

Fundamentally Grounded [Gründlich mit Grund]

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In recent years my poems have opened my eyes to certain basic features of my unconscious behavior, features that astound me. They are reactions to the transformation of society from what it was to what it is now. Since they are unconscious, I think these reactions are more than or less than individual, i.e., general reactions that differ even less from those of other people than the more conscious behavior that bears the mark of one's individuality. To be sure I'm not certain how far individuality reaches into the unconscious. The other reason for seeing these reactions as general, not individual, is their generalized, amazingly basic character, responding to equally general changes, even though these changes are not comparably fundamental.

My perception is neither systematic nor scientific, indeed I wouldn't know to what science I could assign the task of judging these observations of mine. And I have no desire to proceed scientifically in relation to them. Their source was astonishment. But I can see, as these reactions persist, that a process has started, and I recognize belatedly that I could have predicted it on the basis of its first manifestations if I had had an overall perspective or a conscious way of posing questions to myself. I cannot say whether and to what extent all my poems are involved with this process. I see that other changes are occurring in them, which I will try to characterize here.

On January 12, 1992, I wrote a brief text in my notebook that I later saw was a poem and shaped as such. The poem reads:

12.1

Ich kann mir gar nicht vorstellen,

einen Hasen zu essen,
 geschweige denn, ihn zu erbrechen,
 indem ich mich übergebe.

Ich äße ja wohl
 auch zwei Tage an ihm
 daheim.

1.12¹

I simply can't imagine
 eating a hare,

not to mention vomiting it out
 by throwing it up.

I'd after all eat on it
 for two entire days
 at home.

When I recognized the poetic content of the notebook text and shaped it accordingly, the only factor at work was my "poetological conscience," that alertness to poetic making, to the possibility of poetic form embedded in the text—to be extracted and actualized. I should add that I had been writing poems continuously since around 1991 and that this poetry workshop had itself been activated by a specific imperative. After my energies had, throughout 1990, been claimed by outside demands and I had written prose texts on various themes, sponsored by the various cultural institutions—after all that I told myself: you can't go on like that, you must take charge of your spiritual dwelling place. So pay attention to your impulses and turn them into language. By "language" of course I meant poems, since poetry is for me the most succinct and fundamental form of knowledge. I had thus consciously summoned up my poetic consciousness and started the experiment of a poetry workshop. I did not clearly see that the process of knowing was at stake; what was more clear, although not clear enough, was my resolve to clarify my own relationship to the changed social situation, to make my own reactions visible, i.e. to interrogate myself with the same focused attention that I brought to the outside world.

Some time after I had completed the poem, hence was free from the questions provoked by its shaping, I suddenly asked myself in

surprise: what's going on with this hare, what does it mean? And I slowly realized, as one partially sees something in one's sleep, that the hare was central, that the question was not one of eating a hare as in a restaurant, as a collection of drumsticks and other parts, but of eating it as a whole creature. It dawned upon me that wholeness was the issue, that the image implied that other wholeness, the totality of the social changes. Since I am challenged to react as a whole person, I retrieve images or formulae of wholeness from my memory and work with them. I think the challenge derived from the dissolution of the totality in which I had lived and indeed, since that totality was largely "totalitarian," in *relation* to which I had lived: it was this form of life that asked to be continued. And the thought of this poem responded to that request in the negative. The tone of the answer is marked by a certain mockery, sharpened in the second part into contempt or sarcasm. There will be no continuation.

Provoked by my perception of this poem, I began to see "wholenesses" in other poems. This poem was written on December 22, 1991:

Aber gefragt ist

Als ich dachte-damals, oh dieses langsame
Aufmerken in dem geschlossenen Kreis!—

das zweite Haus einer Reihe von vollkommen gleichen
sei schon nicht mehr dasselbe (und gleiche schon gar
nicht), *was hätte ich da
sonst denken können?* Ich komme nicht drauf.

But the Question Is

Thinking back then—oh, this slow
noticing in that closed circle—

that second in a row of completely identical houses
is no longer the same (and definitely
not identical), *what could I
have thought otherwise?* I don't have a clue.

Irony operates in the tone of this poem also, openly so in the rebelliousness against the prescription for distinguishing between "the same" and the "identical." There is mockery too in the refusal:

“what could I / have thought otherwise?” But this is also an honest question. At issue was something indisputable, a discovery. Am I to devalue it? Then I can equally discard previous logical systems, e.g. those of the schoolbooks. Also multivoiced, expressing several attitudes, is the sequence: “oh, this slow/noticing in that closed circle.” The utterance “oh” is both honest and mocking and implies the thought: elsewhere understanding would perhaps have dawned more rapidly, without such a great fuss, and would have moved faster to other levels of understanding.

I see three wholenesses in this text:

1. Obviously: the closed circle.
2. The house, as a single wholeness deployed in a row, a series. The implied reflection is: if only I had acted thus with political or social entities, had set them in a series! And why not, when I’ve already begun to exchange these entities. The motif of the series would have helped me to get beyond the indigestibility of the hare, except that my mental work had taken place at the unconscious level.
3. The least conspicuous wholeness is expressed in the poem’s structure, which conceals the figure of a circle—and breaks it. The title is a partial sentence, one that is only completed by the words just before the end: “But the question is . . . what could I/have thought otherwise.” These words are printed in the typeface of the title. When I read the poem aloud I move the title and its completion to the end.

