Doom and bloom:

Friederike Mayröcker’s Anthropocene lateness

When Friederike Mayröcker died in 2021 at the age of ninety-six, she left a body of work spanning approximately eighty years. Richard Dove, Viktor Suchy and Robert Acker all identify Mayröcker’s ‘late’ phase, which Suchy and Acker perceive as the third in the development of her poetics, as commencing in the 1970s: Dove describes her ‘very conscious pilgrimage through the valley of the shadow of death, which began around the time of her fiftieth birthday’, in 1974.[1] This extraordinary late phase, which lasted some forty-five years, more than half of her writing life, is integral to her *oeuvre* which itself constitutes a sustained exploration of the nature of (artistic) subjectivity and selfhood, the fragility and contingency of the self and the precarity of its situation in space and time.[2] It is this last problem—the attempt to locate the subject (and the other) in time—which is the focus of this article. Mayröcker explores the temporal dimensions of subjectivity in ways which shed new light on the dynamics of what we might call ‘Anthropocene lateness’ and its implications for poetry.

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[1] See Richard Dove, ‘Introduction’ in Friederike Mayröcker, *Raving Language: Selected Poems 1946–2005*, ed. and trans. by Richard Dove (Manchester: Carcanet, 2007), p. xv; Viktor Suchy, ‘Poesie und Poiesis, dargestellt am Werke Friederike Mayröckers’ in *Die andere Welt* ed. by. Kurt Bartsch et al. (Bern: Francke, 1979), pp. 341–358; Robert Acker, ‘Ernst Jandl and Friederike Mayröcker: A Study of Modulation and Crisis’, *World Literature Today* 55.4 (1981), 597–602 (p. 600).

[2] See, for example, the various contributions in *Buchstabendelirien: Zur Literatur Friederike Mayröckers*, ed. by Alexandra Strohmeier (Bielefeld: Aisthesis, 2009) as well as Inge Arteel, ‘Biographie einer Biographielosen’, *Études Germaniques* 276 (2014), 505–516; Klaus Kastberger, *Reinschrift des Lebens: Friederike Mayröckers* Reise durch die Nacht (Vienna, Cologne, Weimar: Böhlau, 2000).

I

The position of subjects (human and non-human, political and linguistic) in space and especially time is an implicit concern of much environmental activism, and establishes a context of temporal disruption against which Mayröcker’s work may productively be read. An example from the work of the climate activist group Extinction Rebellion UK (XR) is instructive. In August 2021, the group began using the slogan ‘ACT NOW ~~BEFORE~~

BECAUSE IT’S TOO LATE’.

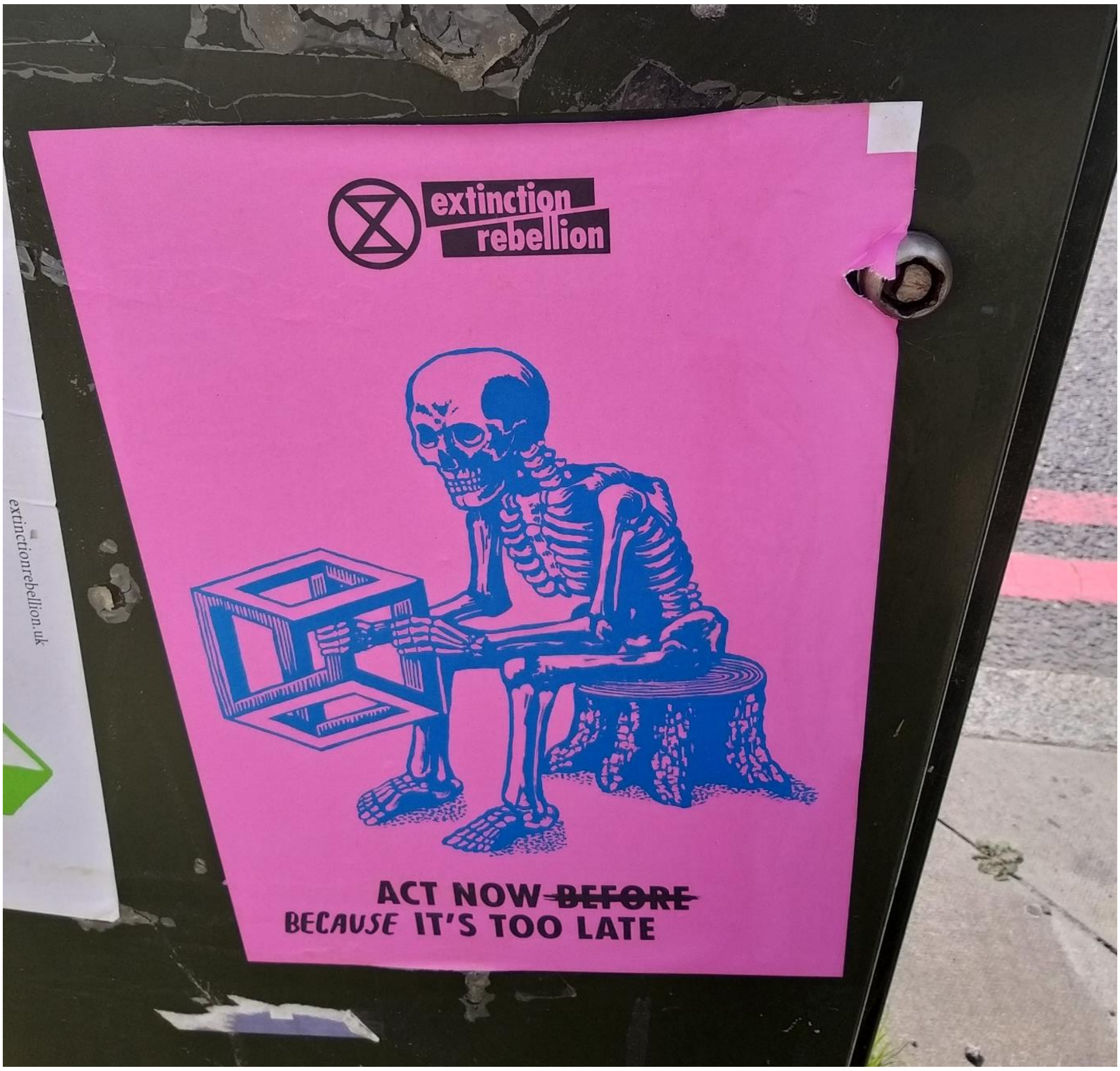
extinction rebellion
ACT NOW ~~BEFORE~~
BECAUSE IT’S TOO LATE
extinctionrebellion.uk

