

Footprints Revisited or "Life in the Changed Space  
that I don't Know": Elke Erb's Poetry Since 1989<sup>1</sup>

Barbara Mabee

*Oakland University (Rochester, Michigan)*

[. . .]

Die Katze hatte einen dicken Bauch  
dort unten wo sie ging.

Die Katze ging in eine Zukunft auch  
dort unten wo sie ging.

Ich denke nun:

Wenn der veränderte Blick einer Katze  
in den Anschein des Menschlichen rückt  
könnte dann nicht Verrückten, Verändern  
das, was den Menschen ausmacht, sein?

"Spurentour" (Erb, Sept. 1991,  
*Unschuld, du Licht meiner Augen* 51-52; 1994)

[. . .]

The cat had a fat stomach  
down below where she was walking.

The cat was also walking into a future  
down below where she was walking.

I now think:

If the changed gaze of a cat  
takes on contours of humanness  
couldn't then rearranging, changing  
be that which constitutes a human being?

"Footprints revisited"  
*(Innocence, You Light of My Eyes)*

For East German writers, the short-lived revolution in the fall of 1989 and the subsequent absorption of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) into the Federal Republic of Germany within less than a year launched a process of self-reflection, search for identity, and rearranging of perspectives. Chiarloni and Pankoke have compiled an insightful grouping of poetry from the immediate period after the fall of the Wall—Fall of 1989 to Oct. 3, 1990—in their anthology *Grenzfallgedichte (Poems from the Fall of the Border or Poems from the Border of Normalcy*—as a play on the double meaning of the German word “Grenzfall”). Several common denominators can be gleaned from this anthology: a disappointment over the course of events after the initial revolutionary grassroots movement; skepticism about having been taken in so quickly by the West; and an awakening of lost dreams. Elke Erb’s poem “Perspective in February” (80) in the anthology is representative in its hopeful outlook on the future and its anger-filled tone with regard to the “poisoned nature of the environment / and the damaged nature of human productivity” (80). The poem ends with a sense of curiosity and anticipation springing from the persona’s newest endeavor—the exploration of the question of what constitutes “a German”: “How does he do damage / how does his kindness flourish / is he a sponger?” (80). Erb’s consistent use of the gender “he” could be meant as an intensification of her mocking tone aimed at hierarchical relationships (not uncommon in her work), or simply as indicative of a general lack of gender specificity in the use of language by GDR writers before the *Wende* (turning point or turn of events).

In this essay, I will focus on Elke Erb’s literary output after the *Wende*, her search for poetic self-understanding against the backdrop of political developments, public discourse surrounding the reassessment of East German literature, and Erb’s intense reading encounter (“Lesebegegnung,” Erb, *Unschuld* 25-39) with the Austrian experimental writer Friederike Mayröcker, born in 1924 (14 years older than Erb). For Erb, Mayröcker’s texts were “existence from the other side.” Her daily interaction with them between January 1991 and 1993 offered Erb “resistant” identification with a Western writer’s consciousness and shook a “different I” (26) out of her.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, living with Mayröcker’s poetic landscapes in multifaceted texts as a participating reader sharpened Erb’s inquisitiveness and desire to unearth the interconnectedness of things. This is demonstrated in Erb’s 1992 poem “Ich stoße darauf” (“I hit upon it,” *Unschuld* 81). I intend to focus on three areas in my analysis of

Erb's poems: socio-political commentaries on life in the former GDR and in the new Germany ("political forms and formulas" are her self-claimed foci after the 1980s, as stated in "Lesebegegnung"); use of spaces and spatial metaphors for an unanchored existence in language; intertextuality with Mayröcker and other strategies for reshaping herself and her craft in her poetic workshop (Werkstatt). Initially, I wish to give some background on the literary climate in Germany after the *Wende* and on Erb's position within Germany's literary scene.

Writers' initial euphoria during the *Wende* over successfully breaking loose from the tutelage of their totalitarian state was quickly followed by a painful process of looking back, in the face of the uncertainties and uprootedness that accompanied the cultural transformations. In his 1991 essay, "Affirmation-Utopia-Melancholy. Drawing up a Balance Sheet on Forty Years of GDR Literature," the West German scholar Wolfgang Emmerich referred to the East German writers' state of inner chaos, sense of dislocation, and mourning over lost utopias, hopes, and dreams as "status melancholicus" (328), a term that he considers generally applicable to modern intellectuals' and artists' fundamental experience of alienation and schizophrenia. As documented by many writers themselves in *Die sanfte Revolution (The Gentle Revolution, 1990)*, the post-*Wende* period frequently caused anxiety, a temporary loss of creative literary output, or silence altogether.<sup>3</sup> Marc Silberman's 1993 essay "Speaking with Silence: the GDR Author in the New Germany" attributes the element of silence in literary writers to the changing identity of the author and the loss of an established audience in the new Germany (Silberman 88).

In the transition period surrounding the *Wende*, most writers branched into other genres such as essays, speeches, reportages, documentations, and autobiographies (Cosentino 146). Representative of the literature from the early period after the fall of the Wall are Christa Wolf's *Reden im Herbst (Speeches in the Fall, 1990)*, Helga Königsdorf's *Adieu DDR. Protokolle eines Abschieds (Farewell GDR: Documents of a Parting, 1990)*, and a collection of essays by GDR writers, *Die Geschichte ist offen (History is Open, 1990)*—all three published in 1990. The latter is an insightful document of the time before unification, in which GDR writers express utopias, worries, hurts, and questions about the uncertain future of socialism—Elke Erb among them with a contribution entitled "Selbständigkeit" ("Independence" 45-52). Literary writers' anxi-

eties about their future in the new literary market place were fueled particularly by unsettling criticism from leading West German literary critics—especially Ulrich Greiner, Frank Schirrmacher, and Karl-Heinz Bohrer—in the well-documented “literature controversy” (*Literaturstreit*) that erupted in the summer of 1990 in connection with Christa Wolf’s narrative *Was bleibt* (*Geist* 133-44, *Baumgart* 72-85, and *Anz* 7-29). At the core of the controversy was the West German polemic against socially committed literature (*Gesinnungsästhetik*), the literature of conscience and moralism, and against the regionalism/provincialism of East German literature.<sup>4</sup> In mocking even one of the supposedly greatest postmodern East German writers, Heiner Müller, and his traditional schooling by writers such as Hölderlin, Shakespeare, Brecht, and Artaud, Reinhard Baumgart predicts that after the end of the German Democratic Republic, GDR literature will most likely also dissolve into the West. “The backward Germanness, the slow production, the naive traditional approach, and the eager social commitment of GDR books: all of this will vanish” (85).<sup>5</sup>