Two days earlier I had noted down a poem entitled “Inside the fairy tale.” The title contains a certain similarity to the formulation of two days later: thinking inside the closed circle. “Fairy tale” connotes something illusory yet also familiar, a fairy tale is a familiar, traditionally sanctioned inverse form of thinking.

im märchen

und ging -und entging - und kam
 an ein kleines haus

(wiederum an ein haus!)
 (wieder noch an ein haus!)

und sei es am ende
ging ihr ein licht auf

und ging - und entging - und kam
an ein kleines haus

(wiederum an ein haus!)
(wieder noch an ein haus!)

und sei es am ende

im märchen

ging ihr ein licht auf

und ging - und entging - und kam

an ein kleines haus

(wiederum an ein haus!)
(wieder noch an ein haus!)

und sei es am ende

in a fairy tale

and went - and escaped - and came
to a small house

(still another house!)
(yet another house!)

and even if it was the end
she saw the light

and went - and escaped - and came
to a small house

(still another house!)
(yet another house!)

and even if it was the end

in a fairy tale

she saw the light

and went - and escaped - and came
to a small house

(still another house!)

(yet another house!)

and even if it was the end

Here then the house plays a leading role, appearing as a wholeness that is in question. The circle turning in a repeated spiral movement is obvious. The mood is gentler than in the other two poems. Which tells me: I first approach the problem with a certain gentleness, then ever more aggressively.

In the book the poems are arranged chronologically, according to the date of first notation. In the manuscript the chronology was decided by the dates of completion. Thus I can analyze my own thought process on two tracks. To which notations did I first react as shaping author, which were realized only after the production of the others? When I put the book together, surprising linkages emerged. Thus a far from aggressive notation of January 1, 1992 remained unattended in my notebook and only entered the book-manuscript as a poem at the end of 1993. This notation dates from 12 days before the hare-poems and 8 days after the one with the closed circle. Here too there is a house, here too an animal.

Unsere

früher, in dem Haus
 mit dem Blick auf das Siebengebirge:

Im Erdgeschoß rechts
 in dem Koben lag auf Stroh
 stand und fraß am Trog

die natürliche weiße Ziege.

Our

earlier, in that house
 with a view of the Seven Mountains:²

On the ground floor to the right
 lying in the pen on the straw
 standing and eating at the manger

the natural white goat.

I have learned from psychology that white animals in dreams refer to processes of individuation. This text however was based on

memory. Was I then, while awake, engaged in the kind of involuntary and intensive transformative work that dreams provide? In fact we learn, under the new social conditions, that everything is up to us. If we are lucky, we really do experience a process of individuation. Was that unconscious general self, of which I spoke at the outset, aiming at individuation?

The difference between this text and the equally gentle poem "Inside the Fairy Tale" is striking with regard to the unconscious thought process. In the fairy-tale text the speaker circles in a spiral and perhaps, whether at the end or within the fairy tale itself, receives an illumination instead of the usual offers of accommodation; in the poem "Our" the speaker finds a cowshed in the house, and in the cowshed the goat. All three, house, cowshed, goat, are real memory-images. Memory fuses two antithetical mental operations, distancing—this was in the past—and recovery from that distance. The outcome is a concrete image. The tangible reduction of the motif of accommodation to cowshed and goat is linked to an ideal of wholeness: the goat is a symbol both of nature and of the energy directed towards future individuation; the goat is white. Thus, here too there is a polarity: nature and *human* individuation. It is also noticeable that the poem does not describe a circle, its structure is open. The title is given meaning only at the end: "Our, earlier, in that house / with a view of the Seven Mountains": After this opening gesture the cowshed, seen without front wall, appears coherently.

A text about individuation entitled "Our" must, in my view, be seen in terms of collective individuation. And I can verify that my private self was not my only concern.

On March 13 the house-series, that began before the fairy-tale poem, reached a conclusion that is again aggressive and mocking but, linguistically speaking, culminates in a triumph.

Schaukasten Geist
am 13.3

Das in Bezug vorhandene Gehirn
zieht um
Das in Anbetracht entstandene Gehirn
stellt um

Winde, die um das Haus gehn,
sind haussimulierende Winde.

Spirit of the Show Case

3.13.

The brain in its networks
changes direction
The brain formed in connectivity
switches over

Winds, blowing around the house,
are house-simulating winds.

Why do I see this conclusion as triumphant? It is surprising, it arrives at a point outside the logic impelling the first two sentences: clearly these sentences, silently but rapidly, have shaped themselves into a wholeness that permits the summoning into being of a conclusion outside that wholeness.

Months later, on August 27, finished on November 16, 1992, a poem entitled "Accommodation in a Flood" comes into being. Different kinds of dwelling, which I recognized only later as metamorphic visions of the house motif, are embodied in the poem's own contours. In January, 1992 there are still "Figuren, gleich in sich gekehrten Gemälden / und beschlossen in ihre Konturen" 'Figures, like paintings turned in upon themselves / and sealed into their contours'; in November there lies "unsere stute gestorben . . . / unsere Rosinante, eingeebnet, papier fast . . . / daheim in den ausgesparten / eigenen umrissen" 'our dead mare . . . / our Rosinante almost flattened paper . . . / at home in the contours of itself / left open.'