Figure 1: Extinction Rebellion, *ACT NOW ~~BEFORE~~ BECAUSE IT’S TOO LATE*, 2021. Photograph: author (August 2021)

One poster featuring this line depicted a skeleton holding an ‘impossible cube’ in the style of M. C. Escher, a *vanitas* for the Anthropocene (Fig. 1): transfixed by an unsolvable problem, the skeleton appears not to have noticed its own demise. Unusually for activist slogans, both image and wording invoke aporia, if not outright resignation. Unlike those slogans of the environmental movement which emphasise hope, individual agency or the possibility of systemic change, ‘ACT NOW ~~BEFORE~~ BECAUSE IT’S TOO LATE’ appears to contain a logical contradiction which thwarts expectations. The striking through of 'before' erases the familiar rhetoric of urgency: if it's too late, why bother acting at all, let alone in haste? Had the revised preposition been *although*, some conventional activist logic might have been salvaged ('it's worth taking action anyway, even if the ideal moment has passed') and the slogan could be hear as a call to arms, an incitement to hope against hope in keeping with the wider tone of XR campaigning. The introduction of the word 'because' points not to defiance but to a straightforward, if obscure, notion of causality: now is the right time to act, *precisely for the reason that* it is too late.

One interpretation this slogan means emphasize the first word, and thus read it as a call to a certain kind of engagement: *act* now, because it's too late (for more reflection, more dialogue, more contemplation of the problem). But this reading is unsatisfactory. The slogan in its current form is not incomplete. As written, it implies two things: first, that the moment for taking action to reverse, mitigate or address the reality of global anthropogenic climate change has passed, will never return, and it is too late to change this. Second, that action must now be taken *as a consequence* of this fact, in full knowledge of it, and that this action will have a specific quality and focus which differ from the quality and focus of the action which might have been taken before it became too late.

These ideas are central to the movement known as 'Deep Adaptation', as set out by the sustainability researcher Jem Bendell, whose thinking explicitly informs the XR campaign.[3]

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[3] Jem Bendell, 'Act Now BECAUSE It's Too Late – XR founder member invites us men to join', https://jembendell.com/2021/08/18/act-now-because-its-too-late-xr-founder-member-invites-us-men-to-join/ [accessed 3 May 2022]. Bendell's work has been criticized by other scholars: some dispute the accuracy of his bleak projections about the future of civilization; others note that his work takes little account of the uneven global distribution of the effects of

Deep Adaptation proposes that systemic upheaval is now an inevitable consequence of climate change; that mere 'mitigation' of its impacts is impossible; and that climate activists should focus on leading a discussion about how to prepare for and 'soften' the coming social collapse—that we should act now, not despite the fact that, but *because* it's too late.[4] Bendell is not the only thinker who adopts this kind of rhetoric in relation to the climate crisis: Roy Scranton, in his essay 'Learning to Die in the Anthropocene', strikes a similar note, advising us to dwell on the death of civilisation, claiming that only thus can we 'learn to see each day as the death of what came before, freeing ourselves to deal with whatever problems the present offers without attachment or fear.'[5] Timothy Morton, approaching the issue from a phenomenological angle, argues that '[t]he end of the world has already occurred': for him,

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climate change; and still others question the pragmatic value of the Deep Adaptation position for climate activism, arguing that hope and optimism are better levers for inciting urgent action. These objections are valid and helpful: my argument here does not rest on the accuracy or utility of Bendell's arguments, but on their rhetorical formulations.

[4] Jem Bendell, 'Doom and Bloom: Adapting to Collapse' in *This Is Not A Drill: An Extinction Rebellion Handbook*, ed. by Clare Farrell, Alison Green, Sam Knights and William Skeaping (London: Penguin, 2019), pp. 70–74 (p. 73).

[5] Roy Scranton, 'Learning How to Die in the Anthropocene', *New York Times,* 10 November 2013 https://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/11/10/learning-how-to-die-in-the-anthropocene/ [accessed 3 May 2022]. See also Roy Scranton, *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene* (San Francisco, CA: City Lights, 2015).

