"How helpless a person can be": Sex, Art, and Politics in DeLillo's "Baader-Meinhof"

A little over a year ago, Don DeLillo's *The Angel Esmeralda: Nine Stories* was published by Scribner. It is the seventeenth book of prose fiction DeLillo has produced since 1971, but it is his first story collection. It is of interest to many readers simply because it was written by DeLillo, author of some of the most important novels of the last thirty years, from *White Noise* to *Libra* to *Underworld,* and because it brings together stories originally published from the 1970s to the past few years. It also provides another opportunity to see DeLillo treat the subjects he's written about over the course of his career, from the mediated, technologized, death-obsessed condition we live in, to the Cold War that shaped so much of that condition, to the limits of language and knowledge, to terrorism.

Recently DeLillo's concern with murder, disaster, and apocalypse has turned to the events of September 11, 2001. Much of his most recent work has been read as primarily concerned with the attempt to make some order out of this hard-to-process event or to reflect on our attempts to do so, and so has been seen as of a piece with older work in which characters try to make sense of the specter of nuclear holocaust, or JFK's assassination, or chemical disasters like Bhopal. However, many of the stories in *The Angel Esmeralda* focus less on the large-scale catastrophes we see in many of the novels and more on a sense of fear and individual helplessness that is not so much a product of these events but rather a pre-existing condition. This apparent shift in focus from isolated event to general condition reminds us that DeLillo's response to the dangerous world that has always been his subject has consisted of attempts not only to make order or reflect on the difficulty of doing so but also to write in opposition—to oppose the State and the state of things that creates such dangers.

I will focus here on one story from *The Angel Esmeralda,* "Baader-Meinhof," originally published in *The New Yorker* in April 2002, which I think connects these three aspects of DeLillo's attention: the helplessness felt in response to living in a dangerous world, the attempt to make sense of that world, and the determination to oppose the things that help make it that way. It has been read as a story about 9/11, but I want to argue that it is also a story about political radicalism and about the oppositional possibilities of art. Reading it this way also makes it possible to argue that DeLillo is revisiting the radicalism of the sixties and seventies and, by extension, earlier historical moments, and, also by extension, Italian-American radicalism and oppositional art.

The story begins in New York's Museum of Modern Art. An unnamed woman is looking at a group of paintings and is approached by a man. They discuss the paintings, which belong to a fifteen-work cycle by Gerhard Richter of members of the Baader-Meinhof Group, a small group of German radicals of the late 1960s and 1970s who founded the militant left-wing Red Army Faction in protest not only of capitalism but of what they perceived as the resurgence of the coercive state they linked to the Third Reich (and to the many former officials again in positions of power). The four members of Baader-Meinhof were imprisoned for years without trial, and during and after the trial died in prison under circumstances many have found mysterious. The man and woman in the story disagree about what might have happened and about the nature of Baader-Meinhof itself, he rejecting both the idea that they were murdered by the police and the idea that they were anything more than murderers themselves. The two leave the museum together and grab something to eat at a snack bar, where their conversation continues—he stepping up his campaign to go home with her, she still haunted by thoughts of the paintings. They end up in her apartment, where she rejects his increasingly aggressive sexual advances, eventually hiding from him in her bathroom. He sits on her bed and masturbates, then apologizes to the locked bathroom door and leaves.

"Baader-Meinhof," then, is not an entirely pleasant story. It is told in DeLillo's spare late style, from the woman's point of view, and she is the focalizer, not the narrator. So though we hear her thoughts, the story's style contributes to a feeling of distance from her even in the rare moments when it slides into free indirect. And as we are distant from her, so she is distant from herself: she doesn't understand what she is feeling when she meets this man and why she goes along with what he wants for so long. Further, we don't really have any sense why he wants her, only that he does—as distant as we are from her, he is completely opaque. After, she is much clearer on the effects on her of this incident—she feels violated, intruded upon in her own apartment—and the story ends with her returning to the exhibit the following morning and, upon entering the room with the Baader-Meinhof paintings, seeing the man.