As the tension of the conflict slowly dissolved during the year, as violence disappears and wishes can be spoken, a kind of longing becomes expressible in this poem:

Angkommen in St. Médard

versetzt in vielleicht effektiv
veränderte verhältnisse träumte ich
in den vielleicht wirksam nun
veränderten verhältnissen sei etwas
aufzuräumen wieder schön wieder
zu halten in den vielleicht anmutig
veränderten verhältnissen sei
zu ermuntern es wieder unter

wieder ermunternden umständen
 und sei nun im resultat
 unsere stute gestorben liege
 unsere rosinante eingeebnet papier fast
 aber mit farben kreiden
 in dem puzzle der beete
 daheim in den ausgesparten
 eigenen umrissen
 übernickt von den astern
 liege das pferd
 wie im traum ja oft
 vergessen vorm aufstehn
 dämmerung streiche
 sei aufzuheben

Arrival in St. Médard³

Placed into perhaps effectively
 changed situations I dreamed
 in the perhaps now actually
 changed situations something is
 to be straightened up once again
 to be made beautiful again in the perhaps gracefully
 changed situations to be enlivened under
 newly encouraging circumstances
 and be it only as a result
 our dead mare lies
 our Rosinante⁴ almost flattened paper
 but with colored chalk
 in the puzzle of the garden beds
 at home in the contours of itself
 left open
 covered by asters
 the horse lies
 as in a dream often
 forgotten before arising
 twilight tricks
 be preserved.⁵

The animal motif develops in several stages. The unconscious impulse to mobilize wholenesses, of which I became aware via the hare motif of January 1992, could have (except that it was unconscious) referred me back to a poem of August, 1991. I was contracted to edit a selection of Friederike Mayröcker for Reclam. She had given me her books in January, 1991, and I had been reading them since, intensively so during the summer in the country. I lay or sat in the meadow and tried to understand, these texts. From my amazement at them and from my powerful urge to understand there suddenly emerged a visible form above me in the courtyard, the clear contours of a horse. The manifestation of the horse was baffling and I would have been impelled to note it down even without my dictum to myself of December, 1990: pay attention to your impulses! As I was noting it down, even as I was striving to grasp hold of and question what I had seen, the text of a poem took shape, as a kind of variant reading of the image:

Ein Erstaunen
nimmt Gestalt an

Aus einer Art von Schuppen
(Anbau, schwarzgrau) oder

wo du es nicht vermutest,
irgendwo

heraus kommt ein stattliches Pferd

oder ungefüg
oder das sich bewegt.

Vollführt Figuren.

Du nicht, nicht ich,

niemand wußte von ihm.

Wer weiß.

was? Jemand weiß.

Von Betracht

hat es statt.

Kam in Gang

und hat Sinn

gar im Sinn
 so pferdweis, erschien
 auf dem Gras,
 in der Luft
 rechts. Wie vordem die Birke
 oder Weide
 den Blick hielt, Telegraphenmast . . .
 Unverhofft kommt oft
 wohl seltener, als gemeint ist.

A surprise takes form

From a kind of shed
 (lean-to, grey-black) or
 where you don't expect it,
 some place
 comes a stately horse
 or stubborn
 or moving.
 Executes figures.
 Not you, not I,
 nobody knew about it.
 Who knows
 what? Somebody knows.
 From being viewed
 it is actual.
 Started moving
 and makes sense
 even sense
 as horse sense, appeared
 on the grass,
 in the air
 to the right. As formerly the birch

or willow
 caught our eye, telephone pole . . .
 The unexpected happens often
 yet less often than generally thought.

From early on I had known about the transformation of intensive mental work into images, so I could assume that the unusual imagistic energy was fueled by the energies of what I had been reading. To be sure I had undertaken this reading with questions about the other world of images. With the poem about the hare, on the other hand, there was no obvious intellectual provocation. Whereas the horse clearly appeared as a response, however surprising its hallucinatory power, the image of the hare came to me without mediation. The impulse to shape experience into wholeness had become autonomous and insisted on taking linguistic form. Much later, in September 1994, another poem with a hare took shape. By then the motif had become familiar, an available tool in the poetry workshop, and the text was noted down immediately in poetic form:

Die freie Natur

Eben, eben: zwei Pfoten, noch zwei
 hart auf das Feld: Feldhase.

Der Hirnkopf.
 Die Ohren die Augen, die Nüstern.

Großes Theater. Über den Grund. Großes Hakenschlagen.
 Und Hocken. Und Grünzeug reinzucken.

Free Nature

Exactly, exactly: two paws, two more
 hard on the field: field hare.

The alert head.
 The ears, the eyes, the nostrils.

A grand performance. Across the terrain. Grand swerving.
 And squatting. And munching fodder.