To be sure, more favorable and uplifting comments about the fate of GDR literature could also be found. In Wolfgang Emmerich’s above-mentioned essay, he predicted that those texts “that reach conceptually and linguistically beyond the open or hidden (allegorical) criticism of East Germany will remain. These are the texts that speak about the difficulties of the individual, instead of making abstract declarations about a desirable socialism” (340). The poetry that did not pursue any political or educational goals was considered by Emmerich “as perhaps the most valuable treasure of GDR literature” (243).<sup>5</sup>

The group of poets Emmerich singles out as having succeeded in breaking away from enslaving self-attachment to the state and ideological language are the young poets of the East Berlin alternative cultural scene, the so-called Prenzlauer Berg-Connection.<sup>6</sup> This group of young experimental poets and artists, born after 1950, had developed a new self-esteem. This was characterized by Erb in the preface to her 1984 co-authored anthology *Berührung ist nur eine Randerscheinung* (*Touching is only a Marginal Experience*) as “social maturity,” and was the “result of their departure from the authoritarian system, the release from the sovereignty of an imposed meaning” (15).<sup>7</sup> The volume, published in West Germany after it had been rejected for publication in East Germany, consists for the most part of texts by previously unpublished poets from the “al-

ternative scene” and of Erb’s conversations with them about their language-oriented texts and meaning-imbued words. Nobody had a premonition about the double-life of Erb’s co-author Sascha Anderson, an IM (informal co-worker with the State Security Service or *Stasi*/state police) and leading member of the Prenzlauer alternative scene, until it was revealed in 1991 by the expatriated poet/balladeer Wolf Biermann in his Büchner Prize speech. The alleged aesthetic and political autonomy of the entire circle has been questioned and problematized by critics ever since. Anderson himself insisted in an interview with Iris Radisch from the West German paper *Die Zeit* (Nov. 1, 1991) on a state-opposed communication system and infrastructure of the Prenzlauer cultural scene. In Ekkehard Mann’s well-argued article “‘Dadaistische Gartenzwerge’ versus ‘Staatsdichter’” (“‘Dada Garden Dwarfs’ versus ‘State Poets’”) the shared aesthetic resistance to the “slave language” (Erb) of the public domain in the language-oriented and experimental texts of the Prenzlauer poets was at its core a subversive form of autonomy that hastened the erosion of the dictatorship more than the “books of the ‘socio-critical’ writers” (180).

The “counter-culture” saw in Erb’s strong sense of self-determination and resistance to a normative poetics and absolute interpretations a kindred spirit and role model and assigned to her the role of mentor. They shared in their writing of poetry a break with the “enslaved expression” (Erb) and, in the words of Uwe Kolbe, one of the circle’s members, with the “collective lie of the ruling language” (*Berührung* 40). However, as Erb has emphatically stressed, the younger generation was by its very existence free from the bondage of its state (except for a few people like Anderson and Schedlinski who allowed themselves to be used by the *Stasi*), whereas her breaking loose from various confinements had been a slow and agonizing process.<sup>8</sup> As members of the “middle generation,” which had been raised with a sense of mission and ideological grounding, their confrontations about aesthetic and ideological rules had taken place in public “lyrical debates” in the 1960s and 1970s (Mabee, *Poetik* 20-26).

Most of the publications of the Prenzlauer artists, whose network extended to Leipzig, Dresden, and other cities, combined their radical poetry, short prose texts, and theoretical reflections with paintings and graphic art in unofficial, self-published journals (called *Samisdat* after a Russian neologism meaning self-publication) with minimal editions of 20-100 copies (Eigler, “Responsi-

bility" 162-66 and "Margins" 148-50 and Michael 1255-66).<sup>9</sup> Erb in her role as critic, mentor, and highly respected writer was one of the few women to publish in these unofficial journals. After German unification many selected pieces from the 30 self-published journals have been gathered in collections and become part of Germany's joint body of literature; however, without their role as counterforces to official discourses and censorship they lost their subversive sting. By 1993, all of the political information journals had been dissolved and only a few of the literary ones remained intact with contributors from eastern and western parts of Germany.

Before we go on to discuss Erb's poetry directly, a few facts about Erb's life and work might enhance our reading of her texts and shed some light on the place she holds in GDR literary history and in the West. Born in 1938 in Scherbach/Eifel (in the western part of Germany), Erb moved with her family to Halle in the former German Democratic Republic in its founding year of 1949—no doubt, a political statement on her parents' part. She belongs to the "middle-generation" of GDR poets who made their poetry debut in the 1960s and early 1970s. Her debut volume *Gutachten (Evaluation)* was published in 1975 after she had studied German, Slavic Literatures, history, and pedagogy at the University of Halle between 1957 and 1963. From 1963-1966, she worked as a lecturer for the publishing house *Mitteldeutscher Verlag* in Halle, then moved on to Berlin to become a free-lance writer. Her ten-year marriage to fellow poet and critic Adolf Endler was dissolved in 1978. First-rate translations from the Russian since 1970 (Zwetajewa, Block, Gogol, Pasternak among them) and four edited collections of women poets (Sarah Kirsch, Zwetajewa, Droste-Hülshoff, and Mayröcker) have helped to establish her as a renowned translator and literary critic. Her own collections of poetry and short prose have won her the prestigious West German Peter Huchel Prize (1988), the East German Heinrich Mann Prize (1990) and the Erich Fried Prize (on Mayröcker's recommendation in 1995). She had never joined the SED Party, but was a member of the GDR Writers' Union. Her residence has remained in East Berlin on the outskirts of the Prenzlauer Berg and in the immediate vicinity of the former Berlin Wall.

