

Beyond Plot: Capturing the Minutiae of Daily Life

Narrativity between Lyric Enactment and Material Writing in Friederike Mayröcker's Proems

This article examines Friederike Mayröcker's late *proems* as a space in which narrativity is reconfigured at its minimal threshold. At the intersection of post-classical narratology and contemporary lyric theory, the *proem* – a portemanteau from the French *proème*, blending *prose* and *poème* – does not merely transgress generic boundaries but fundamentally challenges key narratorial categories such as sequentiality, eventfulness, and coherent diegesis. Through close readings of Mayröcker's works from *études* (2013) to *da ich morgens und moosgrün. Ans Fenster trete* (2020), the article argues that her writing replaces plot-driven organisation with an associative composition grounded in perception, inscription, and the material conditions of writing. Dated entries, fragmented syntax, and typographic variation foreground the immediacy of textual production, thereby shifting emphasis from representation to performative enactment. The *proem* thus emerges as a form capable of capturing the minutiae of everyday life while simultaneously expanding the conceptual scope of both narrative theory and lyric studies.

“ich habe niemals gewusst, wie man eine Geschichte erzählt, so Jacques Derrida”
(Mayröcker 2014, 118¹)

1. Introduction

In 2012, the Austrian writer Friederike Mayröcker (1924–2021) published what would be her final book of prose and her final collection of poetry labelled as such, *ich sitze nur GRAUSAM da* and *Von den Umarmungen. Gedichte*. The following year saw the publication of *études*, which marks a decisive turning point: here, Mayröcker embarked upon a new poetic concept, the *Proëm* (proem). Four more books followed before her death in 2021. With *cahier* (2014) and *fleurs* (2016), she completed the trilogy initiated with *études*. *Pathos und Schwalbe* appeared in 2018, followed by her final book, *da ich morgens und moosgrün. Ans Fenster trete* in 2020.

In relation to this article's concern with the limits of narrative in the representation of everyday life, the proem assumes particular significance, as it synthesises both narratological and content-related perspectives.

¹ “I never knew how to tell a story, said Jacques Derrida”. Mayröcker (2014, transl. 2024, 114).

The relevant English translations of Mayröcker's books are listed alongside the first German editions in the bibliography. The relevant page numbers are listed alongside the quotations in the endnotes, marked with ‘transl.’. Translations by the author of this article are marked with ‘my transl.’.

For Mayröcker's reception in the English-speaking world: Ryan Ruby (2020) and Ann Cotton (2024). For an overview on her work: Strohmayr / Arteel (2024).

2. The Proem

The term *proème* was coined by the French poet and writer Francis Ponge (1899–1988) as a portmanteau word blending *prose* and *poème*, condensing his poetological reflections into a concise conceptual form (Ponge 1942; 1948). Yet the proem signifies more than the transgression of genre boundaries; it also entails the incorporation of the materiality of the quotidian world into the domain of poetry.

From the outset, a notable affinity between Mayröcker and Ponge becomes apparent. As in Ponge's work, everyday life constitutes a persistent focus in Mayröcker's writing, and her engagement with the concept of the proem encouraged her to suspend generic distinctions within her own practice. Encountering Ponge's oeuvre can therefore be considered a seminal moment in Mayröcker's literary journey.

“(ich schreibe Proëme)”, Mayröcker declares in *études* (Mayröcker 2013, 75).² Enclosed in brackets, the phrase functions both as a self-reflexive commentary and as a signal to the reader. It recurs formulaically – “Proëm vom selbigen Tag” – underscoring her evident delight in this form (Mayröcker 2013, 150, 151, 160; Lartillot 2014, 569; Beyer 2024, 492).³ More than a decade later, the phrase reappears, now typographically isolated, italicised, and capitalised: “*ich schreibe PROEME*” (Mayröcker 2020, 131), as well as in different formatting (116; 149) and in a textual variation: “schreibe / schreie Proeme” (151).⁴

In his afterword to *Friederike Mayröcker. Gesammelte Gedichte 2004–2021*, Marcel Beyer (2024, 488) traces this development. Initially, the term *proem* appears only fleetingly, being – as he puts it – “ein unbestimmter, wenn auch besonderer Zauber”⁵ rather than functioning as a generic designation. Over time, however – particularly during the composition of *études* – the proem consolidates into a distinct writing practice and genre classification, and, according to Beyer, develops such momentum that it pushes previous writing styles into the background (489f.).