I assume that this free play with the motif of wholeness indicates that the unconscious directives had meanwhile been absorbed into full consciousness, that I had reshaped myself in my

poetry workshop. This involved a giving up of the previous formation, a process illustrated rather painlessly by a short poem from January, 1993, one year after the first hare-poem (in the course of the year the process was to become more severe):

Das Vorrücken des Zeigers

Ostern im Osten, ich traf den Hasen
an -der unversehrt taute.

The Movement of the Clock-hand

Easter in the east, I met the hare -
thawing unharmed.

Another element in the reshaping of my self was a critique of the habitual and customary relations between stimulus and reaction, a refusal to obey the stimulus. In the poem "Spirit of the Showcase" this necessary event had been announced: "The brain in its networks / changes direction / The brain formed in connectivity / switches over." In a poem of August 93, again invoking an animal, the change in perspective appears thus:

Verfangen

Ungeheuerlich, daß sich ein Mensch
von einem Stück Bach, mit Erlen,
einem Ufer mit Erlen, mit Wiese
- und der kleine graue Viehbrückenruck -

wo eine jeweils
ausgegliche und verschlossene
Ruhe herrscht,

von dem da ein Mensch sich

wiedergeben lassen könne, ei, spiegeln, so,
wie es einem beim Hinsehen die Seele durchfährt
widerstandslos - dies oder das!
bei keiner Katze verfängt es!

Caught

Incredible, that a human
from a piece of brook, with elders,

a bank with elders, with a meadow,
 - and the small grey smudge of a cattle bridge -

where a serene and closed-off
 peace prevails,
 from which a human

can become restored, ah mirrored, thus
 as this or that runs through one's soul
 unresisting while watching - !
 no cat can catch it.

Such reshapings require energy, indeed they seem inherently to thrust from a static condition toward a new dynamism. I cite two poems in which the motif of wholeness is married to the theme of heightened energy, masking a generally dynamic impulse. They come at the end of the book and deal with cats:

Ausschau

Wie die Katze weglief, rannte,
 nie wiederkam die Katze katze
 ein schlechtes doch, ein Ende nahm
 die Katze Katze nie mehr kam
 wie die Katze weglief, brannte

On the Lookout

As the cat fled, ran
 never to return cat cat
 a bad yes bad end had
 the cat cat never came back
 as the cat fled, burnt

The notation for this text dates from Spring 1993; it assumed poetic form after unconscious work had given me, in September 1993, this extra short poem:

Steigern

Die Katze
 plus Katze -
 wann brennt sie?

Intensification

The cat
plus cat -
when will it burn?

This poem also surprised, indeed alienated me: why would I want to burn an animal? The answer, the image's meaning seemed to be: if the energies of cats collide, then there must soon be burning. That is: my own "animal," if I may so term the unconscious, turns irresistibly toward an energy that burns.

The motif of the body, contained in the motif of the animal, will probably seek new ways, ways of transformation, in the future. In two poems of January 2, which I will quote shortly, the body is the maltreated body. Later the body becomes a person. I offer two examples of the shifting motif of the person. The first dates from September 1993:

Wangenknecht

Leiblicher Würde
standhaft (wie angewurzelt)
im Forst, durch das Gehölz
düstert der Blick

hinaus, wo das Licht freit.

Ein Bächlein murmelt.
Haben und Sein.

Das Brustbein scheitelt
sein spärliches, aber hübsches
(gleich-und regelmäßiges)

Haar.

Wer hält diesem Mannsbild die Treue?
Ich. Und natürlich der Kuckuck.

Cheeks of the Lackey

Corporal dignity
steadfast (as if rooted)
in the forest, through the underbrush
gloomy the glance

outward, where the light woos.
 A brooklet murmurs.
 To have and to be.

The breast-bone parts
 its sparse, yet handsome
 (even and regular)

hair.

Who is faithful to this man?
 I am. And of course the cuckoo.

On March 13, 1995, my father appears to me:

13.3 (nachts)
 an den vater gedacht

wie ich ihn stehen sehe
 kein zoll nicht von außen bestimmt
 nicht schulter noch brust noch lende
 ohne den blick seines gottes
 unbelebter gesellschaft

3.13 (at night)
 thought of my father

As I see him standing
 no inch undetermined from without
 no shoulder, no chest, no loins
 without the gaze of his God's
 lifeless society

A probing of the conditions that shape a human being into a bodily person. The situation is no longer a dissolving of the old formation but rather an entering into the new one, following the path of the motifs that the initial stage had brought to the surface.

Now the two poems from January 1992. One is the title poem of the book *Innocence, You Light of My Eyes*. It is a long poem. In it there appears a skinned body of an animal, a dead animal as image of the self. There follows a reverse transformation into the live animal, as a kind of reflection on the first image, for I am reclaiming the animal from the misuse of it in its symbolic function. All this is preceded by what is clearly intensive work on the reshaping of my spiritual condition.