‘the concept *world* is no longer operational’ in an age of escalating complexity and scalar disruption.[6]

These positions are a fairly recent development in the rhetoric of environmental activism and eco-theory, and are especially associated with the temporal category of the Anthropocene. Bendell and others are sometimes called ‘climate doomers’—and, indeed, on the surface, these positions might appear to be a permutation of what Mike Hulme and Cherry Norton have called the ‘eco-activist’ paradigm: ‘a pessimistic story of impending doom, ecological destruction’ which foretells ‘the end of humanity unless radical action is taken’.[7] More optimistically, they could reflect what Christophe Bonneuil identifies as the ‘eco-catastrophist’ narrative of the Anthropocene, in which ‘accepting the limits to growth becomes […] an opportunity for more participatory societies and a new post-growth resilient society’.[8] However, unlike that of Hulme and Norton’s eco-activists or Bonneuil’s eco-catastrophists, Bendell’s position is neither utopian nor dystopian, optimistic nor pessimistic, because it is not future oriented. In fact, Deep Adaptation is to a large degree backwards-, or at least sideways-looking: it focuses (to quote the movement’s own keywords) on ‘resilience’, ‘relinquishment’, ‘restoration’ and ‘reconciliation’ rather than rebuilding or reimagining. It encourages acceptance of the present and reflection on the past rather than attempts to engineer the future.[9] In so doing, it in fact represents a major new development, one which I will call 'Anthropocene lateness', which explicitly rejects the linear temporality of familiar eco-catastrophic or eco-pessimist narratives. It is inaccurate to describe Bendell as a 'climate doomer' because his position is not a pessimistic one. Instead, Bendell talks of 'doom and *bloom*' (my emphasis), of finding 'love' in 'despair', and of the 'delicious intensity' of experience coloured by the foreknowledge of death.[10] This stance is echoed by both Scranton and Morton who, for different reasons, also argue that the logic of urgency, 'act now *before* it's too late', is not merely misleading (since it is already too late) but actively damaging. '[T]he strongly held belief that the world is about to end "unless we act now"', Morton writes, 'is paradoxically one of the most powerful factors that inhibit a full engagement with our ecological coexistence here on Earth'.[11] Instead, in Morton's description of the end of the world, 'a deep shuddering of temporality occurs': the foundations of temporality itself, the sense of action and consequence, and the idea that we can understand ourselves in relation to histories and futures, are all called into doubt.[12]

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[6] Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minneapolis Press), pp. 6–7.

[7] Cherry Norton and Mike Hulme, ‘Telling one story, or many? An ecolinguistic analysis of climate change stories in UK national newspaper editorials’, *Geoforum*, 104 (2019), 114–136 (p. 118).

[8] Christophe Bonneuil, ‘The Geological Turn: Narratives of the Anthropocene’ in *The Anthropocene and the Global Environmental Crisis*, ed. Clive Hamilton, Christophe Bonneuil and François Gemenne (London: Routledge, 2015), pp. 17–31 (p. 27)

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[9] Bendell, 'Doom and Bloom', p. 73

[10] Bendell, 'Doom and Bloom', p. 77.

[11] Morton, 'Hyperobjects', p. 6–7. See also Scranton: 'The sooner we confront this problem, and the sooner we realize there's nothing we can do to save ourselves, the sooner we can get down to the hard work of adapting, with mortal humility, to our new reality'. ('Learning How to Die')

[12] Morton, 'Doom and Bloom', p. 16. This 'deep shuddering' of temporality has been felt across Anthropocene theory, from Dipesh Chakraborty's four theses on the climate of history to Jean-Pierre Dupuy's engagement with Günter Anders's phenomenology of catastrophe:

For Eva Horn, this gap between perception and reality—between our intuitive grasp of our position in the world and the reality which underpins it—is one of the fundamental challenges with which Anthropocene art must grapple.[13] Identifying this quality of the Anthropocene as 'latency', she highlights that the causes, consequences and affects associated with environmental change are so vast and diffuse (in space and time) that they elude perception and representation. Horn addresses latency partly as a problem of scale and planetary space, but I would add that it is also an issue of temporal misalignment: the fact we cannot see or grasp how past actions have already affected our present circumstances, that we do not know and cannot perceive whether and when 'late' or 'too late' to act.

In this sense, Anthropocene lateness is a temporalized subcategory of Horn's 'latency'. But where she sees latency primarily as a challenge for Anthropocene aesthetics to overcome, Morton, Scranton and others approach it more positively. According to them, Anthropocene lateness—indeed, *too*-lateness—as a difficult-to-grasp condition in the present, and an unclear or even unknowable consequence of the past, offers a productive release from the aporia of an eco-anxiety oriented towards an imagined future. Far than inhibiting action or challenging expression, an awareness of lateness enables it, in the form of thought, connection, care and attention.

'The day after tomorrow, the flood will have been. And when the flood will have been, *everything that is will never have existed* […] *If I have come before you, it is in order to reverse time*'. Anders as quoted in Jean-Pierre Dupuy, *A Short Treatise on the Metaphysics of Tsunamis*, trans. M. B. De Bevoise (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 2015), pp. 2–3 (emphasis in the original). See also Dipesh Chakraborty, 'The Climate of History: Four Theses', *Critical Inquiry* 35.2 (2009), 197–222 and Günter Anders, *Endzeit und Zeitende* (Munich: Beck, 1972).

[13] Horn, 'Aesthetics', p. 102.