Mayröcker's resistance to the limits of genre predates this development, as evidenced by up to eleven pages long poems published in *Tod durch Museen*, an anthology subtitled with *Poetische Texte* (Mayröcker 1966), or her poetological reflections in interviews in the 1970s and 1980s:

Und ich habe immer vermieden, eine Story zu machen, d.h. ich sehe überhaupt nirgends eine Story. Ich sehe auch im Ablauf meines Lebens oder im Leben überhaupt keine storyähnlichen Erscheinungen. Und ich kann auch kein Buch lesen, das eine Story hat. (Ramm 1975, in: Schmidt 1984, 75f.)

Wie weit ich in meiner neuen Prosa imstande bin, sie weiter zu öffnen und noch weitere Dinge hereinzubringen weiß ich nicht, aber ich habe einfach das Bedürfnis, möglichst weit zu öffnen, damit das übliche Nachzeichnen von Gedanken in Erzählungen ad absurdum geführt wird. Dieser damit Punkt des Erzählens soll durch Erweiterung herausfallen und nicht berührt werden. [...] Irgend etwas

² “(I write proëms)”. Mayröcker (2013, transl. 2020, 71).

In *proëm*, the letter ‚e‘ is not invariably marked with a diaeresis, as can be seen below.

³ “proëm from the same day”. Mayröcker (2013, transl. 2020, 148, 150, 160).

⁴ „I write PROEMS“. Mayröcker (2020, transl. 2023, 127); different formatting (transl. 112 and 145); textual variation: “I write / I scream proems” (transl. 147).

Mayröcker's use of typographical variation is notable here insofar as – akin to the incorporation in the form of minute drawings or references to her writing tools – it exposes the text as a site of production rather than a transparent medium.

⁵ “a vague yet distinctive enchantment”. Beyer (2024, 488; my transl.).

sträubt sich in mir gegen so einen Ablauf, so einen erzählten Ablauf, ich weiß nicht warum. (Schmidt 1984, 273f.)⁶

These statements articulate a sustained resistance to linear narration and a desire to dissolve conventional narrative progression. Her proems challenge the central narratological assumption that narrative necessarily involves temporally ordered events mediated by a narrator. Indeed, Mayröcker's repeated rejection of "story" may be read, in Genettean terms, as a refusal of *histoire* (story level) in favour of *discours* (discourse level). Fragmentary, associative, and self-reflexive, her texts privilege discourse over the construction of a coherent diegetic world.⁷

At the same time, the proem also invites consideration within lyric theory. Recent contributions, most prominently by Jonathan Culler (2015, 226), have challenged the traditional opposition between lyric and narrative, arguing that the "fundamental characteristic of lyric [...] is not the description and interpretation of a past event but the iterative and iterable performance of an event in the lyric present, in the special 'now,' of lyric articulation." It is precisely this lyrical presentness that Mayröcker's proems enact. Another aspect reveals a significant connection to lyric speech through the tension between the structure of an *indirect address*, as exemplified by the recurring phrase "ich meine" (Mayröcker 2020, 156, 157)⁸, and the simultaneous absence of responsiveness (Culler 2015, 243; Wix 2024, 116). In a dedicated chapter, Culler (2015, 226) provides an analysis of *lyrical address*, offering a key to understanding Mayröcker's proems:

The bold wager of poetic apostrophe is that the lyric can displace a time of narrative, of past events reported, and place us in the continuing present of apostrophic address, the "now" in which, for readers, a poetic event can repeatedly occur. Fiction is about what happened next; lyric is about what happens now.

3. The New Form of the Book

Beyer's observation regarding the implications of the proem shows that it entails not only a new textual form, but a reconceptualisation of the book itself (Beyer 2024, 493). This new form of book is characterised by discrete, dated entries, as exemplified in Mayröcker's trilogy *études*, *cabier*, and *fleurs*, in which the proem is fully articulated.⁹

A double-page spread from Mayröcker's final book (2020, 156f.; transl. 152f.), illustrates this structure. It consists of a single dated entry, 11 January 2019. Each entry, from 23 September 2017 to 3 November 2019, begins on a new page, leaving the facing page partially blank and thereby

⁶ "And I have always avoided creating a story, i.e. I see no story anywhere. Nor do I see any story-like phenomena in the course of my life or in life in general. And I cannot read a book that has a story either." Ramm (1975), in: Schmidt (1984, 75f., my transl.).

"I do not know to what extent I am able, in my new prose, to open it up further and incorporate even more elements, but I simply feel the need to open it up as far as possible, so that the usual tracing of thoughts in narratives is reduced to absurdity. This sore point of storytelling is to be left out through expansions and not touched upon. [...] Something in me resists that kind of a sequence, resists a narrated sequence, I do not know why." Schmidt (1984, 273f., my transl.).