The poetry that Erb wrote between the *Wende* and June of 1991 found in *Poets Corner 3* consists for the most part of a working through the experience of the *Wende* itself, and life under the repressive power structures of the old regime. In sarcastic and ironic

descriptions or more subtle mocking allusions, she pokes fun at the bureaucratic machinery and spying activities by the omnipresent and omnipotent *Stasi*. As a strong and long-standing advocate of autonomy of perception and expression, Erb is highly critical of citizens who are all too willing to submit themselves to an affirmative bonding with the state and to noncritical consumption of ideas. In "Mir dämmert es" ("It Dawns on Me" 32) from January of 1990, she composes a linguistically playful monologue about the all-pervasive network of the *Stasi* with its extensive phone tapping, eavesdropping, and spying network. The persona is filled with anger and frustration upon the realization of the suffered harassment and extent of the betrayal: ". . . all das, was man liest, lautlos, // belauscht ist es worden / im Ohrlabyrinth. Oder wie / war es ? Gar gesehen?" '. . . all that/ which one reads, silently, // it was overheard / in the labyrinth of the ear. Or how / was it? Even seen?'

From July 1990 comes Erb's "Postfeudaler Fürstenwandel" ("Postfeudal Transformation of Aristocrats" 33), in which she draws in four couplets an ironic portrait of the change of the eastern (GDR) aristocrats to western (FRG) aristocrats which, in a play on the word "fromm" (pious), mocks the model of the authoritarian state system interested only in appearance ("der fromme Schein"). "Verfolgt und auf den Punkt gebracht" ("Pursued and Brought to a Point" 34-35) from August 1990 is a haunting poem about the "autokratische Schmachgespinst" 'autocratic web of disgrace' that persecutes by day and night. Like a vampire, it does not let go of its victim. The accusations directed against the old GDR regime and its various forms/levels of terrorizing and controlling individuals "is driven to a point" in the final stanza. Here the phantom—the "Nichts" 'Nothing'—turns into a "tödlicher Druck auf die Kehle" 'a deathly pressure on the throat' that has left "eternal" footprints on peoples' interior.

In "Sturmvögel der Revolution" ("Storm Petrels of Revolution" 35), written in October 1990, Erb again attacks poetically the hierarchical structure of her so-called democratic state. The mockery of power is here depicted in the sarcastically drawn image of the "Schlammflächentatze in Ludwig XVI. / offenes Fluchtkutschenfenster" 'Swampy puddle paw in Louis XVI's open flight carriage window.' Erb herself explains in a conversation with Durs Grünbein, a fellow poet from a younger generation, printed in *Niemandland. Zeitschrift zwischen den Kulturen* in 1992, that the paw resting in the window of the fleeing carriage is meant as a

rhetorical image, the rhetoric of the screamer, who watches passively in a state of impotence.<sup>10</sup> Clearly, the finger is pointed toward the politicians in charge during the revolution in November 1989, who had no alternative to offer but could simply watch from their regal sidelines.

The longest poem to be discussed here from *Poet's Corner 3* is "Thema verfehlt" ("Off the Topic" 36-40) from 1990 and the beginning of 1991.<sup>11</sup> The poetic persona looks back on the fall of the revolution and reflects on the quality of the disappearing everyday life. Scenes observed on television on the memorable night in the privacy of the home flash through the mind of the persona—from overheard bits of conversations by oppositional and state-affirmative camps to the "crowd of comrades" gathered together after work for "Umkehr" 'conversion.' The persona is moved when remembering her loneliness that night and her calling on the "Totengeister" 'dead spirits'—parents, other elders, the "Reds, the leftists, the dead"—so that they might also partake in the event and see the unbelievable changes around them. Using the editorial "we," the persona clearly identifies her/his alignment with the "opposition." The juxtaposition of snatches of dialog among those obediently bound to the state with comments from the persona creates a dynamic tension throughout the entire poem. Often the mockery is explicit in the text: "Die schärfste Kritik kommt von innen. 'Betrogene Betrüger.'" 'The sharpest criticism comes from inside. "Betrayed betrayers.'" Criticism is especially directed at the non-thinking people who only have their small houses or baseball on their minds and don't take a position on anything—something to which a housewife publicly and remorsefully pleads guilty.

Lost utopias, loneliness, and resignation flow together in the *leitmotif* "Marx, der dreht sich im Grabe um" 'Marx, he is turning in his grave' and the repeated phrase "Alles Tarnung / von hier bis Kamtschatka. Die Klasse, die Klasse, / die klassenfeindliche Masse" 'All camouflage / from here to Kamtschatka. Class, class, / the class-opposed masses.' Particularly the ending of the poem seems to validate Wolfgang Emmerich's claim that disillusionment about 'real existing socialism,' which had already set in before the political collapse, had evoked a "status melancholicus" among GDR writers. The premise of Emmerich's assertion that the loss of utopia had flowed into frozen melancholy is certainly embedded in Erb's concluding lines of "Thema verfehlt" when she calls on parents, the elders, "the Reds, the leftists, the dead":

[. . .]

sie rief, allein vor der Wand:  
Seelen, die flügelten, blickten,

als ich sie damals holte  
wie jemand ohne Heimat,  
der mit dem Wind, nicht seinem,  
ein Segel hält, nicht das seine,  
auf einem Wasser, nicht seinem . . .

