

Raging Against Deficiency

Anneke Brassinga

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[P I E T G E R B R A N D Y]



Anneke Brassinga (1948-).
Photo by Mark Kohn.

The world does not fit us. Screaming and helpless, to quote Lucretius, we wash up like castaways on the shore of life, where for a few decades we wander around feverishly in a realm we will never understand, where in the end we miserably disintegrate and ingloriously rot away. Throughout our lives we desperately long to become one with what so desirably surrounds us: our loved ones, the landscape, our food, the song of a thrush, but everywhere we are outsiders and everything remains deeply alien to us. Only language, which speaks to us and proliferates as rampantly as climbing plants and fungal spores, and which is itself an intangible natural phenomenon, enables us to connect with the world. By saying strange things, by dredging up surprising word structures from our uncomprehended inner world, we learn, syllable by syllable, to become part of what we had thought unreachable, but is in fact our very essence.

Water, stone, flesh, fire and light – we ourselves are that. We ourselves are the substance we can't get a grip on. Most of us have to die before we learn to let ourselves go with the flow, a flow that has no meaning. To stop resisting and be happy, not to need language anymore – that is given to only a few.

'However much I weep', Anneke Brassinga (b. 1948) says in *Flowering Rubble* (Bloeiend puin, 2008), *'for beans broken in the craw, I was born at odds with the way of things and that's how I will depart'* (this is, in the original, a play on the first line of a well-known Dutch poem by Willem Kloos: *'I weep for flowers broken in the bud'*). My future *'is the grave and I hope to arrive there dead tired'*. She says that she is suffering from *'remorse that up till now writing has led not to maturing and catharsis, but rather to an increased feeling of impotence.'* *'Granted that when it comes down to it we are all blind captives of our own fortuitous situation – whether or not within a roomier reality – just let mine always be one of Raging Against Deficiency.'* Brassinga is a contrary spirit who seems to regard her presence in this vale of tears as a comical mistake. She never takes anything for granted, never formulates anything in a pedestrian way, and however much she may yearn for love, she will never conform to what the world expects of her.

And that makes the last piece in *Flowering Rubble*, a meditation dedicated to her dead brother Peter and entitled *On Melancholy*, even more remarkable. It begins like this: *'Why is it that I'm in such good spirits these days? Or should it be called lightheartedness, this unprecedented lack of tristesse? There is no reason for it, the hour of my death is rapidly approaching, as is part of the natural order of things, the time left to me is slipping from under my feet and the abyss can open up at any moment. And yet it is as if melancholy and even Weltschmerz no longer form part of my mental make-up.'*

This cheerfulness puzzles her, for she seems to be radically changed. *'I've never known myself to be like this.'* The reason for the change lies in the death of her brother. All of a sudden Brassinga had become aware of a great transparency: *'I fell away from myself'*. Gloom and melancholy lost their meaning and significance: *'The search for clarifications and ways of solving riddles has brought me against a clarity whose mystery defeats me. I have awoken from the dream of being a human being who has to make something of her life, awoken to the realisation that only that which can't be known – for as reality it is inhuman – contains an inescapable truth. The way a stone contains truth: you simply can't identify with it. As long as you're trying to do that you'll be outside things, helplessly longing to enlarge the domain of your thinking, to achieve some understanding.'*

For anyone familiar with Brassinga's work, these are disconcerting passages. Pugnacity, witty contrariness and a bottomless melancholy have been at the heart of everything she has entrusted to paper in the last twenty years, and now she has suddenly achieved a state of detachment and clarity? Is this piece really autobiographical? Isn't she craftily pulling our leg? And if she really means what she says, where can she go from here as a writer?

Time will tell what the answer to that last question will be, but to me it seems obvious that Brassinga has always been searching for enlightenment. Her *Weltschmerz* was never of the obsessive variety but was always looking for a deliverance, which very rarely appeared, and then only briefly and incompletely. But right from her first collection one comes upon moments of happiness and clarity, mostly linked to some intense experience of nature or musical ecstasy. This happiness always goes hand in hand with an acceptance of the eternal

cycle of life and death. In *Aurora* (1987) we find this short poem, which in its compactness contains the whole universe:

Rock 'n roll

*Glittering roses, sky chandeliers -
music lifts us in circles, swirls
of foam against unmoving
roar. Bird of passage
draws flood-tide to shore: the singing
wingbeat of ocean.*

The firmament is the ceiling of a ballroom, constellations are flowers of light, dancing is surf, the surf a dance, the cyclical structure of the music and the dance sweep up the dancers in a whirl against the background of an eternal cosmic murmur; the sea becomes a singing bird, birds migrate with the regularity of the beating waves. While the bird of passage may introduce an element of nostalgia and longing and a tidal wave may threaten to overwhelm everything in the end, the axis around which the poem revolves is still the vibrant cycle of nature and life, of which the poem, because it sings, because the enjambments drive it on, is itself a part. 'How can we know the dancer from the dance?' Yeats asks.

The jump from pussy-cat to poetry

Language is an organism that can be controlled only to a limited extent. The cycle *Words* from *Country Estate* (Landgoed, 1989) shows what happens when the sounds are in charge, dragging the helpless meaning along in a playful orgy which, however, ultimately results in a feast of strange new meanings. A nice example is a poem that takes the word 'klauwier' ('shrike') as its starting point. It is the name of a bird of prey, now rarely seen in the Netherlands, that has the strange habit of impaling its prey on thorny bushes. As 'klauw', the first part of the name, means 'claw', a literal translation of 'klauwier' would be 'claweer'. 'Claweer, claweering. / The water mirrors impenetrably. / Is it a verb, an animal?' Word, action and bird all converge here. 'Low it glides over, toes outstretched / for the grab. Its call is sad / in every shape or form.' In a neat observation the bird appears as a masked clown, but as a verb 'it epitomises the jump from pussy-cat to poetry.' There follows a description of a dozing cat which suddenly, as if struck by lightning, jumps up. 'She's been claweered', says Brassinga, and 'that is poetry / captured in fur, by its own nature called / to the chase of the word or the thing, / with a god-given passion'. Poetry is violence.