Unschuld, du Licht meiner Augen

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

(nach der ersten; lebwohl, Jochen, wir sahen uns nicht!),

und sowohl fort - wie her zu mir fluten,
meine Schultern erkennend, die Räume-Fluchten,

wie daß endlich Umgebung sei
statt Fronten und Stirnen und Schädelstätten . . . ,

einmal doch gesteigert in seinem Element
unsereins ausnahmsweise,

Und zuletzt, nachdem einige imaginäre Male ich
dich, Joachim, im Fluten und Fühlen gewahre

(aber zuvörderst kritisch, als das gebrannte Kind:
Was, wenn du auftauchst, gehst du mich an?),

zuletzt auch ich mich beginne gesehen zu sehen.
als hätte ich streng zu sehen darauf,

daß man mir ansieht, wie ich es meine,
vielleicht sogar wünsche,

sonst nämlich sähe ich andere nicht!

Nämlich hielte ich mich nicht in den Ansprüchen
(Anblicken?)!

und also wieder einmal, Sichten zerklüftend,
es einen Ruck gibt, der sie verschwinden macht

(scheide, Joachim, für immer aus diesem Weltbild!)

und also wieder einmal mir durch die Gedächtnislücke,
mich nach außen sichtbar zu geben geboten ist, da

wird das erheischte offene Ich-Gesicht überraschend

(vielleicht tendenziös gegen die stichelnde Ideal-Norm,

vielleicht auch im Übereifer)

wird das verlangte Ich-Bild
 ein gebratenes Reh. In der Bestecke-Mandorla.

Wildbret im Waldbesteck.

Ich sehe schon, Güte reicht nicht,
 der Art Kurzschlüsse aufzuhalten.

Eher jedoch wäre ein elektrischer Gegenschlag,
 ein feiner Zaubertrick denkbar,

und das Reh blickte weiter verwundert,
 während es Witterung nimmt.

Innocence, you Light of my Eyes

Now, since I, it appears, 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 cableway downhill

(after the first; farewell, Jochen, we did not see each
 other!),

and ebbing away as well as surging toward me,
 recognizing my shoulders, space escapes,

so that finally surroundings exist
 instead of frontlines and challenges and killing-fields. . . .

and for once, existing heightened in its element,
 people like us for a change,

and finally, after perceiving you Joachim, several
 imaginary times, in floods and feelings

(but above all critically, as the burnt child:
 what, when you appear, do you mean to me?),

at last even I am beginning to see myself seen,
 as if I had to pay close attention,

so that one can see what I mean by things
perhaps even what I wish,

otherwise I would not see others!

Indeed, I would not withstand the demands (the gaze?) of
others!

and thus once again, fissuring the views,
there is a jolt, making them disappear

(depart, Joachim, forever from this imagined world!)

and thus, once again, through the hole in my memory,
I am summoned to make myself outwardly visible, then

the mandatory open ego-face becomes, surprisingly

(perhaps tendentiously against the taunting ideal norm,
perhaps even in overzealousness)

the demanded ego-image becomes
a roasted deer. In the circle of the table.

Wild game in forest frame.

Already I see kindness is insufficient
to prevent such short circuits.

More conceivable would be an electric counter charge,
a fine magic trick,

and the deer continued gazing in amazement,
while sniffing the scent.

Here is the story on the Joachim who is mentioned here: he is dear to me, I am sure of him, but my view of him is not worth anything, it is too flat, as events have proved. He is to disappear from this flat world view. Instead a different world-view is to emerge, one in which real spatial, physical meeting occurs. In this changed world view the values and certainties of the overly flat image of the world would be re-examined, drawn into a more concrete set of relations: "What, when you appear, do you mean to me?" How can I confide in someone who does not see me, does not see "what I mean by things," and does not see what I desire, my self being made up of opinions, desires, demands.

I must show myself if I want to be seen—and then I too will see things as wholes: this intellectual-emotional sequence is surely

what we mean by individuation—if the term is still in use, still makes sense. Yet the concept of pluralism should also be in play. With this notion I leave the main line of my discussion so far, which is focused on the inner changes set in motion by the transformation of the social order. The idea of pluralism functioned as a provocation ceaselessly emanating from the new social landscape. To understand capitalist society as a pluralism had for me an educational attraction in these years. In the previous society, officially collectivist but in reality controlled by anonymous systemic forces, it was completely meaningless to think in a pluralistic way. To be sure the concept of pluralism, as a means of thinking one's way into the new social configuration, only remained attractive up to the point where its full meaning became clear and, without losing its basic validity, revealed its limits, namely capitalism's own variety of de-individuation and mass behavior. Having absorbed this concept I expressly bade farewell to its attractiveness in the poem *Il pluralismo*:

Il pluralismo

Mit dem Auto fahre ich
vor einen Baum. Und stehe eine Viertelstunde.

Wipfelrauschen.

Mit dem Auto fahre ich
vor einen Baum. Und stehe eine Viertelstunde.

Knarrender Stamm.

Mit dem Auto fahre ich
vor'n Baum. Und stehe meine Viertelstunde.

Ächzender Stamm . . .

Il Pluralismo

I drive my car
under a tree. And park a quarter of an hour.

Treetops rustle.

I drive my car
under a tree. And park a quarter of an hour.

Creaking trunk.

I drive my car
under a tree. And park my quarter of an hour.

Groaning trunk.

The poem dates from September 27, 1994.