⁷ In Roy Sommer's (2012, 153; fig. 5) model of post-classical narratology, „the continued influence of narratology's structuralist heritage, with the revisions and extensions discussed by Alber and Fludernik“ is acknowledged by introducing the category „formal narratology“, whereby according to Sommer, "there is a constant exchange between formal and contextual narratologies."

⁸ „I mean“. Mayröcker (2020, transl. 2023, 152, 153).

⁹ Regarding the impact of French literature and literary theory: Lartillot (2014) and Wix (2024).

foregrounding white space as a visual and poetic element. Variable indentation and generous spacing further reinforce this effect. Within the standard text block, a longer passage is interrupted by a six-line insertion and a single italicised line, both intended and isolated. The entry concludes with a short segment, followed – after additional spacing – by the date and a brief comment, the only element set in full justification. A small felt-tip-drawing of scissors visually enacts Mayröcker's montage technique, offering a playful, self-reflexive commentary on textual composition.

The result is an open hybrid form resistant to categorisation. The blurb to *études* describes these texts as “prose poetry and lyrical prose pieces, studies then, shreddings, as she [Mayröcker] says, splintering, brittle and highly concentrated.” They may be understood as a “transposition of the lived moment into an eternal here and now”, resuming the core of the *proem* (Mayröcker 2013, transl. 2020, blurb).

4. Writing and the Routines of Everyday Life¹⁰

The centrality of everyday routines in Mayröcker's oeuvre has been widely noted, both in scholarly criticism and, more recently, in international obituaries (e.g. Goldmann 2021). The title of her final book, initially opaque, proves on closer inspection to be a precise description of her literary habits and environment.

Rüdiger Campe's (1991) concept of the *Schreibszene* (writing scene) is instructive here. Mayröcker's writing scene is confined to an attic apartment situated above her long-term flat on the fourth floor of Zentagasse 16 in Vienna's fifth district. Here the poet lived and worked for the last twenty-one years of her life surrounded by a plethora of books, scraps of paper, memorabilia, her Hermes Baby typewriter, pens, and baskets brimming with notes, all of which contributed to the composition of her poetic oeuvre. Her view of the outside world was largely restricted to a row of windows in one room, while the skylights in the next room only admitted the sky.¹¹ She typically wrote in the early morning, often still in bed, before moving to the window to continue.

Wolfgang Straub (2024, 56, online 58) has shown how Mayröcker's writing tools themselves enter her texts. In *brüht oder Die seufzenden Gärten*, for instance, the green, dripping felt-tip pen merges with its green surroundings (Mayröcker 1998, 90); in *Reise durch die Nacht*, it determines the chromatic register: “ich schreibe das, noch im Bett liegend, rufe ich, am Morgen IN GRÜN VOR, mit hellgrünem Filzstift, dessen Verschlusskappe einer tief ins Gesicht gezogenen schneeweissen Wollmütze gleicht” (Mayröcker 1984, 88).¹² Such motifs – the early mornings, the window, the traces of her writing tools – recur throughout the entire body of her work, and here, in the title of her final book, they converge: *da ich morgens und moosgrün. Ans Fenster trete*.

The intertwining of life and writing is further underscored by her use of dated entries, which may initially suggest affinities with diary narration. However, this expectation is systematically

¹⁰ For the mode of ‘quotidianity’, of ‘everydayness’: Honold (2025).

¹¹ Following her death, Mayröcker's estate was meticulously packed into archive boxes by the Vienna National Library. The flat was subsequently renovated by its proprietor, the Literaturhaus Wien. Today, the apartment is available to fellows of the Friederike Mayröcker Residence Programme. They can live and work there for two months at a time. Literaturhaus Wien (2025; including a photographic documentation).

¹² “I’ll write that out IN GREEN while still lying in bed in the morning, I call, with a bright green felt pen, the cap of which resembles a snow-white wool cap pulled far down over one’s face”. Mayröcker (1988, transl. 1992, 51).

subverted. While the presence of dates implies chronological ordering, the entries themselves systematically resist emplotment and causal linkage. Inge Arteel (2014, 507) has distilled Mayröcker's concept into a memorable formula: "Das Werk ist nicht autobiographisch, es gibt aber kein Leben außerhalb des Werks, das Leben ist somit das Werk."¹³

In this context, Roland Barthes' (1968) "effet de réel" becomes superfluous. The dated entries do not authenticate retrospective narration but mark the moment of inscription, the "now", the immediacy of writing itself (Beyer 2024, 493).

