



# Translation: working to de-fragment and re-member Ulrike Meinhof

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Texts, literary or journalistic, can quickly become fragments - as a result of selective re-readings, revisions, citations, excerpts and the need for effect: "all the world's a stage" as we know. For texts that originate in another language, in this case, in German, the fragmentation effect is even stronger as useful excerpts are put to work in the target culture without readers having access to the source text. Translation may work toward de-fragmenting and re-membering such texts, recreating/reinterpreting them, collecting the pieces and reprising them for another time, another place, another readership or audience. And yet translation, like memory work, can also misrepresent, create and simply 'make things up' to fit the needs of the present. This article discusses these issues in regard to Ulrike Meinhof's journalistic presence and career in 1960s Germany, which has to some extent been re-membered in English through a recent research and translation project, *Everyone Talks about the Weather. We Don't!*, ed. Karin Bauer, Seven Stories Press, NYC, 2008.

Literary texts<sup>1</sup>, and perhaps even more so journalistic texts, can quickly become fragments, as a result of selective re-readings, revisions, citations, and excerpting, often used for effect. Snippets of Shakespeare's work: "all the world's a stage" or "all that glisters is not gold" may serve as examples of such an assertion, but so may the exclamation "Alle reden vom Wetter. Wir nicht!" [tr. "Everyone talks about the weather. We Don't!"], a slogan that originated in advertising copy urging people to use the German railways, the Bundesbahn, in the 1960s, and was then adopted and adapted in many different ways, including on a dramatic red poster that sported the black silhouettes of the heads of Marx, Lenin and Stalin and was produced by the SDS (Sozialistischer deutscher Studentenbund), a leftwing German student union, for the purposes of a conference. A few years later, Ulrike Meinhof used the same slogan - in German - as the title of one of her columns, highlighting the student movement's street presence, and forty years on, it became the English title of the first English collection of her work to be produced in that language.

Fragments gain currency through selective re-use and re-deployment. But texts that originate in another language and culture, in this case in German, can undergo even more fragmentation, as the target culture, in this case English, takes what it wants, what serves its purposes or is deemed interesting, and re-uses it, often out of context. Translation often works toward re-membering such texts, recreating/reinterpreting them, collecting the pieces and reprising them for another time, another place, another readership or audience. And yet translation, like memory work, can also misrepresent, manipulate, and simply 'make things up' to fit the needs of the present it is addressing. The so-called 'manipulation school' of translation theorists amply demonstrated this principle of translation in the 1980s and 1990s, bringing cultural difference as well as political and ideological expediency into the study of translation (Hermans, 1985; Lefevere 1992.)

This article addresses textual fragmentation through citation, and examines the possibility of de-fragmentation through translation in regard to Ulrike Meinhof. It begins with a brief summary of the work she published as a journalist throughout 1960s West Germany, and then moves to three of the very few instances of its use/citation in English scholarship. It then discusses the objectives and outcome of the translation and publication project entitled *Everybody Talks About the Weather ... We Don't!* (2008) in de-fragmenting and re-membering her work in the first available collection of complete

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<sup>1</sup> This article is a shorter version of "Ulrike Meinhof:De-fragmented and Re-membered", in *Translating Women*, ed. Luise von Flotow, Ottawa, UOttawa Press, 2011.

Meinhof texts ever compiled in English, which is accompanied by a lengthy introduction to her work and personal history. Finally, this text addresses the parallels between translation and memory work, both of which impinge on the re-membering of the past for the present.

## Part One: Meinhof, fragmented in English:

Until 2008, and the appearance of *Everybody Talks About the Weather ... We Don't!*, the work of Ulrike Meinhof that dates from her period as a journalist, anti-militarist, opponent of nuclear rearmament and impassioned critic of postwar West German society (1959-1970), a journalist who was widely read and listened to in 1960s FRG (Federal Republic of Germany/West Germany), was not available in English in any coherent form. Only fragments existed, cited here and there in accounts of the left-wing and student movements of that period and particularly in regard to the RAF (Rote Armee Fraktion), the urban terrorist group that Meinhof co-founded in 1970. These fragments offer brief glimpses at the work of a woman whose political convictions, energy, and writing skills had made her one of the foremost left-wing voices in 1960s West Germany, at a time when the post-war generation was coming of age, developing and acting on its own political ideas in a climate of intense post-WW2 conservatism.

