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Friederike Mayröcker

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Brief orientation

Friederike Mayröcker was born in Vienna in 1924 and started writing as early as 1939. In 1942, she was enlisted as an assistant secretary in the *Luftwaffe*, the Nazi air force. After the war, Mayröcker started working as an English teacher in Viennese secondary schools, a profession she maintained until 1969, when she was finally able to start living as a freelance author. Mayröcker made her debut in 1946 with the publication of a poem in the Viennese periodical *Plan*, a journal that sought to connect new Austrian literature with the historical avant-garde (especially French surrealism). In 1954 Mayröcker met Ernst Jandl (1925-2000) and although they differed greatly in their poetics and politics, this date marks the beginning of an intense and lifelong partnership between the two poets.

In the immediate post-war decades, trendsetting Austrian journals such as *manuscripts* (*manuskripte*), *transcripts* (*protokolle*), and *new texts* (*neue texte*) provided opportunities for publication, and in 1956 the Viennese Bergland Verlag published Mayröcker's first volume of short prose texts, entitled *Airy Fairy. A Confused Book* (*Larifari. Ein konfuses Buch*). After Stuttgart author Max Bense printed some of her poems in 1964, the German Rowohlt Verlag published *Death by Muses. Poetic Texts* (*Tod durch Musen. Poetische Texte*) in 1966, an anthology of her poems spanning a period of over 20 years. Mayröcker subsequently published collections of prose both with Rowohlt and Luchterhand, before switching to Suhrkamp in 1975, where she remains to this day.

Mayröcker's work encompasses both poetry and prose – and several hybrid in-between formats –, as well as a substantial amount of radio plays. The early twenty-first century publication of her *Collected Poems 1939-2003* (*Gesammelte Gedichte 1939-2003*), which contains more than thousand poems, and the five volumes of her *Collected Prose 1949-2001* (*Gesammelte Prosa 1949-2001*) have since been succeeded by several more books. The institutional recognition of her work has steadily increased since the mid-seventies and she has been awarded numerous prizes, including the Georg Trakl Prize for Poetry (1977), the Great Austrian State Prize for Literature (1982), the Friedrich Hölderlin Prize (1993), the Georg Büchner Prize (2001), the Austrian Book Prize (2016) and the Günter Eich Prize for Radio Drama (2017), as well as Honorary Doctorates from the universities of Bielefeld (2000) and Innsbruck (2015).

Developments

Scholarship has situated the main development in Mayröcker's writing in the prose texts she has produced since the seventies (Kastberger 2009: 20). Up until that point, Mayröcker wrote experimental short prose texts that explored the tension between a freely associative poetics on the one hand and concentrated formal discipline on the other. These earlier texts are highly intertextual and intermedial, incorporating references both to the canon of European cultural history and to the popular culture of the time. They intermingle intra-literary transgressions (resulting in prose poems or the lyricalization of prose) with intermedial ones, such as the profound theatrical and metatheatrical quality of several prose sketches. In addition, Mayröcker experimented with semantics (in the format of instructions, manuals, encyclopedic writing etc.) and the conventional organizing principles of grammar (such as interpunction, paratactical syntax, deixis etc.). The publication of her text *with each clouded peak (je ein umwölker gipfel, 1973)*, however, saw Mayröcker start to explore what she herself described as a rather "unorthodox narrational writing". In a 1983 interview with Siegfried J. Schmidt, she retrospectively said that around 1971 experimental writing

didn't appeal to me anymore. It was boring, in a sense. Of course, that doesn't mean that I left out montage techniques etc. altogether. I stuck to that but I went from a purely experimental writing to a kind of narrational writing, though in interviews I have always declined to label my writing as storytelling. I would still decline this today. I don't want to write stories in any usual sense but I want to approach a totally unconventional, unorthodox narrational writing, if one can call it like that. (Mayröcker/Schmidt 1984: 267f.)*

Mayröcker turned to structural patterns and motifs of autobiographical writing and the rendering of subjective cognition, such as confessional I-narrators, references to childhood memories and romantic relationships, everyday anecdotes, letters, conversations with friends, and the suggestion of intimacy. The experimental character of her writing remains quite evident, though, as she herself indicates in the above quotation. It does not aim at representing *the* life of *the* author but tries to present the volatile consciousness, emotions, and memories of an authorial I that experiences the world in a twofold aesthetic way: through all the senses (aesthesia), and through the appropriation of pre-existing art works, texts, and discursive material (aesthetics).