Back to the deer poem, which defines inadequate thinking as a too-flat way of seeing the world. Like the groaning tree trunk in the pluralism-poem, the deer-poem concludes with a natural formation, “catching the scent,” an attitude that expresses the creature’s natural wholeness, hence within these limits is both holistic and fully individual. To bring about the transformation of the defective human powers of perception into those of the deer, I cite two historical forms of human mental power: the conjuring trick and technical progress:

Already I see kindness is insufficient
to prevent such short circuits.

More conceivable would be an electric counter charge,
a fine magic trick,

and the deer continued gazing in amazement,
while sniffing the scent.

Had I not, with this conclusion, given the deer’s life back to it, the ending would have been as sarcastic as in the poem “*Il pluralismo*.”

Now that I look at the different treatment of symbolic wholeness in this poem and in its immediate predecessor about the hare, I see something completely unnoticed while writing them: the hare is only a provocation, an opening, while a day later the symbol of wholeness becomes usable as a response to problems that are now visible, knowable. That is how the unconscious operates. Both symbols arise involuntarily, they are not programmed. But while the notation about the hare challenged me to a kind of artistic game—will you capture that one as a poem?—the image of the cooked deer, with all the thought processes that accompanied and followed its emergence, *was* already a poem in the unconscious: all I had to do was recognize the event and turn it into language. I think this unconscious self is always working, and working consistently, in every person, prompting an often unacknowledged process of exploration: usually the process is slower than at a time like that,

when I was in bad shape because of the Stasi debate, with my body aching all over in neuralgic response.

I have long known that it is healthy to confront the disaster that is causing pain, and hope that I am sometimes successful in staying healthy. I know too that poetry is a manifestation of this health. At that time it was almost the only proof of health.

Thirteen days after the deer poem there emerged another body-poem, with an agility and dynamism that I had previously not seen in myself. The poem is called "Angels on Earth" and its conclusion distantly recalls the no longer recent poem "Within the fairy tale":

Engel auf Erden

Januar. Sie sind vierundfünfzig, man hat
 Ihnen den Rücken massiert, man hat

die Knochen entlang,
 die rufenden Mündern gleich runden
 Rückenwirbel entlang

aufgestört die Garantien, nicht wahr?
 Was dachten Sie denn, Sie sind

über und über mit harrenden dumpf
 dräuenden Schmerzwolken, spitzen
 Schmerzblitzen besetzt,

haben beinah ein Gewitter zusammengezogen
 fürs Leben, das nie
 ausbricht!

Ja dachten Sie denn,
 Sie schreien zetern zittern regnen sich aus?
 Frieden stiftend?

Bewundern Gewitter?
 Eine Schande, ein Jammer, die feinen
 Fibrillen,

Fasern verdickt, Fasern verdreht
 jahrzehntelang - wollten Sie das?

Baum so wollte verholzen.
 Fossil so wollte versteinern.

Wußten von nichts?

Ja, kochte Ihnen auch Ihre Mutter
so gut gesalzene Kartoffeln?

Ja, hörten Sie auch im Turnsaal:
Schütteln, schütteln, lockern Arme und Beine,
warum gehorchten Sie nicht?

Warum ließen Sie die Aufforderung
unbefolgt,

hacken die Worte
auf Ihren Muskel rechts unterm Hals hacken
den stummen, ohrlosen Stummel

-und standen blöde dabei?

Es war zu spät?
Sie waren dreizehn, Sie waren sieben-zu spät?
Sie sind doch nicht steif geboren!

Geboren wohl schreckensstarr -
Beute der Todesangst -
ja?

Und nachher war keine Zeit mehr?
Zeitlebens?

Lassen Sie Ihren Kopf hängen,
lose baumeln, baumeln den Kopf
vom Rumpf, den Sie hängen lassen
von dem Bein-Becken-Gestell
usf. Nie gehört?

Oh, ein Schmerzpunkt neben dem andern.
Oh, entlang am Schulterblatt Schlüsselbein -
Wunden,
Kreuzbein und Steißbein - wie Ketten von
Muschelperlen.

Oh, das haben Sie weggesteckt.
Oh, das halten Sie in sich im Innern
heimelig wie verborgene Suße.

Was glauben Sie wohl, sind Sie aufgeklärt?
Oh, wo ist ihr wedelnder Schweif?

Oh, wo sind Ihre edlen Schwingen?
 Oh, Ihr himmlisches Milch und Blut?

Angels on Earth

January. There are fifty-four of them, their
 backs were massaged

along the bones,

and down around along the vertebrae
 like shouting mouths

kicked over the guarantees, right?
 What did you think, you are

thoroughly occupied with persistent dull
 threatening clouds of pain,
 sharpening bolts of pain,

have almost drawn tight a thunderstorm
 for life, that never
 breaks loose!

Indeed did you think then
 you are screaming yelling trembling raining
 yourselves out?
 Making peace?

Admiring thunderstorms?
 A shame, a pity, those fine
 fibrils,

thickened fibers, soiled fibers
 for decades—did you want that?

Thus the tree would lignify.
 Thus the fossil would petrify?

Knew of nothing?

Indeed, did your mother also cook for you
 such well-salted potatoes

Indeed, did you also hear in the gym:
 Shake, shake, loosen arms and legs
 why didn't you obey?