Born in 1934, Meinhof was about ten years older than this postwar generation coming of age, and had honed her own political views at home under the tutelage of a guardian, Renate Riemeck. Orphaned at fourteen years of age Meinhof was raised and mentored by her widowed mother's friend Riemeck, a staunch liberal voice who was active in federal politics, in contact with leading West German intellectuals and theologians of the time, and opposed to all forms of re-armament. Involved in the "ban the bomb" movements of the 1950s, she was forced to resign from her position as a university professor, one of the first women in Germany to ever hold such a post, for political reasons. According to Meinhof biographers, Riemeck "instilled in her [Meinhof] a sense of moral obligation" (Bauer, 23) and considerably influenced her thinking.

Coming into her own in the 1950s, Meinhof's public political activism seems to have been triggered by Germany's move toward not only re-armament but nuclear re-armament after the conservative Adenauer government changed the German Constitution of 1948 that had specifically banned all military arms from German soil only eight years later, in 1956, in order to comply with and join NATO resolutions to station missiles and nuclear-weapons on German soil (Bauer, 25). Meinhof, still at university, became a peace activist and

opponent of these policies, organizing rallies, writing leaflets, addressing demonstrations.

Over the next ten to twelve years, Meinhof was a political journalist, publishing in *konkret*, the left-wing journal that was owned and run by Klaus Röhl, the man who became her husband and the father of her twin daughters, but also working as a freelancer in radio and television. She addressed many different issues, repeatedly protesting against re-armament and militarization of any kind, but also warning against developments internal to West Germany and its Cold War politics: the government's project to table an "Emergency Measures Act" that would curtail democratic rights in various 'emergency' situations; its confrontational relations with the German Democratic Republic (the GDR); the fear and war-mongering aspects of the conservative, tabloid media, specifically, but not only, the *Bild Zeitung*. She also pursued interests in "social justice," writing about the first Nazi-officer trial held in Germany in 1964 but more often focussing on marginalized groups in German society, and discussing the fate of political exiles, young offenders or other socially ostracized persons, the developing student movement and those who became victims of reprisals to it, the working conditions of working class women, and the lives of girls living in reform schools (Bauer, 27ff). The docudrama *Banbule* based on her filmscript about girls' reform schools was cancelled within days of her going underground in May 1970.

Meinhof's 'going underground' was the result of her increasing involvement with the group of mainly women around Andreas Baader, a charismatic would-be revolutionary, and it has marked her reputation forever, both in German and in English. Involved in freeing Baader from the custody of prison guards, an event that turned violent, she chose to step out of a window and go into hiding rather than wait for police to arrive, thus becoming a fugitive, and later a founding member of what the press and other media came to call the Baader-Meinhof gang. In this group, Meinhof seems to have acted as theoretician and co-writer of communiques, operating between the RAF and the public, and finally stepping beyond the role of journalistic observer that she had played for ten years with *konkret*, and increasingly railed against. By participating in the collective authorship the revolutionary group advocated, she "willingly sacrificed her autonomy as a writer" (Bauer, 64), and stood by the group in solidarity "even when the group no longer stood behind her" (Bauer, 64.) The first RAF communique appeared in June 1970, establishing its existence; after the so-called "May-Offensive" of 1972 the main members of the group, Meinhof among them, were incarcerated. They had been active for two years. Meinhof spent ten

months in solitary confinement, and was later transferred to Stammheim Prison, where she committed suicide in 1976. Four of her colleagues committed suicide in prison in 1977, after the failure of a hijacking which had been undertaken to press them free.