It is less easy to distinguish a similar periodization across Mayröcker's vast lyrical output. Here, a constant preoccupation with fusing "formal audacity and emotional depth" (De Felip 2020: vii) seems to be in operation. At the same time, one could perhaps identify a growing social and worldly dimension in her later poetic work, for instance in its direct address to concrete people and the suggestive reference to facts of autobiographical reality (that of the aging body, for instance). This is a distinct from her earlier poetry where formal montage was more dominant. Yet we must be cautious with such categorizations. Already in *Death by Muses* (1966) we witness a kind of basic dialogical structure, aiming at a phatic communion with the *Umwelt*, the environment or "world around" one, exemplified in titles starting with "Text with...", or "Ode to...".

Mayröcker's most recent book publications transgress the borders between poetry and prose, reminiscent of her work from the sixties that was not straightforwardly labelled as poetry or prose but rather as "poetic texts" (*poetische Texte*) and "texts in prose" (*Texte in Prosa*). Mayröcker's recent trilogy *études* (2013), *cahier* (2014) and *fleurs* (2016), however, as well as the volume *Pathos and Swallow (Pathos und Schwalbe, 2018)* do not simply mingle generic and medial characteristics. Rather, they develop a hybrid style that Mayröcker herself has characterized as "tender prose":

I've written many, many poems, but now I'm in a phase – and my new book [*Pathos and Swallow*] is included in this – of writing tender prose (*zarte Prosa*), a kind of gentle, affectionate prose which has a lot to do with poetry. I'm fully immersed in this tender prose and thoroughly enjoy it. I don't write poems. I'm writing prose that closely resembles poetry but isn't poetry. And while it's prose, it's not a conventional prose. It's tender prose. (Mayröcker /Larson 2018; see also Lartillot 2020)

These most recent texts display a more anarchic kind of formal freedom, with a typographical design full of incongruent variations, interruptions and transitions, and a seemingly chaotic assemblage of textual fragments, snippets of the imagination and memory particles, signaling, in turn, a lively, irregular and disruptive aesthetic force. The texts explore the possibilities of absolute poetry, a “Lebendgedicht” (Mayröcker 2004: 693; maybe translatable as “living poem”), that understands the intensities of finite human existence, including both passion (*Leidenschaft*) and suffering (*Leiden*) but also its own derivative or secondary textual nature (Sommerfeld 2020).

Avant-Garde Strategies

A striking feature of Mayröcker's work is its idiosyncratic usage of the avant-garde collage technique. In 1972 Mayröcker wrote a two-page programmatic text with the telling title “DADA” (Mayröcker 2001a: 335-337). Here she positions herself in a highly ironic way as “wedged between the two monsters Dadaism and Surrealism” (335) and she broadens her network of influences and inspirations to both older (e.g. Hölderlin) and more contemporary (e.g. Arno Schmidt) writers and artists. The text presents authorship as a shameless re-appropriation of pre-existing material – in later utterances on her poetics Mayröcker calls her authorship “parasitic” (e.g. 2001a: 355). Mayröcker thus both acknowledges and dissolves the authority of each and every cited author or artist, while at the same time establishing new, possibly contradictory correspondences between them. This makes for a very specific intertextual and intermedial poetics, that on the one hand references the aesthetic and discursive material the writing subject incorporates, whilst on the other hand decontextualizing and “defacing” it, rendering it unrecognizable or hard to trace.

In a probing manner, full of rhetorical questions that undermine any solid self-positioning, the “DADA” text presents collage as the technique Mayröcker is most indebted to, as it allows for the conglomeration of conflicting poetics and incongruent material. The basic tension she explores is the one between the systematic and disciplined handling of the material and the subjective associations of a “private language” (Mayröcker 2001a: 336), a language tied to the singular embodied consciousness and experience of the author and thus, in a Wittgensteinian sense, not concerned with legible communication. This combination infuses a parasitic, derivative voice with the intense, existential liveliness of the writing subject. In later decades, subjectivity becomes ever more important in Mayröcker's work, not as the expression of inner emotional life but on a performative, cognitive and embodied level. Both in her longer prose works – without exception written from the first person perspective – as well as in her poetry, Mayröcker explores how the thoughts and perceptions of a singular mind and body are transposed into the literary, aesthetic realm, and thereby depersonalized (Eder 2009).

