



## From *Magische Blatter*

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**Friederike Mayröcker****from Magische Blätter**

Of course I could just feed you a few slick theoretical phrases familiar to anybody who has looked around in modern literature. And you would leave with the notion that in order to do something well one needs to understand it thoroughly and be able to elucidate it. I could tell you about the *random* elements in my texts, about zones of esthetic condensing or diluting. I could say that I charge my words, that I atomize and deform, that I fabricate matrices for my images and motifs from extraneous material by piling collage on collage, that I turn verbs into nouns, nouns into verbs, that I summon an army of punctuation marks to function as attack, blast, aside, lure, calming, or neutralization, that I use repetitions as leitmotifs, that one of my main concerns is to harmonize the disparate, join opposing verbal forms. I could tell you how I put together thoughts, experiences, impressions, common themes, found and traditional materials, how sometimes an overheard word, a headline, a “mishearing” or “misreading” sets something in motion in my mind; how such minuscule, barely noticeable shifts and estrangements start a chain reaction of constellations which hours of thinking and experimenting would not bring about. I could tell you about the minutiae and imponderabilia of writing, but I ask myself: will it really tell you anything about what was triggered?

: i am afraid we are like people who try, the morning after, to retrace the complex, branching body of dreams, but soon give up, disappointed and dissatisfied with trying to fixate what is vague. A few nodal points of the dream one can reproduce, but the essential part, the vibrant, the far-spun intensity, the fascination, the color could not be recovered; it cannot be reproduced, it was there as a dream, we had produced it as a dream and that was the best one could do.—

In 1978, I noted the following on this theme, on my own writing:

. . . just as he resurfaces (shouts) in my mind I reread Artaud along with other poets *in a past tense*, in even proportions, a few lines here, a few pages there, every night before going to sleep in the hope of taking along through the dream and into the expectant new morning what *scratches blinding traces* concerning the shape of

sorcery / magic / sleeping asleep / to scare off the deadly fear: NOT TO BE ABLE TO RETAIN.

The use of excerpts! the feverish reading gathering checking! open to the eclectic breath of inspiration, retracing the magic names: BRETON! MICHAUX! LAUTRÉAMONT! JEAN PAUL! ARNO SCHMIDT!—and examining other arts for their magic potential! What I recognize as it *comes into my head (my eyes)*: while walking seeing standing talking hearing tasting smelling feeling: on dizzying heights tumbling / scrambling from one working hypothesis to the next, determined, it seems, to avoid looking into the abyss: breathless attention, calculated chasing after fertile irritations from outside: ERRORS OF THE SENSES—and thus trained in gathering up solitude I start again every morning to confront the translatability of matter into language— —as if it were already enough to disturb the rules of punctuation to succumb to a new magic deviation.

In between there are, I suppose, the most important years of my life as a writer: freedom from the need of pedagogic work which I had done half-heartedly for more than two decades to make my living and the deliberate dropping of any ties to conventions of external life; but also—let me not pass this over—a growing inclination to withdraw from the world, to give in to my rather elegiac temperament. In retrospect, it seems my obsession with writing was domesticated by my unloved profession, which many products of that time show in an accusing manner as if I had all too carelessly spent my creative substance. Here, in this framework, I want to say something which might cause protest from my women colleagues and will necessarily show me as an outsider within the new sociological-emancipatory system of thinking: with the exception of the important role of my mother and maternal grandmother, I must confess that I owe almost everything to the men around me, not least my long-standing confidant and fellow fighter in the field of literature, Ernst Jandl.

: Which does not mean that I considered myself particularly feminine, rather the contrary, though not quite that either: I remember that even as a child I shied away from any emphasis on girlishness; on the other hand I never tried to appear in any way masculine. It was rather a conscious early *lack of concern about my gender* or, as the preface to my radio play, *A Shadow on the Way to the Earth*, describes the protagonist: “. . . almost asexual, though born female, she, the central figure, falls faster

and faster into the ravine between the two rocks; and we believe we can read the unstoppable course of seasons in the falling of this sun . . .”

(Translated from German by Rosmarie Waldrop)

### **Abdelwahab Meddeb**

#### **Wanderer and Polygraphist**

Perhaps my taste for wandering comes from my early involvement—age ten—with the first desert Arab poets whose poems we had learned in school in Tunis. These poets of the fifth and sixth centuries—Imru’ al-Qays, Labid, Tarafa: just to recall some of their names is a pleasure—had already been presented to a European public by Goethe in his *West-östlicher Diwan*, with acknowledgments to Jones and Sylvestre de Sacy, the English and French Orientalists who had studied and translated them.

These poets are among the dead I find it necessary to dialogue with daily. They are my contemporaries in their very archaisms: from them I have learned the cult of the trace—a trace that stays mute despite the poet’s insistent desire to interpret it, to make it over into a sign that would return him to the path of meaning.

Such a trace signals displacement and witnesses absence. An irrevocable absence, an interrogation without answer opening only upon the memory of those moments when the gift of expenditure occurred along the vector of a pleasure that makes the body quake and brings it to extremes—annihilation, experience of nothingness, death and rebirth—in the interval opened up by the love of women, the praise of wine, the crossing of night and storm, empathy with the mount, horse or camel.

Thus the poem’s engine starts up, following the evocation of the trace, the stridency of the beginning: carried by the breath of the rhapsodic voice, the poem chains its sequences to the fragile pedestal of the desert, perdures despite its fragility, despite the effacement that lies in wait for it from the very moment it is echoed on its ecological site, metaphor of the white page. Faced with this metaphysics of an absence that demands no reparation, I track the idea of the trace through the fate that was its own in the distance covered by the Arab language. I take hold of it again once it has migrated into the Sufi text transcribed in Baghdad in the ninth century; there, through the mouths of Persian turncoats,