Meinhof's presence in English, as a post-war thinker, writer, and public intellectual focused on social justice and anti-militarism, has been minimal, doubtless due to the last 6 years of her life, a period that takes sensational precedence over all the rest. In English, her pre-RAF-work from the 1960s, appears in three different ways:

- First, in a tendentious account of the German student movement, entitled *Hitler's Children*, by Jill Becker, published in 1977, reprinted in 1978 and again in 1989. This book uses a number of extracts from Meinhof's journalistic articles, but spends more time on the history of her family and her biography. Over all, Becker, like others who cite Meinhof, does so to bolster her own arguments, in this case a view of Meinhof (and the entire German youth movement of the 1960s) as confused but vehement moralists on a mission. Quoting from Meinhof's work, sometimes at length, Becker accompanies these fragments with her own editorializing comments: for example, in regard to extracts from the text entitled "Warenhausbrandstiftung" / "Setting Fire to Department Stores" which Meinhof wrote after an incident of arson at a Frankfurt department store that took place to ostensibly draw attention to the gap between German consumerism and German concern about the Vietnam War, Becker comments, Puritan to the point of prudishness, or even priggishness, it [the text] prescribed what should or should not be regarded as necessary. Money should be used "in the education system, in the health service, for public transport, for peace and clean air and sex education. .. Not for pleasure, or possibly for pleasure only without a civic sanction - rather a bleak treat, like having a picnic in a bus depot instead of Versailles (1989:130).

Becker never makes Meinhof's entire text available, replacing it instead with innuendo and snide interpretations.

- More recent, more serious, academic work by Jeremy Varon, an American historian who sets out to compare the American Weathermen and the German RAF of the 1970s in (*Bringing the War Home*, 2004) includes surprisingly few citations from Meinhof's work. Meinhof's famous statement: "Protest is when I say this or that doesn't suit me. Resistance is when I ensure that what doesn't suit me no longer occurs", which she borrowed and adapted from the Black Panthers, is used as a chapter heading; and Varon also quotes from the Department Store text: "The progressive moment in the burning of a department store does not lie in the destruction of commodities but in the criminality of the act, its breaking of the law" (2004, 41).

However, he uses these isolated quotes not to focus on Meinhof or engage with her work, but to set the scene of escalating violence in late 1960s Germany which he can then compare to similar developments around the US/Weathermen, his real interest.

- In the third example of Meinhof fragmentation, Arlene Teraoka provides the most insightful assessment of her work, placing her essay-writing practice into the "best tradition of Kantian enlightenment" (1993, 212) and quoting from a number of her journalistic texts to reveal an underlying purpose of mobilizing "radical change" through the education of the public. She suggests that Meinhof's project foundered when her acts of emancipatory resistance remained nothing but words, nothing more than the "exercise of the freedom of the intellect to pierce through repressive illusions" (216). This conclusion is, in fact, very clear in one of the last texts Meinhof published in konkret, the journal where she published a regular column – a text Teraoka does not cite. It is entitled "Columnism/Kolumnismus" and dates from 1968:

The columnist functions as a pressure release valve. Columnists can write what they want the way they want. This creates the impression that any journalist can write what they want the way they want in their particular paper ... The columnist's outrageousness gives the paper the aura of being outrageous. The columnist's occasional and courageous expression of unpopular ideas gives the paper the aura of having the courage to express unpopular ideas. By investing in the columnist's originality, non-conformism and independent thinking, the publisher pays for appearances. (Meinhof, 2008: 249-250, tr. Flotow).

This assessment of a 'star' journalist's work is a serious dismissal of the years she spent in this role, a recognition of the futility of her efforts, and it seems to herald her railing against the "mere talk" of reformists, and her call to action as a part of the RAF.

To sum up briefly: my point is that very little academic or other work in English takes any real interest in Meinhof, presenting only fragments that serve the particular writer's argument or purpose. Further, many if not most, of the English references to Meinhof refer to her only in connection with the RAF, focusing on the last 6 years of her life, and neglecting the role she played and the impact she had as a lone female public voice in 1960s Germany.