This second characteristic of her work, the relation between writing and cognitive questions of subjectivity and consciousness, was already raised in the sixties, in line with important genre discussions of the time namely the so-called “long poems” and the “new radioplay”. In 1965 Walter Höllerer created a polemic with his “Theses on the long poem”. Höllerer presented the longer poetic form as a means to criticize hermetic modernist poetry and to produce a more readable and realistic poetic form for the expression of inner life. Mayröcker, however, opted for the long poem as her own variation of concrete poetry, in which she allowed the words to sprawl over several pages, filling them with intertextual and intermedial references and elaborating on traditional metaphors (Kühn 2002). She thereby not only diverged from Höllerer’s view but also from the norms of her fellow concrete poets, who adhered to the stylistic principles of subtraction and condensation. Mayröcker defines her long poems as “excerpts of the totality of my *consciousness of the world*” (in Beyer 1992: 31), thereby making the relation with her own experience of the world explicit; the term “excerpt” (“Ausschnitt”), with its allusion to the Dadaist technique of cutting up, indicates that rather than an inner expression Mayröcker’s work presents a selective recreation of experienced reality.

Questions concerning the poetic rendering of consciousness and subjectivity are also at the center of her radio plays and aural texts. Here, “poetic” shifts so as to become “acoustic” or even “musical”. As Mayröcker formulated in the speech she and Jandl gave in 1969, when accepting the award *Hörspielpreis der Kriegsblinden* for their joint radio play *Five Man Humanity (Fünf Mann Menschen)*, she expected the radio play to offer an “acoustic satisfaction [...] close to the one induced by music” (Jandl/Mayröcker 2016: 137). Mayröcker’s radio texts make use of the acoustic mode to evoke a simultaneous resonance of diverse voices and discursive utterances. At the same time, the reference to an identifiable origin for these voices and words – such as dramatic characters or narratorial positions – is rendered opaque, and the status of the speaking subjects remains in constant flux. The non-sovereign quality of subjectivity and the relation between remembrance and forgetting are some of the prominent preoccupations of these texts. The specificities of her radio plays and the radiophonic medium have clearly further shaped Mayröcker’s longer prose texts since the eighties: a simultaneity of voices, remnants of dialogical structures, the text as echo chamber of previously spoken, heard or read language, the tension between lasting memories and elusive presentism, or, on the very basic level of text production, the extensive use of repetition and variation of lexical elements, syntactical phrases and micronarrative sequences – are all techniques and structures that can be understood as linking Mayröcker’s prose work to her radiophonic and aural texts.

This brings us to the next characteristic of Mayröcker’s work, the vocal pathos of the writing subject. Strikingly, the mimicry of an oral and vocal quality is equally present in Mayröcker’s poetry and prose. In the prose texts, inquit formulae abound that introduce the sentences as spoken or shouted; telephone conversations or discussions between the first person narrator and one or more lovers and friends are rendered in a fragmentary way. In her poetry, lyrical techniques such as the address (apostrophe) of absent or dead companions and the suggestive imagining of the addressee as a hearing person, are frequently used. Mayröcker’s writing is thus also very much concerned with voicing; with the existential need of speaking out, the appeal to hear, and the sensuousness of vocal communication (Arteel 2020). It is a characteristic that blurs the boundaries between the written and the spoken quality of literature, not in favor of orality as immediate presence but rather pointing out the scriptedness of both writing and speaking.

A characteristic closely related to this vocal pathos and identifiable across her poetic work is its quality as affective lyrical speech. Here, Mayröcker participates in the lyrical tradition of poets like Klopstock and Hölderlin, whose euphoric and enthusiastic lyrical voice can be understood as a remodeling of religious poetry. Together with the ubiquitous presence of religious imagery and discourse in Mayröcker's work, the at times ecstatic tone of her writing lends it the quality of profane mystical praying (Grizelj 2017) and stresses its susceptibility to the sublime. We can refer here to the previously mentioned simultaneity of passion and suffering: the hymnic tone does not hold but tips over in the elegiac, undermining any equilibrium and confusing the emotions of exaltation and sorrow as well as the generic characteristics of those lyrical genres (Strigl 2009).

Contents

Apart from the overtly self-reflexive dimension of her writing and direct statements in interviews, Mayröcker has only rarely commented on her work and even more sparsely on ideological or political matters. She has, for instance, not given the so-called *Poetikvorlesungen*, the public lecture series institutionalized at several German universities in which authors discuss core aspects of their poetics. Already in the immediate post-war years her aversion to associating herself with a political position became clear, as she reached out to both parties within the polarized Austrian cultural climate: to the leading figure of the conservative establishment, Hans Weigel, who in 1952 published her first longer prose text in his anthology *Voices of the Present (Stimmen der Gegenwart)*; as well as to the neo-avant-gardists of the Wiener Gruppe and authors associated with this group. Yet while, unlike many neo-avant-gardists, she did not define her poetics as a resistance to the restorative Austrian cultural politics, it was nevertheless the progressive and innovative segment of the cultural landscape that would be most open to Mayröcker's writing.

