, the ruins of history, and love lost – the tragic love story infused with the politicization of the personal sphere.

In the correspondence, the mundane, the familial, the political and romantic – as in love – form the basis of a narrative universe reminiscent of an epistolary novel. However, particular letters of Bernward’s to Gudrun read like Romantic – as in the literary epoch – fragments or poems. It is my contention that the fragmentary is key to

understanding images from the student protest movement, because it alludes to the boundlessness of the utopian project, and reflects the philosophical and theoretical underpinning of the generation; they had rediscovered not only Benjamin, but of course Horkheimer and Adorno, Ernst Bloch, and Herbert Marcuse, among others. As a 1988 article in the weekly newspaper *Die Zeit* points out, the late 1960s saw the publication in German of texts written in the 1930s and banned by the Nazis, and their rediscovery set off “[e]in Rausch des Lesens und Debattierens” (“an intoxicating rush of reading and debating”). It is through the often aphoristic, anti-systematic critique of culture and historiography of thinkers such as these, that Bernward and his generation accessed Germany’s Romantic literary heritage, with its profoundly modern sensibility with respect to the dialectics of yearning and suffering, past and future.⁷

At the end of March 1968, Bernward writes Gudrun a letter that reads like a rumination or prose poem on love. It opens with a matter of fact report on his interactions with their son, Felix, including the tragi-comic remark, “er lacht laut, wenn ich heule” (“he laughs aloud when I cry”) (2009 22). A relatively innocuous comment on the warm weather being suited to putting Felix out on the balcony, turns rapidly to an evocation of spring imagery paralleling a blossoming yet tragic love:

“die knospen der linden werden dicker, du bist verliebt, irgendwo fort
(und für mich beginnt der lange marsch der geduld mit mir, mit dir)
diese liebe (unsere) gibt es nur einmal, was ihr fehlte (und was sie
irgendwann einmal haben wird) ist das bewusstsein, dass sie
zerstörbar ist.” (“the buds of the linden trees are becoming fatter.
you are in love, off somewhere (and for me the long march of
patience with myself, with you begins). this love (ours) exists only
once. what it was missing (and what it one day will have) is the
awareness that it is destructible”).

One cannot help reading this relatively banal observation about the budding linden trees linked to love as a poetic allusion to Romanticism, specifically something like Eichendorff’s “Bei einer Linde” which laments love lost through the passing of spring and reads:

Seh ich dich wieder, du geliebter Baum,
In dessen junge Triebe
Ich einst in jenes Frühlings schönstem Traum
Den Namen schnitt von meiner ersten Liebe?

Wie anders ist seitdem der Äste Bug,
Verwachsen und verschwunden
Im härteren Stamm der vielgeliebte Zug,
Wie ihre Liebe und die schönen Stunden!

Auch ich seitdem wuchs stille fort, wie du,
Und nichts an mir wollt weilen,

Doch meine Wunde wuchs - und wuchs nicht zu,
Und wird wohl niemals mehr hienieden heilen.

(Will I see you again beloved tree/ Into whose young shoots/ I once,
in that Spring's loveliest dream,/ did carve the name of my first
love?// How different is since then the branch's bow/ Crooked and
disappeared/ In the harder trunk, the much-loved stroke/ As her love
and the beautiful hours!// I too grew silently on, like you,/ And nothing
in me would remain,/ Yet my wound grew – and did not close./ And
will no doubt never more on this earth heal.)

Eichendorff's poem is not political but it has that utopian drive of nostalgia for a love lost. It captures the notion of survival and suffering of incurable wounds, and history could be seen as an incurable wound, especially in Germany. It is not a resigned poem but a poem that looks to the solidity of its central image, the tree, allowing the lyrical voice to understand the process of growing with pain and loss. There is an obvious analogy to revolutionary political struggle here, one I think, would not have been lost on Bernward. Furthermore, someone as literarily inclined as him and as keenly interested in Romanticism, was almost certainly aware of the intertextual resonances of the language he was using.⁸

Trees such as the linden have a special symbolic place in the German Romantic imagination for their obvious natural qualities of steadfastness, springtime blossoming and full summer foliage. But the linden as literary image, rooted in the tradition of Walther von der Vogelweide's iconic "Unter der linden," is itself an after-image, a bit of the residue of the German literary tradition, which looms so large over aspiring writers, and like many of these, Bernward suffered from an 'anxiety of influence' – to borrow Harold Bloom's phrase – induced by the ghosts of the literary past. In fact, Gerd Koenen notes that Bernward's early attempts at writing, before his university days, were largely marked by failure and rejection, citing a letter from Eckhart Klessmann of the paper *Christ und Welt*, who wrote to Bernward that especially the love poems he had submitted were "zu sehr von Vorbildern abhängig" ("to dependent on [literary] role models") (Koenen 86).