## Part Two: Re-membering Meinhof

The research and translation project designed to address this situation culminated in a lengthy introduction to Meinhof's work and times (Meinhof, 2008: 13-99) and the English translation of twenty-four complete articles - texts she produced between 1959 and 1969.

These include her assessment of one of the first international summit meetings of the western allies in 1958, a report on the first German trial of a Nazi officer in 1964, a critique of a particularly heinous TV program that was fanning the flames of cold-war fear-mongering, a text on JFK's assassination, another on the bombing of Dresden, one on the working conditions of working class women, and later in the decade texts on the protests against visits by Hubert Humphrey and the Shah of Iran, and so on. The text on the Frankfurt department store arson begins as follows:

Arson, it can be argued, is not a good idea, since it can put people at risk who shouldn't be put at risk. Specific incidents of arson, it can be argued, are not a good idea, since this type of attack on the capitalist world of consumerism - and that is presumably what those accused of setting fire to the Frankfurt department store will argue - this type of arson does not revolutionize consumerism; it doesn't damage the system at all. Instead, it drives the very mechanisms that drive consumerism, and helps those who make money from it make even more money (Meinhof, 2008: 244; tr. Flotow).

This 'fragment' of my translation, which I deliberately "extract" here, gives an idea of Meinhof's style and political thought, while the full translation of this material, and its contextualization in a carefully researched introduction, provides the English public, academic or otherwise, with access to Meinhof in a much more coherent and less spectacular way than ever before; the translation de-fragments and remembers her work, and allows readers the opportunity to make their own decisions about her texts. The translations go well beyond the excerpts heretofore selected by others and their sometimes disobliging comments. My realization in working on these texts - and dealing with every punctuation mark besides unravelling a very thick prose, i.e. not extracting citations - was that Meinhof was a gifted writer and a moralist, yes; over the course of the 1960s she became increasingly polemical, and activist, in the best sense of the word, until, of course, she slipped. Was it possible to bring this across in the translations? and would English readers really gain access to Meinhof through my work?

While the translations set out to reproduce the original German texts, they do so almost 40 years after most of them were written, and in a very different time and place. Not only has West Germany disappeared as a political entity, thus making some of Meinhof's commentary on the East-West tensions seem obsolete, but so have the anti-war and anti-Establishment demonstrations of the 1960s. The environmental questions remain, as do the issues around social justice and corruptible media, as well as political dissent. In other words, while some of the material is out of date, there is much of current

interest and value in these 40-year-old texts, though details may not gel anymore. A chronological selection of the complete, unadulterated texts was one way of re-connecting with this past; it was also a way to revise the history of an influential and still much-admired woman thinker.

## Part Three: Translation as memory work

A translation in its published form is the static memory of an earlier text. The act of translation, in the process of production, is the active re-membering of another, earlier text. It disengages the original work from its historic envelope, its environment, reconstructing it for another time, another reader. And translation mobilizes many of the same phenomena as other forms of memory work: fantasy, subjectivity, invention, a focus on the present as much as, or perhaps even more, than on the past, and an attempt to represent and even fabricate this past.

Translation, like memory and remembering, takes what Annette Kuhn describes as "an enquiring attitude towards the past and actively reconstructs this" (2000:186). Like memory, translation undermines "assumptions about the transparency or the authenticity of what is remembered, treating it not as 'truth' but as evidence of a particular sort: material to be interrogated, mined for its meanings and possibilities" (186). Memory/remembering and translation have a number of things in common: they refer to a past (made up of experiences or texts) which they move into a present, usually for specific purposes and with a specific audience in mind. More importantly, the source text - the experience or the text - is usually inaccessible to the present, and therefore unverifiable. Not only does the experience/the text lie somewhere in the past, completed, finished and replaced by the memory or the translation, but the account of this source text varies from person to person, or memory to memory. In such conditions, both memory/remembering and translation easily assume - or are assigned - positions of authority - despite the very possible manipulations, fabrications and fantasies they may, in fact, mobilize.