In her writing, the predominant political dimension lies in the subversion of the symbolic order. Here, Mayröcker's technique of repetition and variation plays an important role, as it destabilizes representations and representatives of authority and normativity on several levels – for instance in regard to the many canonized authors and artists the text quotes and to the oppositional and dogmatic male voice(s) the I-subject discusses with. In this dynamic, the parodic dimension of repetition unfolds itself: the critique and rejection of the male counterpart voices is quoted, repeated and shifted aside. Through this process, the I-subject does not emerge as a sovereign subject but rather embraces the subordinate position, that allows for a fluctuating, metamorphic identity that does not draw attention to itself. Its marginality, evoked more frequently as Mayröcker's career progressed, elicits sympathy with discarded creatures and objects alike. The book *I'm in the asylum. Footnotes of an unwritten work (ich bin in der Anstalt. Fusznoten zu einem nichtgeschriebenen Werk, 2010)* combines marginality as a theme with its metatextual pendant, in that the texts consists only of footnotes. In her latest work, diminutive lexical forms gain importance as a counterforce against large, totalizing ontologies. Mayröcker's texts furthermore subvert the ideology of the nuclear family and the classic psychoanalytic reading of gendered subjectivity with a radically open, indiscriminate and intergenerational constellation or "society" of friends and companions, and a positive, invigorating presentation of the mother-daughter symbiosis.

Conclusion

Though her writings were at first met with a certain perplexity, Mayröcker quickly became a key figure in the context of the Austrian post-war avant-garde. Their stylistic heterogeneity which fused experimental calculation with transgressive pathos, and the sheer quantity of her literary output – as early as 1963 Andreas Okopenko (1930-2010) predicted the impossibility of ever archiving her estate – played a role in these reactions, as did the perseverance with which she as a female author pursued her writing aspirations, “her only fulfilment in life” (Okopenko in Schmidt 1984: 34). The young Peter Weibel (1944) was one of the first to take the literary quality of her work seriously. In 1966 he highlighted the musical quality of Mayröcker’s poetry in particular, and her recycling and collaging of traditional, mainly baroque metaphors. Weibel identified the tension between exploring “progressive” literary techniques and drawing on old, “regressive” semantics (lyrical “Urbilder” concerning nature e.g., or emotional and existential topoi of love, death and mourning) as inherent to the poetry of many neo-avant-gardists, even as a demonstration of “the legendary spirit of the time” (in Schmidt 1984: 39). Jandl commented on how Mayröcker puts conventional lyrical requisites to new use, thereby “making them new and fresh just as Gertrude Stein’s rose” (in Schmidt 1984: 49). Jandl also analyzed her reworking of conventions and models of what he called “prose genres” (under which he in this instance subsumes talks, radio plays, protocols etc.) and the thwarting of the expectations raised by those conventions. Jandl concluded that Mayröcker’s prose, in reflecting on and stretching its own possibilities, resolutely breaks new poetic ground.

Though Mayröcker has always been an *Einzelgänger*, her national and international network is impressive, among authors as well as philosophers and visual artists. In 1973 she was one of the many founding members of the Grazer Autorenversammlung, a collective of progressive Austrian authors founded against the conservative standpoints of the Austrian P.E.N. center and acting for institutional recognition of all authors and their texts. Similarly noteworthy is her regular and successful attendance of the Bielefelder Colloquium Neue Poesie, a yearly initiative of Bielefeld university professors Jörg Drews and Klaus Ramm, which from 1978 until 2003 assembled international poets and artists from the broad realm of concrete, visual and experimental poetry. In a 1980 radio review of the event Mayröcker was called the “secret queen” (in *Neue Poesie* 1997: 12) of the Viennese authors. Also in the seventies, several long stays and travels abroad (Berlin, Cologne, USA, Soviet Union) enabled her to make the acquaintance of authors and artists working in visual, acoustic, and radio art.

Perhaps the most important aspect of her relevance, though, is Mayröcker’s influence on and support of innovative writers from younger generations, ranging from Thomas Kling (1957-2005) through Ulrike Draesner (1962) and Marcel Beyer (1965) to more recent authors such as Mikael Vogel (1975). More than fifty years after Okopenko’s prediction, Mayröcker’s bequest is finally being archived and made accessible for research at the Austrian National Library, which in 2019 acquired a substantial amount of materials spanning the whole of Mayröcker’s career. A smaller archive is to be found at the Vienna Library in Vienna’s city hall, containing a selection of documents from the period 1965-2007.

*All translations of non-English sources in this entry are mine, IA.

Further reading

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