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Unschuld, du Licht meiner Augen:
Elke Erb in the Company of Friederike Mayröcker
in the Aftermath of German Unification

This essay examines the East German poet Elke Erb’s reading of and responses to the work of the Austrian experimental writer Friederike Mayröcker in her 1994 collection Unschuld, du Licht meiner Augen. Erb’s first post-unification collection, it presents a chronological sequence of texts which formulate Erb’s responses to the challenge of repositioning herself after the GDR’s collapse. Proceeding from the observation of an affinity between Erb’s characteristic ‘processual writing’ and Mayröcker’s construction of her texts as a space of both poetic tension and coherent patterning, the essay shows how Erb’s early readings of Mayröcker provided both the crystallization point from which the collection was to grow and a sense of the textual process to come. The essay concludes with a reading of a series of images of individuation in Erb’s volume in order to demonstrate the transformative process undergone within its span.

Denn die Antwort auf die komplexe Situation eines Unheils ist komplex zu erschließen, und das Hängen an Klarheit verdirbt die Intuition, verrät das aktive Denken an die im Hintergrund verborgene Passivität, an die Sucht nach Idyllik, an den Schlaf jener Diktatur, die Einseitigkeit heißt, an das Ruhelager der Ohnmacht.

Elke Erb

In December 1990, two months after German unification, the East German poet Elke Erb was invited by Torsten Ahrend of the Reclam Verlag Leipzig to edit a selection of work by the Austrian writer Friederike Mayröcker for publication by Reclam. Erb accepted the commission, and in January 1991 went to visit Mayröcker – returning to Berlin with a bag full of books to embark on an intensive close reading. The Reclam selection edited by Erb duly appeared in 1993 under the title Veritas. A year later, in 1994, Erb published her first collection of new poems since the Wende of 1989, the volume Unschuld, du Licht meiner Augen. Read in its entirety, the volume is a record in poetry of a time of significant personal and historical change; its texts, chronologically organized, together form a complex chart of inner development in a period of societal transition and upheaval. It also bears clear traces of the encounter with
Mayröcker and her work, marked for Erb as an encounter with a language and an existence from the other side of the former East–West divide, which sets the frame for the process of renewed self-positioning within the span of the volume.

The present essay sets out to explore Erb’s responses to Mayröcker, and the relation between these responses and the volume in its entirety as a created space of personal and more-than-personal transition and self-reflexivity. It is propelled, too, by an interest in Erb’s commitment to complexity, guaranteed by the uncompromising and uncompromised nature of her poetic writing, as the only valid and ‘active’ answer to the larger public, collective history. As such, this essay moves beyond Barbara Mabee’s 1997 overview account of Erb’s poetry after 1989, which includes some consideration of the encounter with Mayröcker in Unschuld, du Licht meiner Augen, to engage more closely with this volume as a poetic trajectory within a particularly challenging historical period.

1. Ein Dschungel. Zur Kräftigung

“Jetzt möchte ich durch einen Dschungel”, dachte ich im Dezember 1990: it is with this recollection that Erb opens the second section of the volume Unschuld, du Licht meiner Augen, entitled ‘Prospekt 2’, which provides a sequence of commentaries on, and illuminations of, the encounter with Mayröcker. There follows an expansion of the image of the jungle:


In December 1990, it was over a year since Erb’s completion of Winkelzüge oder Nicht vermutete, aufschlussreiche Verhältnisse, an extraordinary volume which, from the starting-point of a spontaneously self-posed life-question – ‘Aber werde ich denn noch lieben?’ (p. 9) –, proceeds to unfold an intricate, proliferating web of textual reflections and amplifications of reflections, a kind of innovative epic which casts the originatory question as its ‘Heldin’ (p. 8). Winkelzüge was written over a time-span of six years, from 1983 to 1989, and represents a marked radicalization of Erb’s ‘processual’ writing initiated in the long poem ‘Alex in M. oder Der Weg zum Ziel’ of 1981 (published as the final poem