[. . .]

called them, alone before the wall:  
Souls that winged, gazed,

back then, when I fetched them  
like someone without a homeland,

someone who holds a sail, not his own,  
into the wind, not his own,  
on a body of water, not his own . . .

It is noteworthy that Erb uses the phrase “ohne Heimat” ‘without homeland’ in this poem for the state of displacement, uprootedness, and loss of the ungraspable “principle of hope” that the philosopher Ernst Bloch speaks of in the ending of *Prinzip Hoffnung* (*The Principle of Hope*):

The true genesis is not at the beginning, but at the end, and it only begins to take shape when society and being become radical, that is, grasp themselves by the roots. But the root of history is the human being, who works, creates, redefines, and overcomes the givens. If he has grasped himself and has grounded his essence, without loss or alienation, in genuine democracy, then there comes into being something which appears to everyone during childhood and where no one has yet been: *Heimat* (Bloch 3, 1628).

Erb’s struggle with redefining herself and her new home base in unified Germany manifests itself in the poem “Bau-Sinn” (“Building Intent” 46; June 4, 1991) and, interestingly, she chose to include this poem in her 1994 collection *Unschuld, du Licht meiner Augen*. The poem traverses an intricate web of spatial images all

related to rooms in a house until it switches in the end to geographic locations—the Sahara Desert and the Gobi Desert. The spatial signification relates to the two Germanys coming together and demonstrates Erb's craft in associative writing. The rooms can suggest a physical dwelling place but also a mental or poetic anchoring point. In the ambiguous German word "Oberstübchen," meaning either small room upstairs or mental capability, the poem creates a space that the reader must enter in order to see the intricacy of the poem's texture. Seeing the playful encircling of the brain-related quality of "Oberstübchen," readers can follow the maze of spatial references to a point of epiphany. The building that the opening lines refer to, "Sie können ruhig / gebaut haben, was sie wollen. / Dieser Kammer hier—Landkemenate—/ . . . / kommt nichts gleich. . . ." 'They surely were able / to build what they want to. / This room here—ladies' room in the country—/. . . / can't be matched by anything . . . .' The house, seen as a storing place for cultural artifacts and traditions, signifies the conflicting cultural traditions that the two Germanys have developed during their 40 years of division. Since there is no persona constructed in the poem, one can assume that Erb is referring to herself as a poet preferring to stay or continue in her own space, so to speak, or it can be related to a more general part of the East German population that is most satisfied in continuing with the traditions and cultural artifacts accumulated during their forty years of existence. A future-oriented break occurs toward the end: "Was immer sie bauen, nichts von dem / kommt dieser Kammer gleich, diesem Oberstübchen, oder der Wohnküche unten sogar, / wiederholten sich diese - Landkemenaten - / . . ." 'Whatever they build, nothing can match this upper room / or even the large kitchen down below, / if these—ladies' rooms—repeated themselves / . . .'

Erb develops this notion of adhering to the old more fully in her two-page poetological statement in *Poet's Corner* 3, under the title "Gedicht Werkstatt" ("Poetry Workshop"), which is strategically placed between a 1989 and a 1990 poem. The key sentence here is "Ändern sich die Umstände, zeigen sich die Konstanten" 'Whenever circumstances change, the constancies show themselves.' Gerrit-Jan Berendse has related this poetological statement in Erb's poetry workshop to her continuity in writing after the *Wende* and her preoccupation with her workshop. Berendse's study claims that the retreat to regionalism and private discourse was a common phenomenon among East German writers after the *Wende* (Berendse

146-52), particularly among those who had advocated an open communicative exchange. Erb's acknowledgment of a writer's crisis at the end of 1990, explained in an inserted journal-like prose section, "Lesebegegnung" ("Reading encounter") in her next volume *Unschuld, du Licht meiner Augen* (1994), is indicative of her search for a poetic/aesthetic space that would be conducive to a creative connecting of regionality and the world at large. The new space she desires to traverse, Erb calls "an intellectual jungle" (25). The break in her own poetic development, which she claims would most likely also have occurred without the change of events, must be viewed as her questioning the direction of her process-oriented style of writing that she had begun to develop in *Vexierbild* (*Picture Puzzle*, 1983).<sup>12</sup> It is a mode of creating fields of words in graphically visually fractured texts (inspired by Erb's contact with the art scene of the Prenzlauer Berg) with open spaces for reflection, examination, and association. It breaks with her earlier result-oriented poetry and short prose text and encourages readers to participate in the creation process of the text. In *Kastanienallee* (*Chestnut Boulevard*, 1987), Erb even provides detailed commentaries about the process of writing the poems, printed in smaller print below the literary text and composed within a more and more closed poetry workshop. In "Warnung" ("Warning" 53), a poem is cut down to its rudiments from an earlier, longer poem that centered on the poet's insatiable rapacity or consumer attitude in regard to already existing language—imagery as well as syntactic and semantic structures:

Mörder Meister Verdacht  
 Der Feind steht draußen  
 Diese Übermacht Mummenschanz  
 Diese Diktatur

Murderer master suspicion  
 The enemy is standing outside  
 This superpower masquerade  
 This dictatorship

As commentator, Erb attempts to interrogate herself in the four following pages of small print (including the original longer poem with the editing process in margins): "Vielleicht gelingt es mir, diesen Text, / der eine Interpretation abzuweisen scheint, weil er Gestalt geworden, dasteht, / wie ein vor den Wald gelaufenes

Rotwild . . ." 'Perhaps I will succeed, this text, / which seems to refuse interpretation, / because having taken definite shape it stands there/ like red deer after running out from the forest . . .'