Why didn't you follow
 the summons,
 hack the words
 on your muscle to the right under your throat hack
 the silent, earless stump
 —and stood there dumbfounded?

It was too late?
 You were thirteen, you were seven—too late?
 You surely were not born stiff!

born probably rigid with fear—
 victim of death angst—
 right?

And afterwards there was no more time?
 Your life long?

Hang down your head,
 loosely swinging, swinging your head
 from the rump, the rump that you hang
 from your leg-pelvis-frame?
 etc. Never heard of it?

Oh, one painful spot next to the other.
 Oh, along the shoulder blade, collar bone-
 wounds,
 shinbone and tailbone-like chains of pearls from
 sea shells.

Oh, you have hidden that away.
 Oh, you are holding this inside yourselves
 cosily like hidden sweets.

What do you think, are you enlightened?

Oh, where is your wagging tail?
 Oh, where are your noble wings?
 Oh, your heavenly milk and blood?

The wisdom of the language is of course at work in the related words "Schwingen" 'wings' and "Schwung" 'momentum' or 'energy.' Optically too, a wing has the form of an integral sign and "Schwung" is integrated life-force. In the poem "Unterkunft in einer Flut" 'Shelter in a flood' a wing appears, "wie ihn die Engel

haben / und fügt - sich an einem Menschleib - / und Unterkunft
finden // demnach die Intervalle, die Wartezeiten / Schnitte und
Stau, Entbehrungen, Teile, Stillstände, Wechsel / in unaufhörlicher
Wellenflut." '[A wing] like angels have/ attaches itself to a human
body— / thus giving shelter / to intervals and waiting periods /
intersections and traffic-jams, deprivations, engine parts, stand-
stills, light-changes / in a never-ending flood.' In the deer poem
also flooding was the sign of a release.

The wave motif emigrates from the poetry volume and occupies an influential realm of its own. I am now more skilled at recognizing such processes, but it remains recognition after the fact, the unconscious and involuntary impulse persists. I observe it and am amazed. After writing the fourth or fifth text in which water plays a role, one gradually realizes what's happening.

The poem "Conversations with Oneself are but Sea-murmurs," noted down in May 1994 and poetically structured in July, speaks sternly against the dead, proud, self-isolating self and points to an organic ontology of the self, of which the self as presented is a misunderstanding. I offer a few pointers to this poem. It sketches a definition of gold drawn from the lexicon; it then appears that the cited characteristics of gold are surprisingly appropriate for defining the human self as well. And there is the word "Scheibenmonstranz," 'monstrance.' This is an ecclesiastical vessel for displaying the host, decorated with a radiant circular design. And the concepts "Blastula" and "Gastrula": Blastula is the hollow embryonic form, Gastrula the embryo of the following stage, both are developmental stages of the multicelled organism.

Selbstgespräche sind nur Meeresrauschen

denn das Selbst, wie wir es hatten,
das reine

-unter Gottes Eifersucht und scheinheiligem
Lidschlag -
Gold,

von deinen Klondike-Klauen und sibirischen,
karpatisch

...

geklaut aus schroffen Quarzen:

außerordentlich weich
 und dehnbar, leicht
 mechanisch zu bearbeiten, von
 träger Reaktion,
Scheibenmonstranz, wie es vom Stengel nickt
 hörts ja weder selbst noch sprichts,
 ein Inbegriff
 des innersten Gehirns -
 Oh Blastula, oh Gastrula, oh Gast
 aus fernem Meer, gereist
 mit gleichsam aufsteigenden Teichen,
 Amöbe, die
 im Teichohr Meeresrauschen

Conversations with Oneself are but Sea-murmurs

for the Self, as we had it,
 that pure
 —under God's jealousy and hypocritical wink—
 gold,
 from your Klondike⁶-claws and Siberian,
 Carpathian,⁷
 ...
 sifted from rough quartz:
 extraordinarily soft
 and pliable, easily
 worked mechanically, by
 sluggish reaction,
monstrance nodding from its stem,
 neither hears itself nor speaks,
 an essence
 of the innermost brain—
 Oh Blastula, oh Gastrula, oh guest

from the distant sea, traveling
 in seemingly rising pools,

amoeba

roaring in the pool's ear

This is no inclination to nostalgia and esoteric knowledge, but a fundamental, persistent questioning of what constitutes the whole. I quote the last of these water texts, an aggressively questioning poem:

Es wurde, es wird

Also einmal erst einmal hinaus
 aus dem Wasser. Und landen, verlanden
 den Flimmerhaarfilm, den haarichtfeinen
 Schleim. Als welches Tier? Und blickte denn
 über, und unter dem Rippengiebel bereits
 es mit dem Selbstwertgefühl meiner Mutter?
 Aufrecht ja nun? In Luft?

Landen, verlanden. Der Wolfshunger, Steinzeit-
 garten.
 Die herrlichen Städte bauen, Bohnen abernten,
 schließlich.

Zum Kaffee einladen.

20.2.1995

It became, it becomes

Well, for once first of all
 out of the water. And landing, stranding
 the flimmery film of hair, the hairy-fine
 slime. As what animal? And glancing then
 already above and below the rib cage
 with my mother's feeling of self-worth?
 Upright now? In the air?

