**Spaces in between**

**Moving in the twilight zone.**

In *The World of Yesterday*, Stefan Zweig describes his wonderfully withdrawn, unapproachable friend Rainer Maria Rilke. ‘He had no home, no address where you could visit him […] He was always adrift in the world.’ He packed his bags, according to Zweig, ‘like somebody laying a mosaic: each piece was almost tenderly lowered into its carefully designated space’ like ‘a flower of perfect harmony’. That same patient precision, and that same permanent movement, is apparent in his hectic, youthful work *Die Weise von Liebe und Tod des Cornets Christoph Rilke* (The Lay of Love and Death of Cornet Christoph Rilke). According to Rilke himself, he wrote his ‘Cornet’ on one stormy autumn night in 1899, between two trips to Russia and in the company of his mistress, the brilliant Lou Andreas-Salomé, who was married, 15 years Rilke's senior and an equally dear friend of Nietzsche and Freud's. Ideas, certainly where Eros is involved, are transmitted virally. It is therefore no coincidence that Rilke’s ‘Cornet’, if you would permit me, is filled with, to the point of bursting, rigid towers, tall red standards, and the nocturnal gardens of countesses.

**Sexes flow into one another**

The short ballad, meticulously refined for years after that one autumn night, reads like a feverish sensual dream. In 1664, the young Christoph Rilke, a distant ancestor of the poet, travels to the stronghold of an Austrian count as a standard-bearer or ‘cornet’ with a small company of soldiers, engaging in a night of passion with the countess and riding to a heroic death in the battle against the Turkish army. Rilke’s poetic prose, written in the twilight zone between the height of Romanticism and early modernism, in every way inhabits an artistic twilight-zone: his is a prose that sings, a written song in which men are feminine and women masculine. And, equally, a prose in which woman turns out to be a confusing plural: simultaneously mistress, mother, Mary and sensual angel of death. The death of the young cornet, a standard raised high, together with sixteen Turkish sabres hacking away – ‘flash on flash’, ‘a party’, ‘a laughing fountain’ – reads like a *petite mort*, an orgasm. Death and life, *eros* and *thanatos* intersect. The life-giving mother also appears to be the substance into which he sinks away again as the dying cornet. Freud is omnipresent, but Rilke’s symbolism is ambiguous, with sexes enthusiastically flowing into one another. When an officer from the travelling company recounts a story – about his mother, evidently – he does so ‘‘as a girl, binding flowers’. When the marquis takes off his helmet ‘His dark hair is soft, and, as he bows his head, it spreads like a woman’s about his neck. […] Far off something rises into the radiance, something slender, dark. A lonely column, half ruined. And when they are long past, later, it occurs to him that that was a Madonna.’ The rising phallic column turns out to be a Madonna.

When the (married, older) countess entertains the young cornet in her tower room and initiates him in love, it is he who loses his virginity, relinquishes his ‘sex’. ‘For indeed they have found each other, to be unto themselves a new generation’, no longer simply a woman, no longer simply a man, but something in between. ‘They will give each other a hundred new names and take them all off again, gently, as one takes an ear-ring off.’ When, on the next day, the cornet, unarmed but carrying a waving standard, enters the battle scene to die, he at first bears that standard like ‘a white, insensible woman’, then he unfolds it after which it ‘becomes wide and red’.

**The Mother’s Flight**

Rilke’s attitude *vis-a-vis* the sensual piece of youthful writing was an uneasy one. With hundreds of thousands of copies sold, it secured him the precious aristocratic existence to which he was so attached. The fact that hundreds of thousands of young soldiers in WWI rushed to their deaths with his orgasmic death fantasy in their pockets didn’t sit very well with him. Still, his objections were essentially aesthetic in nature – he remained, above all, an aesthetician. ‘The content in this ‘poem’ is so lacking, thelanguage so underdeveloped that the only thing that can justify its existence continues to be that tempo, that speed, that breathless flux for which clouds drifting over the moon that night served me more as an example than everything I knew or could know about those ancestors as a legend.’ Rilke was also perpetually on the move, continuously striving to remove himself from his centre – his mother. An advanced course in Freudianism teaches us that Rilke’s birth was overshadowed by his mother’s mourning for a lost daughter who died before Rainer’s birth, barely a week old. The young Rainer, *né* René, was dressed up by his mother as a daughter from a young age. It was Lou Andréas-Salomé – his older mistress – who gave Rilke a new name. René became Rainer. One could easily call it a *reincarnation*.

**Many shades of grey**

Similar to those German youngsters heading to war, Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker has kept Rilke’s moon vision in her inside pocket for some years already.