II

Morton's 'shuddering of temporality' finds an aesthetic correlative in the discourse of 'late style' in cultural criticism, and it is worth sketching this connection before establishing its relevance for Mayröcker's work. Theodor Adorno describes the falling away of individual expression in Beethoven's late work as a brief, brilliant moment in which the formal structures of the work and the subjectivity they (fail to) contain suddenly fragment, contradicting and illuminating one another in the process.[14] Following Adorno, Edward Said focuses on late style's 'untimeliness', its quality of being 'in, but oddly apart from the present' (in a phrase which echoes Horn's thinking on latency).[15] From Adorno onwards, the theoretical discourse on late style frequently situates itself in opposition to a popular understanding of late works as a reflection of individual artists' emotional responses to their own impending deaths. Rather than focusing on the individual psychology of the artist, theorists of late style are interested in the structural and formal qualities of late works, and of their relation to history and aesthetics.

But late style is not straightforward, and even basic definitions are challenging: what critics understand as an artist's late style in retrospect—their last works before death, their *Spätstil*—may or may not be their *Alterswerk*, the work of their old age. The precise qualities and scales of 'lateness' become clear only after an ending is reached, a fact that has a particular poignancy in the light of our current predicament. Moreover, as Smiles and McMullan note, critics following Adorno and Said tend to emphasize the apparent independence or singularity of late style, the extent to which late works appear transcendent, as the product of an isolated genius—but equally important for any definition of late style is an awareness of its contingency, both formal (in the sense that a deep understanding of formal conventions is needed in order to transcend them) and social (in the sense that aging bodies require particular types of care and connection).[16] Gender is a recurrent sticking point, since women are less often permitted to transcend the bounds of their time and society in this way: McMullan notes that women have typically been 'systematically excluded' from discussions on late style, 'just as they have no place (or at least a highly circumscribed place) in the larger concept—genius—of which late style is a sub-category'.[17] Fragmentation, difficulty and 'maturity without sweetness' (as Adorno describes it) are sometimes taken as the hallmarks of late style, but this definition is vague and contested, and it is clear that there can be no single framework for what late style looks like across cultures and contexts.

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[14] Theodor Adorno, 'Spätstil Beethovens' in *Gesammelte Schriften* ed. by. Rolf Tiedemann and others (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1970–), 17 (1982), pp. 13–17. Further references given in text.
[15] Edward Said, *On Late Style* (London, New York: Bloomsbury, 2006), p.11, p. 16.

Late style, then, is an imperfect framework for understanding works of art, and one which does not furnish a recognisable list of qualities which might be used to extrapolate an aesthetics of 'civilizational lateness' in the sense of, for example, Scranton's thinking.[18] Nonetheless, Adorno and others' focus on the structural and formal qualities of late works can still supply a useful starting point for considering the aesthetic qualities of art in the Anthropocene. Elsewhere in this volume, Alexis Radisoglou examines the apparent failure of what he calls (following Mark Fisher's influential definition of 'capitalist realism') 'Anthropocene realism' in the films of Nikolaus Geyrhalter.[19] Central to Radisoglou's argument is the notion that documentary realism is, by itself, an inadequate artistic response to environmental crisis. Merely depicting a problem, he contends, is not the same as engaging with it. Radisoglou's insight recalls a line from Adorno's work on late style: '[e]s ist, als wolle angesichts der Würde menschlichen Todes die Kunsttheorie ihres Rechtes sich begeben und vor der Wirklichkeit abdanken.’ (13) [‘It is as if, confronted with the dignity of human death, the theory of art were to divest itself of its rights and abdicate in favor of reality’].[20]

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[16] McMullan and Smiles, p. 7.

[17] Gordon McMullan, *Shakespeare and the Idea of Late Writing: Authorship in the Proximity of Death* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 17–18. See also *Aging and Gender in Literature: Studies in Creativity*, ed. by Anne M. Wyatt-Brown and Janice Rossen (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1993).

[18] Scranton, 'Learning How to Die'.

[19] Alexis Radisoglou, 'Anthropocene Realism: On Nikolaus Geyrhalter's *Erde*, and the Limits of a Cumulative Aesthetic', *Austrian Studies* 30 (2022), pp. XX–XX.

Reading against a context in which human extinction appears a very real possibility, literary ecocritics have sometimes done just this: turned away from considering art as art and instead reached for what Adorno and Said both caution against, the ‘psychological interpretation’, which foregrounds the individual or collective psychological response to the possibility of death (as in ecological ‘grief’ or eco-anxiety). It is undoubtedly true that there are works of art which engage—in the mode of eco-elegy, for example—with the psychological impact on human beings of the possibility of their own extinction. These, however, cannot and should not define Anthropocene poetics; such a definition would be profoundly limiting. Reading through the prism of late style reminds us that Anthropocene art must be understood as a broad category including all artworks now being created, under the sign of mass extinction and ecosystem collapse, whether or not they engage with these issues explicitly.

According to Robert Spencer, the ‘late’ of Adorno’s ‘late style’ can be understood as ‘refer[ring] to capitalism and in particular to capitalism’s senescence, its unsustainability and its inability to realize its own ideals’.[21] Antonia Hofstätter, examining how Adorno’s understanding of the ‘catastrophe’ in Beethoven’s late work might relate to the idea of the Anthropocene, concludes that Adorno’s work challenges the commonly-held assumption in Anthropocene theory that nature and culture are on a continuum: instead, for Adorno, nature and history are in a dialectical relationship, the misalignment of which is most starkly revealed in in ‘late works’.[22]

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[20] Adorno, ‘Late Style in Beethoven’, *Essays on Music* ed. Richard Leppert, trans. by Susan H. Gillespie (Berkley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2002), pp. 564–568 (p. 564).