Erb's process-oriented style as an interaction with earlier texts by rewriting them or commentating on them is perfected as a strategy in her autobiography *Winkelzüge* (*Shady Tricks*, 1991), a 445-page poetic text composed between 1983 and October 1989 (interrupted by other writing projects) with the playful zest of her named kindred spirits: Munchhausen, the Pied Piper of Hamelin, and Eulenspiegel (17). This postmodern text, completed by the time of the *Wende* in 1989 and published in 1991, blurs fiction and biography, follows no clear chronology, and playfully engages author, narrator, and reader in their "reading" and "writing" as well as "re-writing" of Erb's life and earlier texts. The text encourages the reader to become an "active participant in the formation of the text, i.e., as co-author of the evolving text" (Eigler, "Margins" 151 and Simpson 272-74). At the outset of *Winkelzüge*, in a section significantly entitled, "Sie stirbt. Sie stirbt nicht." 'She dies. She does not die.' (15), Erb links author and reader in the processes of self-reflecting, re-imagining, and constructing identity based on personal and collective history:

Die Betrachter (Autor und Leser) werden,  
was sie gewähren und ihnen in den Sinn kommt,  
der Heldin sofort zukommen lassen müssen,

wollen sie ein Erbe nicht schmälern, das sie antreten,  
wenn die gestellte Frage ihnen am Ende des Textes  
die Heldenrolle übergibt.

The observers (author and reader) will  
have to pass onto the heroine immediately  
what they perceive and what enters their mind,

if they do not want to diminish the heritage, into which  
they enter,

when the question posed hands over to them the role of the  
heroine at the end of the text.

Erb's reading of the experimental texts by Friederike Mayröcker for the publishing house Reclam that had asked her to assemble a representative collection of Mayröcker's work (poetry, short prose,

drama) provided her with the opportunity to work through her period of disorientation and to gain access to Western thought and aesthetics. Mayröcker, like Erb, has been associated with experimental poetry/short prose, dada, surrealism, association techniques, and postmodernism, but she refuses to be confined to any particular movement or school (Lindemann 92). Even before Erb's deep immersion in the reading of Mayröcker, many affinities can be noted when one compares their works.

Mayröcker and Erb are both grounded in the exploration of signification processes that had its beginning in the twenties of this century when avant-garde writers began to deconstruct the representational concept of language and began to experiment with montage techniques and other modes of writing as a way of breaking away from social dictates and norms. Both Erb and Mayröcker have in their works probed extensively the nature of language and signification rather than seeking primarily to express existential truth. In Mayröcker's case, her contact with Ernst Jandl (to this day he is her best friend and critic as well as her "Lebensgefährte"—'partner for life') and the Vienna group known for its experimentation and playful innovations, gave her a direction for her life as a writer. Others associated with this Vienna group were Konrad Bayer, Oswald Wiener, Franz Mon, Helmut Heißenbüttel, Eugen Gomringer, Hans Artmann, and Friedrich Achleitner. Many of them were only published in short-lived journals that had circulated in small numbers—not unlike the situation with poets from the Prenzlauer Berg in East Berlin and other major East German cities.

It is interesting to note that Erb stresses in "Lesebegegnung" that she approached her reading of Mayröcker's work with "Widerstand" 'resistance' after having visited her and been given by her a bag full of her books. Resistance signals caution so as not to be absorbed by the other text but to approach it critically with one's own screening devices ("Rastersiebe" 26). A mixture of intense respect and the fear of losing her own ground and craft flows through Erb's 14 pages of inserted prose commentaries in "Lesebegegnung" and in her poems, "text-echo[sic]s" are found that are her reader-response to Mayröcker's texts. At times Erb and/or the poetic persona surround themselves with a protective skin ("Hornhaut") in order to avoid injury and self-exposure as in the poem "Sie in meinem Haus" ("She in my house" 14), an imaginary (wishful) visit of the writer to Erb's home in the country.<sup>13</sup> Wishing

to reach out to the other, the persona makes an attempt to see the world through the eyes of the female visitor:

[. . .]

Wo nämlich schaut sie hinaus?

Wie nämlich schaut sie hinaus.

Wohlbehalten?

“Nein, die Fenster sind nicht zu verrücken.”

“Nein, die Küche selbst  
schaut nicht hinaus.”

[. . .]

Where does she really look outside?

How does she really look outside

well-meaning?

“No, the windows cannot be moved.”

“No, the kitchen itself  
does not look outside.”

Through the eyes of her guest, the world has taken on a new appearance and seems to have reversed perspectives in the familiar setting: the kitchen appears to be gazing outside and the windows have shifted and reflect different sights. In the poem “Cosine” (15-17) changing perspectives become the main focus of the poem. Prefacing the poem with a cryptic excerpt from Mayröcker’s *Stilleben* (*Still Life*) with an accompanying reference to the page reference in that text, Erb encourages readers to decode the connecting element between the texts or to compare the texts more closely as one unified body. The signal the reader receives before entering Erb’s text is the word “Dialogfehler” ‘dialogue error’ and a premonition that indifference and listless eating might lead to death. In the poem itself, a persona initially simply wonders “Werde ich nicht mehr sein?” ‘Will I not be any more?’ The reader wonders whether this might mean a fear of losing the poetic voice altogether. Receiving no “echo” or feedback from the natural surroundings, the self-doubting poet-persona finally gets a message from the unconscious (“aus dem Nicht [sic]?” ‘from nothing?’) in the form of an imperative—“sieh deinen Tod” ‘see your death’—reminiscent of the baroque motif “memento mori.” While resting in a state of bewilderment,

the persona is called by “the pages” of a familiar voice lurking in the background—by her lyrical dialogue partner (Friederike Mayröcker). In the second and final section, biblical allusions to the Apocalypse can be noted when the persona is continually hit by floods, until he/she comes to rest in a state of peace and covers her/his nakedness (vulnerability). The unconscious releases here, no doubt, archetypal images—water, earth, and wood—that according to C.G. Jung are essential as “symbols of transformation” in the constitution of the self (Jung 5, 247). The concluding stanza evokes a dying of the old self so that something new can “sprout,” as suggested by the word “Spriesssatz” ‘sprouting sentence’ (17). Perceiving this abstract, dream-like scenario (the word dream is used twice in the corresponding passage in Mayröcker’s *Stilleben*), against the backdrop of Erb’s reception of Mayröcker’s texts as “existence from the other side” (25), we can glean the message that the disoriented poet, dislocated from the home base, has no intention of being ruled by feelings of futility and indifference but desires instead to start anew by existing in creative spaces of language and welcoming nourishment from the dialogue partner.