While seizing on the musicality of Rilke’s text, she uses it to further her study of the counterpoint between dance and text, between moving and speaking. ‘I have been looking for sources for movement for some time. Step by step, that search appears to lead inwards. From walking, to singing, to speaking, to breathing. From spinal column to trachea. Just like walking, breathing is one of the most elementary and vital movement patterns. Breathing engenders sound, sound can turn into speaking and speaking into singing. A voice cannot lie: it exposes what is inside a person. There are billions of people, but you can recognise somebody by their voice even if blindfolded: it is as uniquely personal as a fingerprint.’

If Rilke was still annoyed with what he referred to as ‘poetry contaminated by prose’, it is today precisely that contamination, the bizarre ‘in-between’, which is so conducive to artistic fascination. In every aspect Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker too went looking for that in-between for her ‘Cornet’. The main colour is many shades of grey, ‘a receptive colour’, according to De Keersmaeker, in *ton sur ton sur ton*. The stage area is covered in a thin, virgin layer of grey loam dust, reminiscent of dry earth, but also of ashes. Underneath, as usual, a geometrically constructed base pattern consisting of long, connecting, ever-expanding pentagrams of which the sides and the intersections offer access to a spiral that opens from the centre like a rose. The dancers – Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker herself, also greying, and Michaël Pomero – will write their dance in the dust. Pomero, the man, opens the dance. ‘We open in a major key, with the exposition of the material, in silence: one phrase in five qualities with increasing intensity. Michaël opens with the most intense of these five qualities, which I call the fire quality. So we open powerfully, the movement rises, it is at once energetic and extremely refined.’

Pomero fits the description Lou Salomé attributed to Rilke, to be bestowed a ‘masculine grace’. Michaël is an exceptional dancer. He is a very masculine man yet has a feminine elegance and sensuality that is never lyrical or mannered. Powerful and fluid at the same time.’

**The phoenix, the fire and the ashes**

This horizontal writing in the loam dust is at odds with a vertical writing: the text of Rilke’s Cornet is projected like a book on the wall at the rear of the stage. Here, too, there is a strange, interstitial space: the audience reads in silence, individually yet collectively. Singing in silence, since Rilke’s words are music, his text becomes the score.

At precisely the golden ratio of the text, flutist Chryssi Dimitriou enters the plateau to perform Sciarrino’s *Immagine fenicia* (2001).

Cornet dreams: something screeches at him, not an owl, but a body, lying next to a tree, a young woman, bloody and naked, a siren. This moment is the key for the flutist to begin Sciarrino’s flute solo. ‘Chryssi looks like Botticelli’s Primavera, very feminine, lovely. Yet when she plays, legs apart, heals in the sand, convulsive, almost orgasmic, she looks primitively masculine. She plays the music with an obsessiveness that reminds me of the *Sacre du printemps*.’

The music seems to be something that she undergoes, yet it is very clear that she is the one who drives the sound. Percussion, rhythmic breaths, air just before it can become a tone. So shades of grey, here as well. ‘I didn’t want to use melodious music. That would only turn it into a mess. I also like the mechanical aspect of Sciarrino’s music, the extended techniques, the clicking of the flute mechanics, the connection of those mechanics with something as intimate as breath. The inside of the body is brought outside, so to speak, the flute is a kind of artificial extension of the windpipe.’

**Incidental counterpoint**

Rilke himself was horrified whenever an attempt was waged to compose music to his Cornet. The poetic prose of the text itself is so precious, the mosaic so finely chiselled, that it doesn’t tolerate any added lyricism. Rilke’s melodious prose, in terms of narrative material and theme is rooted in fin-de-siècle wallowing, but his style can be classified as almost cubist: abrupt plot-turns, staccato sentences, scenes that with only a single phrase – ‘Watch fire’ – invoke a nearly cinematic shot.

Against this powerful text, Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker set a choreography with its own compelling logic that is entirely distinct from the text. ‘The choreographical vocabulary starts from strictly formalistic movements grafted into the body and bodily proportions. The use of space is then dictated by the geometric floor plan. I was especially curious about what happens when you confront the logic of a text with a movement logic that is independent of it. The confrontation of two autonomous logics creates a kind of incidental counterpoint: sometimes the dance depicts the text, sometimes it underscores a word, sometimes it merely provides commentary.’ Choreographic movement and Rilke’s prose affect each other like two texts superimposed on each other. ‘One can see that almost literally through the confrontation of the vertical, projected text, and the ‘text’ that we are writing in the loam dust whilst dancing.’

**Beyond thinking binary**

‘I thought it was crucial not to cast the man and the woman, myself, as the young cornet and the countess who initiates him in the art of love. We may dance together, or more accurately, simultaneously, but the choreography is not a *pas-de-deux*. I also wear grey cloths, a pair of trousers, rather robust shoes. Both our genders get dampened that way. The phrase starts from a centre, at an angle to the smallest pentagram. I wanted to avoid the man being positioned opposite the woman. Such a line-up would only emphasize the polarity. This polarity would uninterestingly reduce us to our genders: him as ‘merely man’, me as ‘merely woman’. And that is precisely the strength of Rilke’s text: masculinity and femininity continuously transitioning from the one to the other.’