[21] Spencer, ‘Lateness and Modernity in Theodor Adorno’ in *Late Style and its Discontents,* ed. by. Gordon McMullan and Sam Smiles, p. 220–234, p. 221, p. 234.

[22] Antonia Hofstätter, ‘Catastrophe and History: Adorno, the Anthropocene and Beethoven’s Late Style’ in *Adorno Studies* 3.1 (2019), pp. 2–19.

The attempt in this essay to comment on Mayröcker's Anthropocene lateness draws on both of these insights. In extending Adorno's perspective on lateness to the level of a whole system, Spencer pays attention to the work of particular writers whose late style, he argues, is 'at once specific to the life and imagination of the artist and germane to the world'.[23] This a line of thinking which I echo in my reading of Mayröcker—lateness in her work operates on a number of levels—but I also follow Hofstätter in drawing attention to misalignment, negativity and points of rupture as a form of critique. I read Mayröcker's poetry as a record of a moment of profound structural disruption. The discourse of late style teaches us that attending to the structural reality of that rupture (between individual subjectivity and societal or artistic convention; between history and nature) is integral to understanding how art relates to and refracts rather than just describing or documenting death, oblivion and catastrophe.

III

Mayröcker's poems and prose works speak to many of the complications inherent in the notion of late style, as well as providing an exemplary case study for its potential richness. Alexander Schwieren describes as her 'radical' confrontation with the discourse, drawing particular attention to the linguistic self-reflexivity of her (late) style.[24] Mayröcker's long late period confounds expectations that *Spätwerk* and/or *Alterswerk* be the product of brief but intense final periods of creative blossoming. Instead, the majority of her work is consciously untimely, structurally informed by an awareness of mortality, riven and illuminated by a sense of the fragmentary subject at odds with language. (‘Doom and bloom’ is also an apt description, given that one of her final books is entitled *fleurs*.)[25] Mayröcker’s ‘late style’ is atypical in other ways, too, which undermine the gendered image of the late stylist as a transcendent, isolated genius. Contingency and constraint are embraced throughout her *oeuvre*, not just towards the end of it. The oft-cited example of Matisse’s learning to work with collage after he was no longer able to paint seems to suggest that aging, and the physical frailty with which it is often associated, are necessary evils which can in certain cases result in creative innovation; Mayröcker, on the contrary, celebrates contingency, constraint and dependence on others throughout her writing life, via her own collage-like compositional practices.

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[23] Spencer, 'Lateness and Modernity', p. 234.

[24] Alexander Schwieren, 'Alterswerk' als Schicksal: Max Frisch, Friederike Mayröcker und die Poetologie des 'Alters' in der neueren Literatur', *Zeitschrift für Germanistik* 22.2 (2012), 290–305 (p. 305).

It might be possible to make an argument for reading Mayröcker as a kind of eco-poet or a poet of the Anthropocene, given that her poems often describe non-human beings, including plants and animals, and her work often has an elegiac tone.[26] But although she returns over and over to plant and animal motifs and encounters, these images and objects feature in Mayröcker’s poetry simply because just about everything does: her work is a catalogue of phenomena which combines the everyday and the transcendental. Certainly, in her critical writings and in interviews, Mayröcker never alludes to the environment, her writing or her life using the vocabulary of politically-engaged environmental activism. This analysis therefore makes no attempt to claim Mayröcker as any sort of eco-poet. At best, her work is eco-phenomenological, interested in both the phenomenon of environment and in environmental phenomena in the broadest possible sense and offering ‘observation or recognition of the natural world for its own sake, rather than in relation to difficult and complex questions regarding human-environment relations'.[27]

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[25] Friederike Mayröcker, *fleurs* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2016).

[26] See Morton, ‘The Dark Ecology of Elegy’ in *The Oxford Handbook of the Elegy,* ed. by Karen Weisman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 251–271.

Of all the environmental phenomena which are present in Mayröcker's writing, birds occupy a special position.[28] Birds are a recurrent motif she has returned to throughout her writing life, in various species and guises, from the role played by swallows in her engagement with Hölderlin to the birdsong which gives shape to grief in *Requiem für Ernst Jandl*. Mayröcker's bird images often convey a sense of something indeterminate, incorporeal, glimpsed or half-seen, undeniably present but always slightly beyond the horizon of perception.

One poem from the 1980s, 'tropisches Knabenkraut, wild, im Schnabel', is worth singling out for analysis here because it provides a sustained engagement with time and temporality, explored through precisely this type of elusive bird image. In this sense, as well as formally and thematically, it is characteristic of a particular strand of Mayröcker's work. Alongside the long, structured cycles such as *Requiem für Ernst Jandl* (*Requiem for Ernst Jandl*) for which she is known, Mayröcker also produced many short poems with complex rhythms and syntax, ostensibly lyrics, albeit with a complex relationship to the clear speaking subject which characterises most lyric poetry, which describe quotidian phenomena in ways that enable us to glimpse their transcendental and metaphysical contexts. The poem reads:

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[27] Susanna Lidström and Greg Garrard, '"Images Adequate to Our Predicament": Ecology, Environment and Ecopoetics', *Environmental Humanities* 5.1 (2014), 35–53. 43.