The linden tree also bears a political-national symbolism linked to Berlin's Unter den Linden, the grand avenue which leads through the monumental heart of the city, representing the new centre of political power in the German speaking world of the late eighteenth century. Bernward's invocation of this image is an instance of nostalgia for a time in which utopian thinking was not forced around the history that led to Hitler; a time when the progressive potential of Romanticism and German Enlightenment thought had not been perverted by the course history took into modernity. The apparently apolitical linden tree does indeed carry political weight, even if for Vesper, the more overt signifier of political change is the phrase "der lange marsch" ("the long march"). Linking this contemporary political imperative of progress and revolution to Romantic images such as the linden tree demonstrates an attempt to reconnect with the utopian impulse and progressive kernel in Romanticism, snuffed out not only by nationalistic chauvinism and eventually Nazism, but by the burden of this history.

Going back to the poem and letter, the notion of the lover being gone, as Bernward puts it, “irgendwo fort” (“off somewhere”) or having moved on, as in Eichendorff “wuchs stille fort” (“grew silently on”) speaks to the yonder and the loss of a past presence. The imagery of destruction, loss and eternal, suffering wounds is common to both Vesper’s letter and Eichendorff’s poem, and the wreckage left after the destruction of love reflects the residue left for the after-image. The presence of absence concatenates the intense personal sense of loss – whether it is Bernward’s loss of his father or Gudrun – with the baffling historical and political circumstances around the perceived failure of the protest movement. Perhaps a psychoanalytic reader would recognize the loss of super-ego and even a perverse mourning of the lost war and *Führer*, but this is beyond the scope of this paper. Losing Gudrun is largely what motivates these letters and she recognizes her culpability in creating this loss. What the letters from both Gudrun and Bernward do is attempt to come to terms with the constant presence of absence, which for Bernward meant the absence of Gudrun, while for her it meant chiefly the absence from her son.

Although, Gudrun’s letters often take a conciliatory tone, she does express frustration with Bernward’s yearning and is rigorous in writing the end of her love story with him, while somewhat contradictorily writing the bond of their family story, promising him the link through Felix. For instance, she writes: “‘unsere’ Geschichte mag zehnmal zuende sein, *die* Geschichte ist es nicht, solange F. [Felix] lebt” (“‘our’ story may end ten times over, it is not *the* story, as long as F. [Felix] is alive”) (2009 38). She is keen to distance herself romantically from Bernward and become ever clearer and more explicit that she and Andreas Baader intend to live together as a couple. Gudrun is also writing Bernward in the sense that she is trying to portray him, especially in his relationship to her:

“Mir ist Dein Verhältnis jetzt zu mir nicht ganz klar. Ich weiß, wie sehr Du fähig bist, einen Menschen nicht nur als das zu lieben, was er ist, sond. auch als die Idee, das Bild, das Du von ihm hast. Möglicherweise ist das jetzt so mit mir ganz extrem” (“Your relationship to me now is not quite clear to me. I know how capable you are of loving someone not just for what they are, but also as the idea, the image that you have of them”) (2009 204).

This very blunt assessment of her former partner turns out to be a very piercing insight into the concept of love, its dialectical mix of loving the other and projecting one’s own ideal onto the lover. She recognizes that Bernward fits this profile, reducing his love for her to something of a solipsistic gesture. While she is partially correct, and is clearly trying to undo the myth of their love or at least re-write it, she has also just assessed herself. Or so one might argue, thinking of her relationship to Andreas Baader, into whom she projected an idealized man of action, a leader and her lover.

Gudrun’s shift away from Bernward and toward Andreas is a move that symbolizes the frustration with words and the desire for action, and in the process exposes part of the roots of West German terrorism. Tellingly, when the first generation of the RAF sat in prison and Gudrun code-named her fellow inmates according to

characters from *Moby Dick*, Baader was dubbed 'Ahab.' Koenen sees this as evidence not only of Gudrun's adoration of the man of action, but in fact, as proof that she projected her desire for action into this leader figure. In other words, Gudrun more or less invented – or wrote – the character of Andreas Baader: "Gudrun war es, die diesen 'Ahab' gefunden oder in Wirklichkeit erst erfunden hatte, [...]" ("it was Gudrun who had found this 'Ahab' or in reality just invented him") (Koenen 336-37). While this is perhaps going a little far, Gudrun certainly helped to create his image, celebrating and embellishing Baader's calls for action in the late sixties; she ends a lengthy letter to him in August 1968 – which is also published in the volume at hand – with the words: "Hell YES! Andreas, *Praxis*, Du sagst's!" ("[...] You said it!") (2009 273). In six words she expresses the anger and aggression, and posits the man and 'his' idea of action, prefiguring the terrorism to come.