So no binary opposition. This black-and-white thinking, the idea that something is only given meaning by contrasting it against its opposite – war versus peace, man versus woman, strong versus weak – has become a source of contention since the advent of the post-structuralism of Derrida and Deleuze, and certainly because of feminist theorisation. Post-structuralism unmasked these oppositions as concealed hierarchies: one of the pair implicitly takes the upper hand. The opposition ‘man-woman’ is then supplemented with oppositions like ‘hard-soft’, ‘active-passive’, ‘reason-emotion’, ‘leading-suffering’, and so on. Above all, such oppositions are always reductions: they reduce any two things to what set them apart and then compound and consolidate those differences. ‘While men and women are obviously in no way each other’s opposite. At most they can be conceived as complementary variations in which men can have ‘feminine’ and women can have ‘masculine’ characteristics. The relation between the two is fluid. So they do not stand opposite one another. Nor are they locked up in parallel worlds. That’s why Michaël and I never dance in parallel lines because they would never cross. Our dance is rather a kind of a canon with variations. We dance the same phrase, one voice, but with different spatial ratios and intensities.’

**The lost centre**

‘Michaël always dances a phrase one level higher when it comes to its spatial amplitude. We start together, side by side in the centre, rather like two brothers, like a redundant figure. The distance gradually increases as we follow our trajectory through the pentagrams and the opening spiral. By dancing six phrases every time on each of the five corners of the pentagram, we move over one corner per round of six and gradually remove ourselves from the centre. In doing so, Michaël moves forward one step extra every time relative to my trajectory as a result of which he dances increasingly further and faster into the periphery. Meanwhile, Chryssi plays *All’aure in una lontananza*. We do not dance to the music itself, but do time our phrases to her breathing. Because of that movement, our dance opens slowly, like a rose, away from the centre, but always in relation to that centre and each other. Michaël and I must continuously manage to guard that angle between each other. In opening that rose, we gradually increase the tempo because we must cover a greater distance with the same material. When we let the rose close again, we continue to increase the tempo even though the distances start to grow smaller again as a result of which we end in a climax: the movements are very fast, the pentagram small again, Michaël and I side by side again in the centre. I find this idea of a centre very important. All the more so, because it is a notion that we have lost. Cities no longer grow organically around a central place but are constructed without a centre, like in a grid. I believe this fact testifies to the denial of something fundamental in the human species, but also in nature. It is a pity that this desire for a centre around which people can gather is claimed by a right-wing discourse. However, I believe this is a primitive, universal desire: the campfire around which people would gather, tell stories, share their imagination. It may be a romantic notion, but romanticism is art’s ultimate tool of choice to save something humanity was on the verge of losing as a consequence of modernity. That aspect of romanticism is, in spite of the excesses, in spite of fascism, still valuable.’

**A dancing palimpsest**

The fact that Rilke’s Cornet was first recuperated by Prussian militarism and subsequently by fascism, makes dealing with this text a delicate and worrisome affair. ‘You can steer clear from it because it was contaminated by that abuse or you set out to reclaim that text. This is what the famous actor Oskar Werner did, who himself was active in the German pacifist movement. He continued to recite that text his entire life. There are two recordings of it, one early one and one when he was getting on in years. The fact that somebody like him continued to cherish the text, freed me from my scruples.’

In the final part of the performance, De Keersmaeker reads the text *viva voce*. The written word is now supplemented with sound, whereafter the sound is grafted onto the movements and finally takes the upper hand. Here, also: an androgynous palimpsest, text-on-top-of-text: De Keersmaeker has physically mastered the through-and-through German diction and rhetoric of Oskar Werner and so enters the estranging grey area between feminine and masculine, Flemish and German inflexion. In doing so, De Keersmaeker draws at once from the earlier and the later recording, in between youth and old age. ‘I treat Werner’s recording as a score. Physically it was a very special experience to incorporate, as it were, that speech. The idiosyncrasies of language appear to be something corporeal, it does something with your body, with how you move.’

The effect is estranging, but underscores the text’s musicality, the sensuality of German, which still carries traces of the masculine ‘toughness’ discourse of fascism stuck to it. As Klaus Theweleit analysed it in his classic study *Männerphantasien*, or more recently Jonathan Littell, based on Theweleit, in his essay *Le sec et l’humide*. Many voices speak through De Keersmaeker: first and foremost Rilke, the cornet, the countess, Oskar Werner as a young actor, Werner after a full life, De Keersmaeker herself, powerful, greying, a speaking palimpsest. A tribute to the diversity of voices and layers that make every individual a multifaceted plurality.

Wannes Gyselinck