[28] See Eleonore de Felip, 'Von Amseln, Elstern und Nachtigallen: Vogel-Mensch-Dialoge in Texten von Friederike Mayröcker und Michael Donhauser' in *Tiere - Texte - Transformationen* ed. by Reingard Spannring and others (Bielefeld: transcript, 2015), pp. 227–244.

tropisches Knabenkraut, wild, im Schnabel zum Beispiel Vanille
nein nicht ins schwarze dorthin flog mein Blick nicht der Vogel
sasz nicht im Baum oder Auslug was möcht ich fürchten
ein Fittich ein dunkler Fittich wenn
sein dunkler Fittich mich brausend umfängt, das ist
der erste Amselruf schmerzlich und zart aus verstaubtem, aus fahlem
Gebüsch, das ist da ist ins schwarze getroffen
das Herz da steh ich, halte Zwiesprache mit dem Vogel, Widerschein
einer schweren Sonne im blutigen
Schnee, o was möcht ich
mein Herz meine Amsel, ins schwarze getroffen am weiszen,
am vierten März diese schmelzenden Töne Damaszener
Klingen, heftig tropfendes
Herz, genarrtes genarbtes Herz, wo wohnt hier...
: so sprach er mich an Herzkirschenmann, blättert
das Auge, Atem schläfert in groszen Bäumen grünschaftig
vor struppigen Sturm, Vorfrühlings Gefieder
unvergleichliches Merkmal verzweigtes
Glied im Gazellenmieder, werden gezittert zitiert wir im
leichten Zopf dieser Stube, strohverpacktes
Genügen Ehre und Anmut, Bergstiefel die bewegten Blicke
von damals, das schwarze seitliche Auge der Amsel jetzt
aus fadenscheiniger

Hecke sein blonder Nacken[29]

[a tropical orchid, wild, in his beak for instance vanilla
no not into the (black) spot that's where my glance flew the bird did
not sit in the tree the look-out what have I to fear
a wing a dark wing if
its dark wing swoops to surround me, that's
the blackbird's first cry aching and sweet from the dusty, from the pale
bushes, that is there is hit the (black) spot
the heart I stand there, converse with the bird, the reflection
of a heavy sun on the bloody
snow, o what do I desire
my heart my blackbird, hitting the (black) spot in the white
on the fourth of March these melting sounds of Damascene
steel, the quick dripping
heart, the shamed scarred heart, where do they live here..
: so he addressed me the chap of the cherry tree, leafing
his eye, breath slumbering in the huge trees green-sheathed
before the scruffy storm, plumage of early spring
tell-tale sign of twiggy
limb in a pair of gazelles' stays, are quivered quoted we in
the parlour's light braid, pleasure virtue and grace

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[29] Friederike Mayröcker, 'tropisches Knabenkraut, wild, im Schnabel' in *Gesammelte Gedichte* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2005), pp. 482-483. The translation is my own.

bundled in straw, stiff boots the moved glances
of long ago, side-on the black eye of the blackbird now
from the threadbare
thicket his blond nape]

The poem opens with the image of a tropical orchid in what we take to be the beak of some exotic bird, which quickly vanishes from the speaker's peripheral vision. Playing with the idiom 'ins schwarze treffen', literally meaning 'to strike into the black' and equivalent to the English 'hit the bullseye, find the mark', the poem manipulates the tension between concealment and precision implicit in this phrase. The speaker's eye is drawn to the black—which we may read here as a shady part of the tree into which the bird has vanished—but this means they fail to 'find the target', that is to spot the bird, which seems to have moved on. A few lines later, after hearing 'der erste Amselruf schmerzlich und zart' [the blackbird's first call aching and sweet], the target is found: 'da ist ins schwarze getroffen / das Herz da steh ich, halte Zwiesprache mit dem Vogel' [that is there is hit the (black) spot / the heart I stand there, converse with the bird], prompting a beautiful lyrical segment of the poem in which the speaker apostrophises the bird, moved by the 'schmelzenden Töne Damaszener / Klingen' [melting sounds of Damascene / steel] that emerge as it sings. A moment of peaceful communion between human speaker, bird and tree ensues, structured around the ellipsis which follows 'wo wohnt hier..' [where do they live here..] and subsequent line break and colon. Once again, the bird is broken down into glimpses of eye and plumage, dwarfed by the tree and seemingly not perceived directly. This continues in the final lines of the poem, where we meet 'das schwarze seitliche Auge der Amsel jetzt / aus fadenscheiniger / Hecke sein blonder Nacken' [side-on the black eye of the blackbird now / from the threadbare / thicket his blond nape].