Also in “Wo das Nichts explodiert” (“Where Nothing Explodes” 95-96), the disinherited mind creates imaginary spaces outside the self and everyday life, where it will continue to hear various orders: “Wer spricht? Von hinten / wieder - der Imperativ!” ‘Who speaks? From behind / again - the imperative!’ Allusions to memories of social realities in the GDR are subtle in this poem, as for example in the parody on the famous song: “Auferstanden aus Ruinen” (“Resurrected from the Ruins”), written by the former culture minister Johannes Becher. The poem concludes with the poetic persona expressing an interest in the imaginative space outside of the everyday realm:

[ . . . ]

“Die entschiedenen Worte aber,  
die Unterschiede, die Imperative,

dort vorn irgendwo ins Gewebe gerissen  
haben sie ihre ledigen Schnitte,  
wo das winzige Nichts explodiert.

So erwecken sie mein Interesse.

[ . . . ]

The decided words, however,  
 the differences, the imperatives,  
 there in front torn somewhere into the fabric  
 they have their single cuts,  
 where the tiny nothing explodes.

In this way they arouse my interest.

In the unbound space “no place nowhere” (I borrow the phrase from the title of Christa Wolf’s narrative *Kein Ort Nirgends, No Place Nowhere*, depicting a fictive meeting between the German writers Heinrich von Kleist and Karoline von Günderode in 1804,) where words can explode with creative energy, Erb and Mayröcker both experience life to the fullest. Erb’s “text-echoes” on Mayröcker follow a journey into the past and future across spatial and temporal boundaries into the prehistory of the self in the “museum of prehistory” (110). Her “geistiges Auge” ‘awake/intellectual eye’ (119), leaves nothing uncovered, as she demonstrates in “Ich stoße darauf” ‘I Hit upon It’ (119), a simple poem that signifies banal digging with a spade in a garden—but brings surprising elements to the surface that are all interrelated with each other. In “Lasz uns einander den Arm reichen und ein Stück gehen” (“Let us reach out our arms to each other and walk a little” 19), spelled with sz in “lasz” to show respect for Mayröcker who kept this spelling over decades because her typewriter had no ß letter), we gain insight into Erb’s unique strategies of intertextuality. Here she uses the direct line from Mayröcker’s text on page 88-89 and opens her text with a greeting, so to speak, to the other: “Ich (Lese-Wind-Harfe) / antworte” ‘I (Reading-Wind-Harp) / answer.’ Expanding on the train of thought developed by Mayröcker in the passage in *Stilleben*, she embarks on a search for the author through a maze of spatial metaphors until she reaches the top stairway, where Mayröcker has taken her consciousness—“Treppen / hochoben” ‘stairs / high above.’ Getting too close to the space of the other means losing balance. “Weil ich anstoße. Immer. Nicht im Gleichgewicht gehe” ‘Because I get close. Always. I do not walk with balance.’ Both she and Mayröcker enjoy the state of being unsettling—“[s]törrisch verwirrend: Arm in Arm!” ‘stubbornly confusing: arm in arm!’ (19).

The intertextuality between Erb and Mayröcker displayed in *Unschuld, du Licht meiner Augen* demonstrates perfectly Julia Kristeva’s notion of Bakhtin’s dialogism as a form of writing, in

which one greets the other, and subjectivity and communication come together as intertextuality (Kristeva 66).

Another model that applies to Erb's reading of Mayröcker in her "text-echoes" is that of Patrocínio Schweickart, which is set forth in the essay, "Reading Ourselves: Toward a Feminist Theory of Reading" (31-63). Schweickart describes mainstream reader-response theories as being preoccupied with "issues of control and partition" (55) with regard to the distinction between the contribution of the author/text and the contribution of the reader. In contrast, in the dialectic of communication informing the relationship between the feminist reader and the female author/text, the feminist reader attempts to connect by working through the contradictory implications of the desire for relationship and for intimacy—up to and including a symbiotic merger with the other. For the woman reader, according to Schweickart, the intersubjectivity of the dialogical model as a model for reading holds a Utopian construct of producing community, a potentially close connectiveness between women readers and writers. Schweickart asserts convincingly that the feminist reader does not encounter simply a text but a "subjectified object" which allows her to connect and to come into close contact with an interiority that is not her own, but is "a power, a creativity, a suffering or a vision."

The dialectic between closeness and resisting/distancing in Erb's reading of and responding to Mayröcker exudes a creative energy and gives strength to Erb's process of reshaping herself, her poetic craft. Erb's work as a whole clearly displays a feminist consciousness, particularly her imagery, which is frequently centered around a woman's household and everyday life, but also her extensive editorial commentaries to her poetry collections of individual women writers (Droste-Hülshoff, Kirsch, Zwetajewa, and Mayröcker). Erb's acute sensitivity to women's struggle for autonomy and identity amidst "situations and statuses conferred" (Scott 34)—a major focus in recent feminist theory—can be noted in her anthologies on women poets and in her own poetic strategies of resistance against various types of impositions, be they social, aesthetic, political, or ideological. It is not surprising then that, in the face of the new socio-political reality after the collapse of the GDR in 1989-90, Erb would be greatly inspired by another woman writer during the painful process of clarifying her own position as a poet in the changed social situation.