It is not hard to see why "Baader-Meinhof" is read as a 9/11 story (as Leslie Kaufman, Julia Apitzsch, and others have). The woman exhibits traumatic symptoms, and the story seems to be performing the distance between event and self characteristic of much post-9/11 fiction. Her feelings in the face of the paintings and the events they represent seem expressive of the grief and powerlessness many felt after 9/11: the woman seems to mourn the people whose deaths are depicted in Richter's paintings, thinking that in her repeated visits to the exhibit she is "sitting as a person does in a mortuary chapel, keeping watch over the body of a deceased relative or friend," and when asked how she feels looking at the

paintings, she answers, "I think I feel helpless. These paintings make me feel how helpless a person can be" (105, 109).

In addition to the threads of detachment, mourning, and helplessness that lead it to be read as a 9/11 story, "Baader-Meinhof" is also filled with a sense of irresolvable ambiguity. There is the ambiguity of the woman's state of mind; the ambiguity of the paintings, which Richter's blurred style makes difficult to decipher and interpret; the ambiguities of Baader-Meinhof's demise and their meaning; the ambiguity of the story's end; and the ambiguity of the connection between the personal story and the political one. I believe that this ambiguity, especially in the last case, points to a reading of this story beyond its evocation of a particular event, a reading that sees the story as exploring the difficulty of identifying larger forces but insisting, or perhaps *and so* insisting, on the importance of persisting in efforts to do so. The ambiguity, on this reading, is a force in itself in this story, almost the proverbial setting-become-character: it represents the difficulty of interpreting the world before us and seeing clearly what it is that makes the world the way it is—understanding who is in charge and what their power consists of—and opposing it.

There are a number of moments in the story when the woman begins to see things more clearly, to resolve some of these ambiguities. Standing before the paintings, the man says that he is trying to remember how the people in them died, and the woman responds, "They committed suicide. Or the state killed them." The story continues:

> He said, "The State." Then he said it again, deep-voiced, in a tone of melodramatic menace, trying out a line reading that might be more suitable.
>
> She wanted to be annoyed but felt instead a vague chagrin. It wasn't like her to use this term—*the state*—in the ironclad context of supreme public power. This was not her vocabulary. (106)

The woman's repeated visits to the museum are helping her to arrive at a new insight, a new way to name something in the world. Here she finds herself using a new word and with it a new way of looking at things, and more than the naming it is this activity—seeing—that is important. The story is filled with vision, with looking and seeing, and not simply the act of seeing but the recognition that one has not been looking, or looking hard enough. As the man says of the challenges presented by Richter's blurry coated canvases, "You need a special training to *look* at these paintings. I can't tell the people apart" (107). The larger training here is not simply in art appreciation, rather it is in the effort necessary to understand the world: as the woman says, responding, "Yes, you can. Just look. You have to look" (107). This stress on the act of paying attention, was further emphasized, as

Julia Apitzsch has pointed out, by the retitling of the story when it appeared in *The Guardian* under the name "Looking at Meinhof" (105).

It is true that this world the woman is beginning to realize she must work to understand is a violent one in which existence is precarious. This is one of DeLillo's most prevalent themes, that we live in what he has called "dangerous times" (Nance). Across the length of his career, DeLillo's novels have offered critiques of the corporation, consumerism, and other elements of contemporary control and explorations of the nuclear threat and the larger cult of death that has shaped so much contemporary history. The individual events, real and imagined, that his characters have faced, though they often occupy the center of the novels, have never really been seen simply as isolated incidents but rather as the products of larger systems, and this remains true for his attention to 9/11. The world is a dangerous place beyond particular eruptions of danger; it is the state of things, but not, I believe "Baader-Meinhof" reminds, the necessary state of things. What the woman in the story learns is that she does not want to remain helpless in the face of the fact of this danger.