5. The Subject of the Proem

The proem dated 11 January 2019 centers on an engagement with works by the South Tyrolean artist Stefan Fabi, with whom Mayröcker collaborated on several occasions. Initially composed for the artist, the proem later entered the book, retaining a certain degree of autonomy, albeit one in tension with the open-ended conclusion which is to be examined later in the study. The text opens with two questions:

was souffliert uns NATUR? was souffliert uns die KUNST? (Mayröcker 2020, 156).¹⁴

As the proem unfolds, these questions give way to a dense interweaving of perception, memory, and reflections. Detailed descriptions of Fabi's oeuvre, such as *Plejaden* and *Selbstbildnis*, including the exact measures of each work, are interlaced with associative passages: sensory impressions of nature: "es singen die Kirschpärchen, knarrender Kopfsalat, wie die Krallen des Morgens" (156)¹⁵ or fragments of narrative, such as a brief encounter with the artist in a hotel lobby, which immediately shifts back to visual impressions of the artist's work:

ich meine love and glory des Stefan Fabi, tauchte plötzlich in der Hotelhalle auf, dasz ich meine Arme, ausbreitete, die Wiedersehensfreude anzuzeigen, etwa ein Furioso, um himmelswillen Wasserfarbe auf Papier, eingebettet in Landschaft (156).¹⁶

The first insert features a tiny drawing rendered in fine black felt-tip pen that catches the eye. The schematic representation of scissors is minute in proportion, thus ensuring seamless integration within the textual flow. The drawing accompanies a passage describing the artist's montage technique: "mit ganz kl. [ill. of a pair of scissors] ("Schere") Tapete beschnitten" (156).¹⁷ This, in turn, leads to a self-reflexive statement on her writing process in parallel with the artist's technique: "was zählt sind die unvollendeten Sätze!" (156)¹⁸ The proem concludes mid-sentence:

¹³ "The work is not autobiographical, yet there is no life outside the work – life is therefore the work." Arteel (2014, 507, my transl.) She also quotes the author from a 2006 interview: "Ich bestehe auf meiner Biographielosigkeit." – "I insist on my lack of biography." (505, my transl.)

¹⁴ "what is NATURE prompting us? what is ART prompting us?" Mayröcker (2020, transl. 2023, 152).

¹⁵ "the cherry-pairs sing, creaking lettuce, how the morning light like the talons of morning" (152).

¹⁶ "I mean, Stefan Fabi's love and glory, suddenly appeared in the hotel lobby, that I, stretched out, my arms, to express the joy of reunion, more or less al furioso, for heaven's sake watercolour on cardboard, embedded in landscape" (152).

¹⁷ "trimming wallpaper with really lit. [ill. of a pair of scissors] ('scissors')" (152).

¹⁸ "what counts are the incomplete sentences!" (152).

11.1.19 sandte mir Briefe
in welchen verwelkte
Blumen, ich meine, (Mayröcker 2020, 157).¹⁹

Both the individual entry and the book terminate mid-sentence, a technique inspired by the French writer who is mentioned in the epigraph, Jacques Derrida (Wix 2024). The final comma, in place of a full stop, further accentuates this openness.

6. Conclusion

Looking back from this point, the reader will notice that Mayröcker's book begins, significantly, with a lower-case word, as though extracted from an ongoing textual continuum. Even its title defies conventional capitalisation. Thus, Mayröcker subverts the traditional signal of a new beginning, be it in a new book or a new entry. In *Die kommunizierenden Gefäße*, Mayröcker (2003, 48) evokes the idea of an endless sheet of paper: "wenn es 1 nicht endende Papierseite gäbe"²⁰, a metaphor, which is realised in the concept of the *proem*. As Beyer (2024, 493) observes, her impulse to write is always oriented towards a work yet to come. Writing is an ongoing process, inextricably linked to her life as there is no life outside the work.

And her poetry does not escape everyday life – it emerges from it. The ordinary is not separate from poetry; it is exactly what allows poetry to happen. Mayröcker's proems thus articulate a poetological concept with the potential to capture the minutiae of everyday life, as evidenced by the title of her final book – *da ich morgens und moosgrün. Ans Fenster trete*. The *proem*, being a hybrid form, destabilises narrative categories while expanding the scope of lyric, demonstrating that narrativity and lyricity are not mutually exclusive but rather converge in an open, processual practice, grounded in the performative dimension of language.

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¹⁹ "sent me letters / in which wilted / flowers, I mean," (153).

²⁰ "if 1 unending piece of paper existed". Mayröcker (2003, transl. 2021, 38).

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