The ‘flitting’ quality of the images draws attention to the dynamic presence of the bird, between movement and stasis, which is also reflected in its disaggregation into beak, song, colour and eye rather than stable formation as a singular entity. The complicated rhythm of the text also contributes to the curious effect of dissonant temporalities in the poem. As the longer excerpts above demonstrate, there is a syncopated effect almost all the way through, a product of the dramatic use of enjambment and mid-line caesurae combined with the idiosyncratic punctuation. For example, at one point we find a colon at the start of a line, used to mark an extended pause at a moment of emotional intensity:

> […] schmelzenden Töne Damaszener
> Klingen, heftig tropfendes
> Herz, genarrtes genarbtes Herz, wo wohnt hier..
> : so sprach er mich an Herzkirschenmann […]
>
> [[…] these melting sounds of Damascene
> steel, the quick dripping
> heart, the shamed scarred heart, where do they live here..
> : so he addressed me the chap of the cherry tree […]]

The huge variety in the line lengths and metre, which leads to an almost chaotic mixture of length and pace, is a distinctive quality of Mayröcker’s work. In this poem, the longest lines have seven feet; the shortest have two or three. The feet themselves also vary substantially. Parts of the text--the faster moments in the poem--are identifiably anapestic or dactylic; at other times, the verse is iambic or trochaic, slower and more ponderous. There are a couple of halting spondees towards the start of the text, which mime the hesitant search for the bird (for example, ‘nein nicht’ [no not]). The poem moves rather like a bird moves: sporadically, with flitting dynamism, and always a little ahead of its reader.

The poem also makes frequent reference to overlapping temporal structures: the diurnal cycle (the ‘Sonne’ [sun]), the human calendar (‘am vierten März’, [on the fourth of March]), the changing seasons (‘Vorfrühlings Gefieder’ [plumage of early spring]), the cycle of life and memory (‘die bewegten Blicke / von damals’, [the moved glances / of long ago]). These techniques give the sense of competing—or at least, co-existing—temporalities in the poem: the human, the avian, the arboreal, the planetary. Thus, without claiming to give voice to any specific non-human being, Mayröcker’s poem renders legible the phenomenon that Jacob von Uexküll’s theoretical biology describes in terms of the distinctive *Umwelten* of different organisms: ‘Die Zeit als Aufeinanderfolge von Momenten wechselt von Umwelt zu Umwelt, je nach der Anzahl von Momenten, welche die Subjekte in der gleichen Zeitspanne erleben’ [time as a sequence of moments differs from *Umwelt* to *Umwelt*, according to the number of moments subjects experience within the same time span].[30] Von Uexküll comments, for example, on the extraordinary ‘slowness’ of time in the life-cycle of a tick, which can wait eighteen years for food. Later, he gives an account of the same oak tree within the *Umwelten* of various creatures, through which it appears hard or soft, large or small, welcoming or threatening, fast or slow, depending on the size and sense perception faculties of the organism which approaches it. In much the same way, humans and non-humans encounter each other as ‘fast’ or ‘slow’ beings depending on our frameworks of perception and the parameters of our *Umwelten,* a reality which is reflected in the temporal complexity of Mayröcker’s poem.

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[30] Jacob von Uexküll, *Streifzüge durch die Umwelten von Tieren und Menschen: ein Bilderbuch unsichtbarer Welten* (Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1956), p. 46.

This temporal complexity has the capacity to generate a variety of affects. At one level, the temporal misalignment appears to have a coy, flirtatious character, with erotic overtones connoted by the dialogue between lyric speaker and the 'Herzkirschenmann' (the bird) and the reference to 'verzweigtes / Glied im Gazellenmieder' [twiggy limb in gazelle's stays]. Equally, and perhaps relatedly, there are moments of horror and hints of violence, reaching a kind of apocalyptic pitch via the reference to '[der] Widerschein / einer schweren Sonne im blutigen / Schnee' [reflection / of a heavy sun / on the bloody snow] and the lines which precede the moment of intense dialogue with the bird: 'schmelzenden Töne Damaszener / Klingen / heftig tropfendes / Herz, genarrtes genarbtes Herz' [melting sounds of Damascene steel / the quick dripping / heart, the shamed scarred heart]. More than just grief-laden or sorrowful, the imagery is dramatic and violent. The reference to Damascus gestures towards a crucial, sudden, transformation in self-understanding via a 'Damaskusgeschehen', a Damascene conversion, as well as Damascus steel, a much-mythologised ancient form of steel production of which knowledge was said to have been lost in modernity. Both reinforce the sense of impending transformation, collapse or apocalypse.

At numerous levels, then, the poem explores the temporal dissonance or asynchrony which underpins belatedness. This is apparent in the account of the alternating movement and stasis of the bird, in the rhythms of the poem, and in the overlaying of different temporal structures. What arises is a feeling of balanced stillness and movement, of a clash of timeframes—and, crucially, a sense of creative acuity experienced in the act of waiting and watching in hope or trepidation. Mayröcker's poem is, in a sense, a poem about birdwatching, which focuses on a single bird and it describes the chief pleasure of this activity: not the experience of seeing a bird directly straight away, but the focus, rhythm and concentration of careful looking, watching and waiting. One may, as the poem frequently does, have the feeling of always been 'too late' for more than a tantalising glimpse, and in the process be reminded of the differences in speed and pace between the human *Umwelt*, that of non-human others and planetary systems. Above all, this is a text in which temporal dissonance is made not only legible but also meaningful.