The process of learning to connect what she sees on the walls of MOMA to what she encounters within the walls of her apartment begins with understanding the political relationship between the state and the individual in the same way that she understands the personal relationship between herself and the man. She begins to recognize the echoes between the intrusion of this man into her personal space and the intrusion of the state into private life, as protested by Baader Meinhof (and perhaps illustrated in their treatment, regardless of the facts of their deaths or the meaning of their actions). The pressure applied by the man, the coercion, the urging to "be friends," repeated as he tries to force himself on her and, rejected, repeated again as he begins to disrobe, echoes the power of the state to enforce agreeableness and punish refusal (115). The effects of his intrusion are that she sees the immediate result but also the pre-existing condition of this constant exertion of power, of the attempt to control, and not just in the personal but the political. After the man leaves her apartment, the story reports her thoughts:

> She saw everything twice now. She was where she wanted to be, and alone, but nothing was the same. Bastard. Nearly everything in the room had a double effect—what it was and the association it carried in her mind. She went out walking and when she came back the connection was still there, at the coffee table, on the bed, in the bathroom. Bastard. (117)

This double effect is not an ambiguous one, and DeLillo brings us closer to his character in the moment of realization through his use of free indirect. We are right there when the woman's eyes open to something that has always been there, something these parallel experiences are helping her to finally see.

In pressing home the lesson that power must be seen, and in presenting Richter's paintings as the vehicle by which the woman begins to learn it, DeLillo makes the case for political art. Like Richter's, DeLillo's is not Soviet Realism-style political art, or Upton Sinclair-style political art, but an art that urges new ways of seeing not through offering a clear picture of the problem and solution but rather through blurred suggestions that new ways of seeing, and being, must be found. While problems and solutions remain suggestively ambiguous, the crucial role of the artist is not: as DeLillo put it in a 2005 interview, "Writers must oppose systems. It's important to write against power, corporations, the state [...] I think writers, by nature, must oppose things, oppose whatever power tries to impose on us."

This is a notion that has been seen as suspect from at least two sides. To some, the idea that a novelist today can step outside the culture and critique it in order to overthrow it seems quaint, presuming as it does that stepping outside the constraints of language and ways of thinking themselves conditioned by the status quo is possible, even that there is an outside of language from which a culture can be seen and described. To others, this is simply not the job of the artist. George Will famously castigated DeLillo for his novel about Lee Harvey Oswald, *Libra,* calling it "an act of literary vandalism and bad citizenship" and saying, "DeLillo's notion of the writer outside the mainstream of daily life is so radical [that it] stops just a short step from declaring the writer as a kin to Oswald, who, as a defector, was the ultimate outsider." As DeLillo said to David Remnick of Will's criticisms,

> I don't take it seriously, but being called a "bad citizen" is a compliment to a novelist, at least to my mind. That's exactly what we ought to do. We ought to be bad citizens. We ought to, in the sense that we're writing against what power represents, and often what government represents, and what the corporation dictates, and what consumer consciousness has come to mean. In that sense, if we're bad citizens, we're doing our job. (48)

He added, "Will also said I blamed America for Lee Harvey Oswald. But I don't blame America for Lee Harvey Oswald, I blame America for George Will." What DeLillo blames America for is, in part, Will's attitude about the role of art. Art's oppositionality is crucial, DeLillo argues here and in "Baader-Meinhof," and increasingly so as the fact of that potential is denied.

Further, that denial is analogous to the denial of the meaning of oppositional political action, even violent radicalism. Sitting in the snack bar with the man while he talks about the meaningless of his own life, the woman says, "What they did had meaning. It was wrong but it wasn't blind and empty. I think the painter's searching for this" (110). The ekphrastic aspect of this story allows it to be about not simply or even primarily

the question of the meaning of the Baader-Meinhof Group's actions, or Al Qaeda's; rather it becomes a story about the question of oppositional art.

DeLillo famously raised the idea in the voice of a writer character in his novel *Mao II,* that the power once held by the novelist to influence the culture has been usurped by the terrorist. A decade later, his pronouncement was confirmed for many, but I don't think he believes this idea himself. Rather, I think he recognizes the kinship, in Will's term, between the novelist and the terrorist, and, unlike Will, values the attempt to oppose and to change. It is of course a difficult comparison, filled with ambiguity. Looking at Baader-Meinhof—the paintings and the history—DeLillo revisits the way we have thought about and treated political opposition. What's more, and ultimately more interesting for thinking about DeLillo's career and contemporary fiction, he revisits the scene of political art, and asks just how helpless writers, even after the death of the author, the failure of reference, and the containment of subversion, have to be. A decade of perpetual war later, a permanent, unnoticed condition, this is a question particularly worth asking about our writers and ourselves.

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