Landing, stranding. Hungry as a wolf, stone age
 garden.

Building splendid cities, harvesting beans, finally.

Inviting for coffee.

2.20.1995

I now turn back to the volume's first poem, written in January 1991. It reveals that I could have recognized the process I've portrayed here by its early telltale signs, had it occurred to me to ask about it. The poem is preceded by a motto, words from Friederike Mayröcker's book *Das Herzzerreissende der Dinge* (*Things Tear Apart the Heart*). The words are: "a reflex on the eye glasses of the blonde / German scholar during the car ride." This verbal sequence, the physical presence of the female Germanist, had alarmed me. I portray the alarm in the poem. Only now, thanks to the series of perceptions released by the hare poem, do I understand this alarm from outside: this Germanist affected me as an image of wholeness challenging me in physical form, as the poetic text rather clearly describes. The poem's other main motif, a vision of primeval times, was also an effect of shock. In the summer I sent the poem to Friederike Mayröcker and wrote in a cover letter:

Dear Friederike,

When we drove to Salzburg in January, we arrived at night. Driving along the river, we looked for accommodation. The houses near the bank seemed to have no lights, so the river flowed as if alone. In the room I read *Things Tear Apart the Heart* and suddenly had this primeval vision. It was as if the river outside, in the valley behind the wall, were flowing directly past my head. It wouldn't be turned away, pestered me continually, I resolved to stand up to it, since it was like a scene of instruction, a baptism—into a life in a changed space, a life I do not know.

The poem reads:

Sie und der Fluß

Dasein, Zeit greift, pfeilgerade Wellen
belangen die hingehaltene Haut.

Als wenn Schnee an mir taut so salzlos.

Wellen, die anwandern, eine der andern
Schalenweise

und Reise.

Hier läuft ein Fluß zügig ebenenflugs
wie in Erdstromzeiten wir hingen
salzlos Menschen hineingefiedert
in Luftseiten Vögel.

Ich erschrak, als ich las: "ein Reflex
auf den Brillengläsern der blonden
Germanistin während der Autofahrt,"

wie erschrak ich, ich hielte,
keiner Sprache mächtig, sie in den Händen,
stürbe im Choc, schwarze Asche im Nu,
in dem knisternden Blitz, hielte ich
das Geschenk - lebensgroß - noch im weißen
Gabenpapier -, wie vom Schlag gerührt.

Jäh. Wie konnte je
Schiefer so ragen so schwarzfarnkundig
so farnschriftkundig so farnschriftverschwistert
in der Schichtentruh Ruh?
Im Grund wie denn ragen?

Kopfüber die Ragejagd Sturz
in den Scheitelpunkt Zeit
auf einem fußfernen Boden mit Dir.

Geübt. Stößt sich ab. Ein Fliegen.
Von der goldenen schrecklichen Welle.
Schon immer. In Lüften. Geübt. Kein Straucheln.
Wie vom Wind getragene Samenfruchtspreu, so
lernten
sie schwimmen in all diesen Jahren, ich nehme
sieben, stehe im anderthalbten

She and the River

Existence. Time invades, arrow-straight waves
bothering proffered skin.
Like snow melting on me quite saltless.
Waves, approaching, one peeling off another
and voyage.

Here a river runs swiftly through a plane
as in primeval times we hung
saltless humans feathered
in air streams, birds.

I was shocked when reading “a reflection
on the eye glasses of the blonde
German scholar during the car ride,”

how shocked I was, I paused,
unable to speak, she in my hands,
would die in shock, black ashes immediately,
in the crackling lightning, I held
the gift - life size - still in white
gift wrap - as if touched by a bolt.

Abruptly. How could slate so tower so black-fern-
skilled
so fern-script-skilled so fern-script-sisterhoodedly
peaceful in the geological layers?
In the depths how could it tower?

Head first plunging back into the tower
into the vertex of time
at an inaccessible spot with you.

Drilled. Pushes off. Flight.
From the golden fearful wave.
Eternally. In the ether. Drilled. No stumbling.
Like chaff to seed fruit carried before the wind,
thus they learned
to swim in all those years, I am taking
seven, and stand at one and a half.

If, in this text of January, 1991, I calculated correctly the time
needed for learning to live differently, then that time would be up in
summer 1996.

Translator's Notes

1. German dates are written day, month, year—reversed from English
usage month, day, year. The translation of Elke Erb's prose text is by

James Rolleston; that of her interspersed poems is by Barbara Mabee and Victoria Joan Moessner. The translations are meant to serve Erb's poetological text and, therefore, are quite literal. Little attempt has been made to duplicate their lyrical quality.

2. Seven Mountains (Siebengebirge) is part of the Westerwald region, south of the river Sieg near the city of Königswinter on the Rhine.

3. City in France east of Bordeaux.

4. Rosinante is Don Quixote's horse.

5. The German contains diametrically opposite meanings. One possibility is "twilight tricks/be eliminated."

6. Klondike is a reference to the 1898 gold rush in Klondike, a region in the Yukon territory in northwestern Canada.

7. Carpathian is a reference to the Carpathian Mountains that run through Eastern Europe.