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Elke Erb's *Mountains In Berlin*

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Elke Erb. *Mountains in Berlin.* Translated by Rosmarie Waldrop. Providence, Rhode Island: Burning Deck Press, 1995. 96 pp. $8.

Midway through Elke Erb's *Mountains in Berlin,* an anthology of short prose selected from *Gutachten* (1976), *Der Faden der Geduld* (1978) and *Vexierbild* (1983), appears a relatively long text devoted to Heinrich von Kleist (1777-1811). This text keystones Erb's collection, for several reasons. Most importantly, Kleist, best known for his plays, was also the pioneering author of a series of "anecdotes" written for the *Berliner Abendblätter* during the winter of 1810-11. Within the context of the classic German novella, Kleist's *Anekdoten* constituted early examples of brief narratives; in other words, prototypes of "short-shorts." Twenty years later, young Charles Dickens (1812-70) would be producing similar pieces, eventually collected in *Sketches by Boz* (1936-7); Chekhov (1860-1904), too, sharpened his pen by composing half-literary, half-journalistic stories based on humorous daily incidents; and by the end of the nineteenth century, the newspaper sketch had evolved into a major genre, perhaps best represented by the indefatigable American O. Henry (1862-1910). Yet it was paradoxically Kleist, otherwise a Romantic, who was among the first to provoke European authors into questioning the literary legitimacy of the "unheard-of event that has actually happened," as Goethe magisterially defined the sole subject matter appropriate for a full-fledged *Novelle.* Kleist's *Anekdoten* encouraged writers to focus instead on the most banal facts and routines of everyday life—and to disclose their unsuspected significance.

With Kleist's *Anekdoten* in mind, Erb charts a radical path to the ordinary. She is fascinated by the gap between objects and our perceptions of them; and by the ways in which we designate objects with words. "What Could the Man Have in Mind" begins with a typically flat description of three car tires. Filled with earth and planted in the earth, the tires lie "on top of one another . . . largest, middle, smallest." Erb continues:

> Until fall, when flowers, stems, leaves will have filled out into a blunt cone with hardly any trace of terracing, the flower seeds come up in their ring of earth in the first, the second, the round earth of the third tire. Monument: rising to show that dead does not mean sunk? Monument of the survivor's sense of beauty, widowed last year? He stands at the window, thoughtful, says: "First you've got to cut the inner rim out of the tires, that's not easy. The blade must be sharp and—lightly oiled. Then it'll work; otherwise, not . . . . " But in his mind, even while he speaks, he is elsewhere.

Being "elsewhere" mentally and thus inattentive to the brute particulars of the present moment defines a salient characteristic of humankind: the ontological separation that we experience between our self and the physical world. "It is very difficult to accept something real as it is," writes Erb in "Staunch

Friendship"; and in her opening text, "Grimm's Fairytales," she tellingly depicts a grey sow standing in a low pen "at the end of the world." Before arriving at Karl's farm—before acknowledging the existence of this sow "at the end of the world"—the poet and her companion(s) have taken "a long walk in muddy shoes," followed by an "endless ride in the local." Are we supposed to laugh at this mock pilgrim's progress, the sole reward for which is the sight of a sow? Probably, but in the sense that the French say "to laugh yellow," by which is meant an uneasy, forced chuckle because we actually find the tale quite depressing. Initially, the sow symbolizes those unattainable particulars that we strive for—a noble quest that has animated philosophers since Antiquity. Ultimately, however, we must admit that the sow remains a sow, even as for Gertrude Stein a rose is a rose is a rose. There is no transcendence whatsoever, and it is our attitude to this inevitable conclusion that is at stake.

Several low-key texts—ranging from riddles and short narratives to diary jottings and dreams—indeed chronicle perceptions of the world "as it is" and implicitly communicate the sentiment of being "let down" after a long journey back to the "thing-in-itself." (Compare the exaltation and desperation conveyed by Rilke in his poetry on the same theme.) Being let down, permanently, by the world, is the point; or perhaps one should qualify these texts as attempts to attain a sort of emotionless acceptance of the material world "as it is." In Erb's text on Kleist, she first recounts a rather dramatic incident that someone had witnessed years before. She concludes by confessing: "After a Kleist anecdote nobody says: So what? I seem unable to write this text in such a way that nobody could say: So what?" In "Ruppiner Street," Erb seemingly announces ("I must write it down, I will") an extraordinary event, in the Goethean sense, but the incident turns out to involve a dog sticking his neck "out over a windowbox with two / drooping old tulips, petals wide open, / in front of quiet Dederon drapes, / . . . on the third floor." Here we do say, as so often elsewhere in this volume: "So what." Only a few enigmas may stir one's curiosity, such as this oblique portrait, which nonetheless begins with disarmingly unemotional statements of extraordinary facts:

> N.'s wife had, even before the war, left him and married somebody else. The destruction of Dresden turned his street into rubble and ashes, later into a field. A bombing of Nordhausen murdered N.'s parents. Both his sisters died fleeing, God knows where, they had no children. One friend was gassed, another was and remained missing. His brother fell in Holland. N. Himself was a prisoner of war in England. He had helped build villas, not a single one remained standing. The only thing that, after the war, reminded us of N., was N.

Some readers may ascribe the drab "so-what-ness" of these narratives to the fact that they were written in Communist East Germany during the two decades preceding the fall of the Berlin Wall. A few pieces evoke poverty

directly or reflect the understandable obsession with material goods that has characterized East Germans since the Second World War. "My Comfort My Trunk," for example, describes an inherited "wonderful, big, brown trunk" that turns out to be an illusion, "a mere trick." Yet even in such texts, it remains doubtful that the writer first and foremost alludes to man's economic relationship with things. Perhaps these narratives should be read as ironic—thus subversive?—factual counterpoints to the ideological abstractions of Marxist discourse and to the blunt aesthetics of Soviet Realism. In many cases, her writing is so bland and straightforward that one wonders whether it might be fundamentally, or secretly, ambiguous. One effect remains clear, however. Upon finishing this volume, we comprehend that a choice perpetually remains open for us, in every instant of our lives. Confronted with the scintillating surface of the world—which may surge forth in the form of a grey sow—we can elect to affirm a miracle . . . or we can simply shrug our shoulders and say: "So what."

John Taylor