

Correspondence

Anne Verougstraete

I wish to use an exchange of letters between Lou Andreas-Salomé and Rainer Maria Rilke as the basis for a discussion of the *Unheimliche*. The selected short extracts alternate between the *conscience to be one* (separated or in fusion with the Other) and the *matrixial conscience* of a borderspace shared with an intimate unknown Other. They evoke the phallic layer related to the castration complex and they gradually move towards the matrixial layer, where the dimension of plurality is originary.

Worpswede near Bremen

July 18, 1903

Dear Lou, I must tell you (...)

And once late in autumn a little old woman stood beside me one evening in the light of a shop window. She stood very still, and I thought that like me she was busy looking at the things displayed for sale, and so I scarcely paid her any mind. Finally, though, her presence began to make me uneasy, and, I don't know why, I suddenly looked down at her oddly clasped, worn-away hands. Very, very slowly an old, long, thin pencil emerged from those hands, it grew taller and taller and took a very long time to become completely visible, visible in all its wretchedness. I can't say exactly what it was that made this scene so terrible, but it seemed to me as if a whole destiny were being played out before me, a long destiny, a catastrophe that was building up fearfully to the moment when the pencil would cease growing and, trembling ever so slightly, topple out of the loneliness of those empty hands. Finally I understood that I was supposed to buy it...

Rainer¹

According to phallic logic, the poet's glance is focused on a fixed point: the objects on display. In the pane of glass in front of him, he becomes aware of the reflection of a little old woman, who emerges, discrete and separate, alongside him. Are they both trying

to re-conquer the lost object - by mastery and control? The reflection captures the glance, imagining likeness ('like me'), while the poet stands beside the passer-by in disaffectedness: *'I thought that like me she was busy looking at the things displayed for sale, and so I scarcely paid her any mind.'*

But the proximity to the matrixial phantasy related to the encounter of the prenatal feminine in the Real brings about a change. The *little old* – eventually archaic – woman is not standing in forcible proximity but *she stood very still*, in fragile vulnerability, in 'besidedness'². Her presence becomes increasingly tangible. Awakened from the anaesthesia of his disaffectedness, the poet consents to not knowing what is going on. His glance suddenly moves towards the *unheimliche*. This unconscious movement paves the way for an 'encounter-event': *'Finally, though, her presence began to make me uneasy, and, I don't know why, I suddenly looked down at her oddly clasped, worn-away hands.'* In this movement toward an encounter-event, the experiences of porousness and sharing are interlaced. It marks the threshold, simultaneously a point of transgression and a halting-point. Bracha Ettinger calls 'these relations and processes of change and exchange in which the non-I is a partner-in-difference of the I'³ 'borderlinking'. At the unstable border between the self and the other, the visible and the invisible, the familiar and the unfamiliar, is a trans-subjective psychic zone of affective and informative contact. In the space filled by the co-presence of the anonymous intimate partial poet and the worn hands of the intimate anonymous passer-by, existence comes to itself. 'The co-emergence in difference corresponds to a feminine dimension of subjectivity, since joint recordings of shared-but-singular and particular experiences re-evoked archaic phantasies of the link between the female invisible bodily specificity and the late prenatal subject-to-be.'⁴ The awareness experienced by Rilke shows that men have also known an intra-uterine existence and that the matrix is oriented towards the feminine in both men and women: *'Very, very slowly an old, long, thin pencil emerged from those hands, it grew taller and taller and took a very long time to become completely visible, visible in all its wretchedness.'*

Is it the apparition of absolute destitution that gives rise to the uncanny? Superimpositions are making themselves felt: oscillations of touch, variations of pressure, fluctuations of movements. An originary repressed comes back to the surface. The erotic antennae of the psyche allow themselves to be affected to the vivid point of pain and pleasure, by the unbearably intensifying feeling of strangeness. Gradually emerging, the

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old pencil carries traces of an ancient scripture into the present: *'I can't say exactly what it was that made this scene so terrible, but it seemed to me as if a whole destiny were being played out before me, a long destiny, a catastrophe that was building up fearfully to the moment when the pencil would cease growing and, trembling ever so slightly, topple out of the loneliness of those empty hands.'*

The strange aesthetic experience is overdetermined. The recognized, as uncognized experience, concerns the relation-without-relating to the maternal corporeal 'thing' and archaic events, forever mysterious and out of touch, having however opened to the touch. 'The I's passivity is transformed by the non-I's activity in jointness-in-differentiating by the passage through channels of trans-sensitive borderlinking.'⁵ The opening to the other and to the world does not go through primary affects of rejection and abjection but through 'fascinace'⁶ and primary compassion. Throughout the lasting process of the encounter-event, the I is not looking for the cause of anxiety but for what comes towards it, and for hospitality. Wit(h)ness of the passage through the trauma of otherness, the poet cautions the action of the old woman in self-relinquishment to what the border situated glance did initiate. Does he recognize an initially non-frightening experience, impregnated by movement? He progressively consents to a certain fading of trembling movements and to the loneliness of his existence in the emptiness of the loss of origin. 'Embracing instants of matrixial borderlinking orient the subject - *in this instance the poet as individuated subject* - towards responsibility.'⁷ This 'aesthetical' proto-ethical com-compassion paves the way to ethics.⁸

He understands that in the common use of the pencil of poetic writing, he gives a certain presence to the first invisible relations to the other he carries in him. Consciously prompted by a feeling of obligation, he chooses to make it his own. Paying homage to the otherness of himself and of the world, and endorsing it, he makes us encounter our own otherness:

'Finally I understood that I was supposed to buy it'

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Let us listen to the reply of Lou Andreas-Salomé:

{Westend near Berlin}

Rüsternallee 36.