This may sound like an indictment of every effort to translate - but it is not. It is simply a recognition of what translation studies have shown time and again: that difference rather than equivalence is the constant in translation, as it may well be in memory. For the Meinhof texts, the difference in context, generation, experience, political purpose - expressed in the language and the style of her writing - is paramount. It affects every aspect of reading, understanding and rendering her work. A quick, very telling example, is her reference to

Franz Joseph Strauss, a Bavarian politician, in a text entitled "Hitler Within You": "One day we will be asked about Herr Strauss in the same way we now ask our parents about Hitler" which brought Meinhof a libel case initiated by Strauss. What can a footnote about Strauss do for the English reader today in comparison to what a German reader in the 1960s must have known about the man - from an amalgam of photos, sound bites from radio and television speeches and interviews, and the reader's own personal politics. Similarly, how can the various levels of language that she uses to bring her work to life be replicated in English? the blustering German "das wär ja noch schöner!" in response to visa requirements imposed by the GDR, or the difference between "Ja" and "Jawoll" from the article on the trial of Karl Wolff, the Nazi administrator.

Difference is the rule, then, and a certain incommensurability - but the effect of these differences decreases in the face of the broad range of topics Meinhof addressed and her spectacular argumentation. For example, in 1965 she commemorates the bombing of Dresden on February 13 and 14 1945 by writing:

If we needed proof that there is no such thing as a just war, then Dresden is that proof. If we needed proof that the defensive position must always turn into an aggressive position, then Dresden is that proof. If we needed proof that the people are always abused by the governments that enter into war, and are degraded into being both the pretext and the victims of applied barbarity, then Dresden is that proof (Meinhof, 2008: 136; tr. Flotow)

Expressing sentiments that doubtless apply today, Meinhof's anti-war texts are, in fact, utterly translatable, and while differences remain, the strong conclusions seem to ignore linguistic and cultural boundaries.

Another example may serve to confirm this assertion: in regard to the scandal caused by a group of young German protesters who hurled plastic bags of pudding and yogurt at Hubert Humphrey to protest the Vietnam War, Meinhof comments,

It is thus not a criminal act to drop napalm on women, children and old people; protesting against this act is a crime. It is not a criminal act to destroy the harvests necessary for the lives of millions; protesting against this is a crime ... Terror tactics and torture are not criminal acts; protesting against them is (Meinhof, 2008: 230-231; tr. Flotow).

The process of translation digs deeply into the layers of text, re-assembling meanings, re-membering them, and producing differences all along the way. For the project of presenting a more complete Meinhof in English, translation, regardless how flawed by time or history, or how inadequate to the details of the German language, culture and history, is the only solution. In this case, translation works

toward the rehabilitation, at least to some extent, of the reputation of a thoughtful and gifted public intellectual, a woman's critical voice that marked the turbulent 1960s with her intense and intensive interest in social justice, democratic public life and opposition to war and any form of militarism.

Still, it is an enduring paradox that the translation project designed to shed light on Meinhof's journalistic brilliance, her perseverance, and the role she played as a humanitarian left-wing anti-Nazi voice in the 1950s and 1960s should come into being largely because of the much more sensational fact of her terrorist affiliations. Had she not 'slipped' and joined the ranks of the urban terrorist of early 1970s Germany, she would doubtless have been even more lost to our present.

Teraoka, Arlene. 1993. "Terrorism and the Essay: The Case of Ulrike Meinhof," in *The Politics of the Essay. Feminist Perspectives*, eds. Ruth-Ellen Boetcher Joeres and Elizabeth Mittman. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 209-225.

Varon, Jeffrey. 2004. *Bringing the War Home. The Weather Underground, the Red Army Faction, and Revolutionary Violence in the Sixties and Seventies*. Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press.