Mayröcker describes another form of temporal dissonance, that of the writing subject's relationship to text, as the driving factor behind her work. Poems serve for her as a kind of bulwark against the passage of time, what Peter Sirr calls 'a headlong rush to capture [moments] before they vanish' which colours not only the last phase of her work but most of her career.[31] 'She foregoes', Ryan Ruby writes, quoting Said, 'the fiction of "transcendence and unity" that underpins the conventional lyric in favor of a perpetual "[deepening of] lateness."' The '&c' with which she ends many poems 'is the only immortality we will ever taste in this life'.[32] There is discordant temporality at play here which aligns with the notions of 'lateness' and fragmentation as discussed by Adorno and the 'shuddering' identified by Morton as a consequence of what I have called Anthropocene lateness. The poet pays attention to things that are over in an instant; she locates these within the framework of a life gradually but inexorably progressing towards death and writes them down so they can be preserved for longer, according to the unknowable, potentially vast, timescales of memory. The defining experience of this attempt to apprehend conflicting timeframes, to capture something in language or even in thought before it slips away, is a sense of lateness—but this lateness is rich and productive, just as it is in the poem. As in ‘tropisches Knabenkraut…’, something is always slipping out of our (and Mayröcker’s) grasp with the passage of time, which reflects of the limitations of the human, the constraints of mortality and the limits of language and art. Once the poem is made, the moment has passed, its fixing in words is a record of lateness: this lateness itself is not an inconvenience or beside the point, not something to be overcome. Rather, as in the poem, it is a prerequisite for the creative impulse, underpinning and enabling all forms of attention and expression.

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[31] Peter Sirr, 'Thin Skinned Dreams: Reading Friederike Mayröcker' in *Poetry Ireland Review* 97 (2009), 75–80 (p. 79)

[32] Ryan Ruby, *A Heaven of the Book*, 2020 https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/154848/a-heaven-of-the-book [accessed 4 August 2022]. This is a feature of Mayröcker's distinctive method of composition which often involves the gathering of fragments, automatic writing or quotation, and aleatory techniques.

Here we return to Bendell’s ‘doom and bloom’, and Adorno’s argument that lateness (in the guise of late style) illuminates the dialectic of nature and history beyond the individual and beyond the psychological. Rather than categorising Mayröcker as a poet of the Anthropocene or an eco-poet, whose work functions to mirror or comment on the ecological grief or anxiety which many of us experience, we can instead begin to see this poem—and, tentatively, Mayröcker’s work more generally—as a contribution to and formative example of an aesthetics of lateness which is coming to prominence in the Anthropocene. I have argued this here by proceeding from theory (Bendell, Morton and others) to Mayröcker’s literary praxis, but Mayröcker’s poem explores this in a way the theoretical interventions cannot, through careful attention to the dynamics of human and non-human, to questions of attention and perception and the linguistic traces of temporal misalignment. Paying attention to lateness has the potential to enrich thinking about the temporal paradigms of the Anthropocene, which is, after all, an essentially temporal construct. Since the passing of the term ‘Anthropocene’ into common artistic and critical parlance, art and theory have been very excited about the possibilities of thinking with ‘deep time’, the *long durée* of geological history which the term itself foregrounds, but dominance of this one temporal paradigm has overshadowed a range of other ways of thinking about time in Anthropocene which have just as much potential to enrich or destabilise. Lateness is one of these other aspects of temporal thinking which is folded into, yet often overlooked within, the Anthropocene context. Embedded in the concept of the Anthropocene is the idea that we occupy a discordant temporal frame which is on the one hand too brief, too fast in geological and planetary terms for us to fully grasp the extent of our impact on the geological fabric of the planet—but on the other we are also too slow, too stubborn, too laden with inertia, to do anything about it.

This is, of course, a fatalistic view of lateness, but in the context of Mayröcker's poem, we might also draw attention to its productivity: the fact that it emphasises 'doom and bloom' rather than doom and gloom. In that sense, we can also read Anthropocene lateness as a further permutation of those narratives of lateness which Ben Hutchinson has described as characteristic of canonical European thought from Romanticism onwards.[33] Hutchinson pinpoints this lateness as a specifically European phenomenon, an argument which may help 'provincialize' the European Anthropocene in useful ways: anxieties about 'lateness' are not the primary cause of concern in communities in the Global South which bear the brunt of global heating. For those communities attempts to make such lateness productive and fruitful take on a different resonance, just as the debate about temporal categories *per se* resonates differently in Indigenous theory and philosophy.[34] There is, however, a rich seam of interpretative frames for understanding lateness in modern German-language culture: Karen Leeder describes it as a 'strategic intervention' which opens up the possibility of rebellion and resistance, potentially giving access to greater maturity and acuity, and Anne Fuchs presents a compelling case for cultural latency, considering it from a Freudian perspective, as a corrective to Harmut Rosa's famous 'acceleration compulsion'.[35] For Fuchs, lateness is a state of being which 'foreground[s] a decelerated temporality that rejects the tyranny of the present'.[36] In this way, the 'latency' identified by Horn as a key challenge to Anthropocene aesthetics can also be coded positively, becoming not, or not only, a challenge, but also, crucially, an illuminating and revelatory force.

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[33] Ben Hutchinson, *Lateness and Modern European Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

[34] See, for example Heather Davis & Zoe Todd, 'On the Importance of a Date, or, Decolonizing the Anthropocene', *ACME: An International Journal for Critical Geographies*, 16.4 (2017), 761–780.

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[35] Karen Leeder, 'Figuring Lateness in Modern German Culture', *New German Critique* 42.2 (2015), 1–29 (p. 29); Anne Fuchs, 'Defending Lateness: Deliberations on Acceleration, Attention, and Lateness, 1900–2000', *New German Critique* 42.2 (2015), 31–48. See also Fuchs, *Precarious Times* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2019).

[36] Fuchs, 'Defending Lateness', p. 48.