Erb's newly developed concept of creating entities of wholeness and circular structures stem from her desire to get to the bottom of things and to see their interrelatedness. The continual shifts of spatial and temporal perspectives keep readers on the alert and encourage shifts in their own consciousness when experiencing a form of illumination ("Licht" as in the title of her latest work) in the act of reading. Thomas Rietzschel's mockery of Erb's "schwärmerische[r] Titel" 'swooning title' in the *Frankfurter Rundschau* clearly misses the point, namely the ironic self-consciousness embedded in *Unschuld, du Licht meiner Augen*. Even more inappropriate is Konrad Franke's critical judgment in *Süddeutsche Zeitung* that "[d]iese Autorin verachtet die ratio . . ." 'this author despises intellect.' With her distancing glance and parody-loving tone—covering a wide range from grim humor to gentle laughter, biting irony to sarcasm and mockery—she has poetically taken a reading of the problematics in German-German relationships in unified Germany: "Man spricht Deutsch" 'One speaks German,' 86; "Im schönsten Seelengrund / steht meiner Heimat Haus" 'In the most beautiful soul depths / stands the house of my homeland' 21.

Her memory journeys into her private and collective past in the former republic are firmly grounded in the autonomy of her memory and perception, as she states in "Archiv" ("Archive" 99): "Ich stehe, meine ich, dem eigenen Gedächtnis doch näher / als dort den Geheimdienst-Akten. // Selbst, wenn es völlig versagt 'I am, I believe, after all closer to my own memory / than to the secret service-files over there. // Even if it malfunctions completely.' Erb's insistence on the validity of her own memory over the archive of the secret police, currently administered by Joachim Gauck and his board, does not come as a surprise to readers of Erb's œuvre.<sup>14</sup> For her autonomy means not to be manipulated or instrumentalized by the "imperatives" of the voice from behind or to be utilized for purposes outside of one's own governance. In "Wir haben keinen gezwungen" ("We Did Not Force Anybody" 66), East German population categories are drawn around the three different types of witnesses taking stock of their former life in the GDR and rhetorically joined by the same opening line in each of the three stanzas—"man musste nicht" 'one did not have to.' The three types of witnesses represent three major types of GDR citizens: the dedicated, enthusiastic state supporter, acting on his/her own volition; the resistance fighter who survived with an ego fairly intact; and the lukewarm

citizen, who became a perpetrator through blackmail and is still unsure about his position (brought out by halting, abrupt, almost stuttering utterances and the thrice repeated phrase "kann sein" 'maybe'): "Ich hatte Angst. Oder auch nicht. / Sie haben mich erpreßt. / Ich hatte keine Angst. / Kann sein. Ich hätte besser / ohne sie / gewiss doch lieber / ohne sie / kann sein, gelebt." 'I was afraid. Or perhaps not. / They have blackmailed me. / I was not afraid. Maybe. I would have lived better / without them, certainly rather without them / maybe.'

The title poem of *Unschuld, du Licht meiner Augen* (64-65) addresses in Erb's characteristically mocking tone a situation in which she believes she has been manipulated and instrumentalized by a former friend. The process of coming to grips with her own narrow view of her male friend and their friendship is depicted as an agonizing ordeal, since it involves a critical reexamining of several different positions. Behind the break-up of the friendship lies a complex issue that is tied to the literary controversy in Germany surrounding the accusation that Christa Wolf was a "state author" after her publication of *Was bleibt*. Because Erb identified the first name Joachim and the abbreviated form Jochen and created a sound association in the word "Schädelstätten," followed by a telling ellipsis, critics have already assumed that this is the writer Joachim Schädlich, who left the former German Democratic Republic before the Wall came down. Some of his former GDR colleagues have taken issue with his public comments, for example his denial in the newspaper *Frankfurter Allgemeine* (June 28, 1990) that there are no provable specifics of GDR literature. Others have been critical of his statement that literature in the GDR stood "from its very beginning under the pressure of the state monopoly on thinking and speaking."<sup>15</sup>

As this poem clearly invites identification of persona and author, readers can assume that the persona's wish represents Erb's desire to be seen and heard by her male friend Jochen for *what she is* instead of responding to the "verlangte Ich-Bild" 'demanded ego-image' that lacks wholeness. Her image of the poet-friend, however, is also far too flat, undifferentiated, and calls for re-examination if trust is ever to be re-established, as indicated in the opening lines:

Nun, da ich, zeigt sich, zu flächig sehe  
(wo ich deiner als des mir teuren Joachim gewiß bin),

und die Figuren, gleich in sich gekehrten Gemälden  
 und beschlossen in ihre Konturen, sich ablösen, ab  
 zu wandern scheinen unter die eigenen Abschiedsblicke,  
 schwinden, jede wie eine Seilbahn hinunter [. . .]

Now, since I, as proven, see too shallowly  
 (being sure of you as my dear Joachim),

And the figures, like introverted paintings  
 and encased in their contours, become detached

seem to wander off under their own departing glances,  
 each one like a cable railway downhill [. . .]

Only if both partners were to remove their facades and present themselves to the outside and to each other authentically could their friendship ever be renewed. The distorted view that both personae now have of each other is as unfitting and absurd as the bold image of unprepared venison in its original form found in the forest equipped with silverware for better digestion ("Wildbrett im Waldbesteck" 'wild game in forest frame'). A climactic and tongue-in-cheek point of fruition occurs in the image of the dead roasted deer ("gebratene Reh"), which also appears elsewhere in the volume as a configuration of a self undergoing a transformational process: "vielleicht tendenziös gegen die stichelnde Ideal-Norm, [. . .] wird das verlangte Ich-Bild / ein gebratenes Reh" 'perhaps tendentially against the taunting ideal norm, [. . .] does the demanded ego-image / become a roasted deer' (65). In the end, however, the skinned body of the animal does not remain intact as the image of the self. Venison is not digested in the forest, but instead a live deer is sighted "gazing in amazement, while sniffing the scent." In other words, the persona is not swallowed up by the powerful call for a "demanded ego-image" (by the image or status conferred on it) but assumes agency in the shape of a living deer that stands apart from the herd. The deer signifies a kind of individuation as it frees itself from abuse and freely explores its surroundings.