Gudrun Ensslin and Bernward Vesper are authors of a ghost story that unfolds through the fragmented images of their personal history as it intermixes with the political upheaval around them. Their stories emerge from the rubble of the past and the complexity of a historical context fraught with the problem and burden of Germany's history. What is more, as Gerd Koenen writes:

"Alle Reminiszenzen an diese Jahre sind so zersplittert und konfus, wie es diese Jahre selbst waren; und zudem überformt oder deformiert durch das Bleigewicht des Wissens über alles, was später geschah" ("All reminiscences of these years are as splintered and confused as the years themselves were, and moreover misshapen and deformed by the leaden weight of the knowledge of everything that happened later") (Koenen 120).

The ghostly picture, their after-image, that developed over time, made their after-image stories part of the broader public history of postwar West Germany. Yet for one person, these two people are stories in and of themselves; it is their son, Felix Ensslin, for whom this is the case, and in an interview in *Der Spiegel* this past spring, he asserts: "Eltern sind eben nicht nur biologische Wesen. Eltern sind auch Erzählungen, sie bestehen aus Geschichten, die einem einen Platz geben in dieser Welt" ("Parents are not just biological beings. Parents are also narratives, they consist of stories that give one a place in this world") (*Spiegel* 139). The place Felix's parents' stories gave him is, to say the least, challenging and compels him to enter the historiographical discourse, but there does seem to be a genuine desire on his part to open other perspectives on the stories of his parents, who have been dismissed as radical, crazy, and in the case of Gudrun, criminal.

As Felix contends in his Afterword to the collected correspondence of his parents:

“Für mich sind diese Briefe wichtig geworden, weil sie in die Zwangsläufigkeit der großen Erzählmachine, wonach alles immer schon auf den Tod, den Mord, den Selbstmord hinausläuft, ein wenig Sand werfen. Ein klein wenig Jetzigkeit, Möglichkeit und Anderssein in die Geschichte eintragen” (“These letters became important to me because they throw sand in the big narrative machine according to which everything has always led to death, murder and suicide. They insert a little immediacy, possibility and otherness into (hi)story”) (2009 286).

Felix, too, suffers a surfeit of history with parents who have such a significant role in the public history of Germany. Here, he is vocalizing the spirit of protest against the historiographical machine, with the inflection of the 1960s protest movement, as the first postwar generation learned to confront the overwhelming problem of how historical narrative is constructed. What we have, perhaps all we can ever have, is history as after-image; the phantoms of the past that seem to point to the inevitability of what was to come. But that narrative inevitability is the greatest specter of all.

Notes

¹ On the night of 2 to 3 April 1968, bombs exploded in the Schneider and Kaufhof department stores in Frankfurt on Main, Germany. That night, a female voice told the West German press agency, dpa, over the phone that this was an act of “political revenge.” On 4 April, Gudrun Ensslin, Andreas Baader, Horst Söhnlein and Thorwald Proll were arrested and charged with arson.

² Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own. I refer to the correspondence as “2009” in parentheses.

³ This title refers to perhaps the most polarizing and politicizing issues of the 1960s protest movement, namely, the introduction of an Emergency Measures Act, a set of laws that gave the government sweeping powers if a state of emergency was declared. The students recognized this end-run around West Germany’s democratic constitution and saw this move as proof of the latent fascism of the older, governing generation, complicit in the crimes of Nazism.

⁴ Vesper sometimes ignores German orthographical rules on using upper case letters, particularly for nouns and sentence beginnings, and I have replicated that in my translation. The practice is an anti-authoritarian gesture.

⁵ In letter 53, Gudrun cites “Dez. 66” (December 1966) as the date on which “Du mich [...] ziemlich tödlich verletzt hattest” (you ... had wounded me pretty mortally”); i.e. one instance of Bernward’s infidelity, which she had generally tolerated.

⁶ Bernward and Gudrun actually worked on publishing Will Vesper's literary oeuvre, which exudes blood and soil nationalist chauvinism. It does seem ironic that these two would fight for progressive causes that sought to open and modernize German society, while at the same time trying to publish this conservative, nationalistic and regressive work.

⁷ Gert Ueding's article, "Das Fragment als literarische Form der Utopie," outlines the connections between Ernst Bloch's utopian conception of the fragment and the aesthetic shift toward the fragmentary at the end of the 18th century. He cites Friedrich Schlegel's assertion that, "[v]iele Werke der Alten sind Fragmente geworden. Viele werke der Neuen sind es gleich bei der Entstehung" ("Many works of the ancients have become fragments. Many works of the contemporaries are fragments from their inception.") (Ueding 352).

⁸ In my article "...macht die blaue Blume rot!" [see Works Cited]" I demonstrate Vesper's connection to the Romantic poet Novalis and the utopian, revolutionary potential of Romanticism.

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