July 22, 1903

Dear Rainer,

As I read your last letter there were moments when what you described made such an impact on me, came alive through the smallest physical detail and yet grew beyond it into the tremendously human, that I forgot about you completely. And I felt that odd process of “ensouling” that can emanate even from impressions of misery when they come not just straight from life but channelled through the life of that person creating them, transmuting them. For you are wrong when you say that you merely suffered through all these things as a helpless accessory without repeating them in some higher process. They are all there: no longer only in you, now also in me, and external to both of us living things with a voice all their own (...)

Lou⁹

Although she does not theorise the matrixial, Lou Andreas-Salomé places herself in the complex zone of encounter along which unconscious (transferential) dimensions cause subtle dynamics of borderlinking. She surpasses the rhythmic movement of presence and absence and reveals that the emergence of meaning depends on shareability and jointness and on the changes of distance-in-proximity.¹⁰ She elicits the organic links connecting the poet’s singular experience to a vast human dimension, beyond him. ‘The matrixial dimension reveals a new perspective, that of the *impossibility of not-sharing* in the Thing-event.’¹¹ Could that odd process of ‘ensouling’ felt by Lou Andreas-Salomé be a ‘diffused matrixial affect of minimal pleasure-with-displeasure, like those of awe, alertness, astonishment or compassion?’¹² In a single movement she links trauma and the community. She honours a creative principle that is not without relationship to what Bracha Ettinger calls metramorphosis: ‘In its function as a passage to the Symbolic, it acts from the shareable borderspace to create and redistribute the traces of these joint transformations of encounters.’¹³ Lou Andreas-Salomé gives Rainer Maria Rilke an echo of the transforming effect of his letter on her and beyond, noticing that the one is already

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in the other, forever ‘bound within matrixial nets composed of psychic-mental strings and shared threads and working-through in *metramorphosis*.’¹⁴ ‘*For you are wrong when you say that you merely suffered through all these things as a helpless accessory without repeating them in some higher process.*’

The traces of all things which the poet has ever experienced were partially ‘cross-inscribed’ in multiple small matrixial weavings, that returned displaced, redistributed, and artistically augmented: ‘*They are all there: no longer only in you, now also in me, and external to both of us living things with a voice all their own*’.

Anne Verougstraete is a member of the Belgian School of Psychoanalysis (EBP-BSP) which means working bilingually in French and Flemish. She is a psychoanalyst in private practice in Brussels and at a mental health centre. She has written several articles and presentations about the question of the feminine. She is the author of *Sigmund Freud et Lou Andreas-Salomé* (L’Harmattan 2005). She translated Bracha L. Ettinger’s article, ‘From Proto-Ethical Compassion to Responsibility’ into French. Studying the letters exchanged between Rainer Maria Rilke and Lou Andreas-Salomé has helped her to reflect upon Bracha L. Ettinger’s concept of borderlinking. As a mother of three and a grandmother of seven, Anne Verougstraete has been able to observe closely and gain practical experience regarding concrete aspects of the matrixial.

¹ Rainer Maria Rilke and Lou Andreas-Salomé, *The Correspondence*, (New York and London: W.W.Norton &Co., 2006), p.52.

² Bracha L. Ettinger, ‘From proto-ethical compassion to responsibility: besidedness and the three primal mother-phantasies of not-enoughness, devouring and abandonment’, in *Athena: Philosophical Studies*, no. 2 (2006), 100-36 (117): ‘Besidedness as a borderlinking process is a part of the metramorphic unconscious apparatus.’

³ Bracha L. Ettinger, *The Matrixial Borderspace* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), p. 63.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.69

⁵ Bracha L. Ettinger, *From proto-ethical compassion to responsibility*, p. 110.

⁶ *Ibid.* p.119: ‘Matrixial fascinancy is a presubjective and sub-subjective support for admiration and vision.’

⁷ *Ibid.* p. 111

⁸ *Ibid.* p. 111

⁹ Rainer Maria Rilke and Lou Andreas-Salomé, *The Correspondence*, (New York and London: W.W.Norton &Co., 2006), p.57

¹⁰ Bracha L. Ettinger, *The Matrixial Borderspace*, p.70

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¹¹ Ibid. p.74

¹² Ibid. p.64

¹³ Ibid. p.64

¹⁴ Bracha L.Ettinger, *From proto-ethical compassion to responsibility*, p. 116

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