Erb's poetry collections since the *Wende* reveal a deep concern for a reassessment of subjectivity and clarification of position on a personal, aesthetic, and socio-political level. During the obviously painful process of reexamining perspectives and constituting a new poetic self, she has radically challenged the notion of fixed identity

and advocated revisiting footprints, as suggested by "Spurentour," the poem in preface to this essay, in order to discover "contours of humanness" and authentic relationships. Her poetry confronts borderlines of various kinds—among them barriers between East and West and inner walls that were erected on both sides of the Berlin Wall. Through linguistically playful strategies, parody and mockery, symbols of transformation, and memory processes she points toward ways of dissolving barriers and constructing entities of wholeness. It is clearly essential for her to constitute a new self via intertextuality with other women writers. Her female reader-response to Mayröcker is a unique model in its intensity as a lyrical dialogue that weaves together the exploration of female subjectivity, individuation, and unbound spaces of creativity. After a three-year period of immersion in Friederike Mayröcker, the phoenix is rising from the ashes, as it were. In the words of the German critic Elisabeth Lenk: "Woman can only develop her new relationship to herself through relationships with other women. Woman will become the living mirror of woman in which she loses herself in order to find herself again" (57). In Erb's case it was the fortuitous assignment she received from the Reclam publishing house in Leipzig to "lose herself" in the writings of Friederike Mayröcker. Readers accompanying her on her exploratory journeys are asked to participate in poetic processes of confrontation, individuation, and (fantastic) transformation.

## Notes

1. I would like to thank Oakland University for a research grant during my sabbatical semester in the fall of 1994 that made this study possible. The quote in the title is from Erb's letter to Friederike Mayröcker (July, 1991), printed in Erb's *Unschuld, du Licht meiner Augen* (27).
2. In the afterword to her edited collection of selected texts by Friederike Mayröcker, *Veritas, Lyrik und Prosa 1950-1992*, Erb also refers to "resistance" as a fundamental component of her reading strategies: "Naturally, now I no longer have the first resistance at my disposal in an unbroken fashion. Reading lives with writing" (283). All the translations in this article are my own unless indicated otherwise.
3. Erb's essay "A few words about the fact that fears are actually useless" (*Die sanfte Revolution* 237), demonstrates a reaction against flat, gloomy prognoses. She maintains that fears of an approaching calamity only indi-

cate a hampering need for a clear blueprint behind which lurk hidden passivity, an obsession with the idyllic . . . one-sidedness, and “the resting place of powerlessness” (237).

4. For a comprehensive overview of the debate and issues surrounding it, see Deiritz and Krauss.

5. Emmerich's essay appeared also in a slightly different version under the title “Status melancholicus. Zur Transformation der Utopie in der DDR-Literatur.”

6. To apply the term “autonomous,” however, is problematic for the Prenzlauer scene in view of the Stasi connections of two of their key figures, Sascha Anderson and Rainer Schedlinski. (See Cosentino and Müller's anthology “*im widerstand/in mißverstand*” *Zur Literatur und Kunst des Prenzlauer Bergs* and Jane Kramer's “Letter from Europe” in *The New Yorker*.)

7. For a more detailed study of commonalities between Erb and the younger poets, see my article “Autonomie und Widerstand: Elke Erbs Texte und die Jünger der Szeneliteratur des Prenzlauer Bergs.”

8. Erb has stated this difference emphatically in a letter to me from August 5, 1993 and in several interviews I have conducted with her between 1990 and 1995.

9. See also the 1991 anthology *Vogel oder Käfig sein (Being a bird or a cage)* for a cross section of contributions from the graphic-literary *Samisdat* journals, which developed out of the independent literature and art scene that existed in Dresden, Halle, Leipzig, and Berlin between 1979 and 1989.

10. Erb's conversation with Durs Grünbein is recorded as “Die Tiger sind ausgeblieben. (Elke Erb und Durs Grünbein im Gespräch)” ‘The Tigers did not come. (Elke Erb and Durs Grünbein in Conversation)’ in a special issue on “Tugendterror” (“Terror of Virtue”) in *Niemandland. Zeitschrift zwischen den Kulturen* 10/11.4: 147-52.

11. Erb's “Thema verfehlt” was chosen by Eigler and Pfeiffer, editors of the anthology *Cultural Transformations in the New Germany, American and German Perspectives*, as their introductory piece (10-19) to their published proceedings from a conference on this topic at Georgetown University in 1992. The text is published in German and in English and translated by Judith Urban, to whose translation I am indebted.

12. For a recent English translation of Erb's poetry from *Gutachten to Vexierbild*, see *Mountains in Berlin* (1995), selected and translated by Rosmarie Waldrop.

13. Erb has a *dacha* in the country in the Oberlausitz near Bauzen.

14. In 40 years of existence, the Staatssicherheitsdienst (*Stasi*; State Security Service) had had a staff of 100,000 official *Stasi*-co-workers and 100,000 unofficial assistants. It had accumulated 180 kilometers of files on citizens and had its headquarters in Normannenstrasse 22 in East Berlin (44.3 *Spiegel*, Jan. 15, 1990: 24 and Dönhoff 4). The poet Gerd Neumann from Leipzig demonstrated a similar feeling to Erb's in his gesture of silence as the only possibility for East Germans to defend their honor. He wanted his own position in the socialist state not to be dishonored, neither by his reading of his *Stasi* file nor through evaluations by West Germans (Streubl 969).

15. Erb indicated to me in a conversation with her in Berlin on May 30th, 1995 that the figure of Joachim can—but must not exclusively—be linked to Joachim Schädlich because the poem wants to address issues broader than individual relationships.

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