The violence that poetry can inflict on language is apparent time and again when Brassinga's love of exuberant wordplay seems to be running out of control. In that respect, though, she has a worthy companion in James Joyce, whose *Finnegans Wake* consists entirely of wordplay. To mark the appearance of the Dutch translation by Bindervoet and Henkes Brassinga delivered an ode to the book which is one long play on words. To those who think that Joyce's experiment has degenerated into unreadable lunacy, our poet explains the beneficial effect this strange work can have: 'I know of no other piece of writing that

will make the brain fizz up so effervescently into the most wide-awake, completely open, word-drunk rags of language and verbal eruptions that a mind faint from lucidity can pioneer or stumble over.' For Brassinga, madness and lucidity appear to be inextricably entwined.

On occasion her predilection for wordplay can result in rather insipid pieces, but usually Brassinga's deliberately mannered language evokes a wealth of subtle images. Even for those who have never seen Rembrandt's painting of *The Jewish Bride*, the poem devoted to it provides a visual feast:

*the posy of her cheeks
roses, she is the naked fruit opened to me,
underbrush of devotion, sweet unfolding
into courtly inclination, oh pious cakelet,
butter-pat lamb, flame of dreamy repose and
the rose-pink hands, cream puff-like whiteness hiding
under incarnadine wheatsheaf of the greatest
little bride*

Poetry is a natural phenomenon born of breath, heartbeat, sounds, idiomatic expressions and scraps of literature, but it is part of the same world as fruit trees, paintings, Paris boulevards, Mozart and grandma's coffee-pot. Brassinga will happily draw inspiration from what other artists have added to the world. In *Timidities* (Timiditeiten, 2003) there is a series of poems accompanying photographs by Freddy Rikken and many of her poems attempt to translate a musical experience into words, while in her prose collections essays about admired works of literature often seamlessly overflow into descriptions of nature or personal revelations. Poems are made up of words and sentences, and however new the language of a poem may be, there is always a history behind it. Quotation and allusion have become second nature to Brassinga, so that for her there is no fundamental difference between a reference to Gorter and quoting the song of a thrush, an adagio by Beethoven or the murmur of the waves.

Drift Ice (IJsgang, 2006) contains a virtuoso poem which combines the cycle of the seasons and the eternal recycling of language and literature into a single entity. The title, *Bladzucht*, can be translated as *Leaf Sigh*, the sighing of leaves in the wind; but it can also mean 'Leaf Longing', the yearning for a new spring and the need for blank or printed paper. It begins, if I am not mistaken, with a variation on the medieval song *Gequetst ben ic van binnen* ('Wounded I am within me') so that the loss of leaves also becomes a form of lover's pain:

*I am stripped of my senses
I am touched from within
I am aglow with drink the godly venom brewed
purely from my selves that were aflutter once,
drink, to swig right to earthy depths
a busy mirroring at the toes
through which to floor of rotten niche
my realm I reach*

The tree which is speaking is getting drunk on the puddle between its roots, in which its own leaves are fermenting, but which also reflects the sky. Death is the precondition for new life, which here arises from a narcissistic frenzy of wordplay in which the sacred coincides with the profane and the banal: venom has its origin in God, solid worth is equated with an earthy taste, a niche in the cathedral that is the forest turns out to harbour decay (here again the Dutch has a nice play on words: *rotte nis* is just one space away from *rottenis*, meaning putrefaction), and the kingdom of heaven is the projection of a yearning ('*my realm I reach*'). In the second verse, with its eight lines which partly mirror the first one, the fall, the *katabasis*, the descent to the underworld, is transmuted into an upward journey. Here are the last lines:

*deeply touching wee sip clammers
out of blackest downfall upward;
it is my unconstrained nature
to capture again the heavens' lustre .*

The boozing has become a cautious, but emotionally taxing ('*deeply touching*') sipping, downfall makes rising possible, a rising which is an attempt to construct a new heaven. But can those heavens be anything other than the tree's own crown, through which at most a small part of the starry sky can be seen?

What we see is what we are, a strange combination of emptiness and atoms, which implies that we can get to know the world by delving into ourselves and ourselves by observing the world. In a brilliant essay on Proust (in *Flowering Rubble*) Brassinga writes: '*That through the body truths can be found in the mind, that a life, however different from his own, is not without meaning, is something his work has certainly taught me.*' During your life you form a reservoir of sensory impressions, feelings and memories in your subconscious, which can suddenly acquire meaning through physical contact with reality: '*So according to Proust, as an artist one has no option but to abjure all so-called realism and brand everyday reality as trivial, since it is really a matter of recreating things, those things that, having assumed material form, have entered the inner world where they give rise to something in that weird hothouse of emotion, memory, physical sensation and those almost other-worldly laws that represent an ethic for which there is no room on earth or in human interaction. We are talking about a truth that cannot be realised in the social context, a memory, as it were, from a better world.*'

Passing on the fire

Although good poetry is made of language and is therefore a construction of the poet, it is often random events, sensations, impressions, that spark the creative process. One summer night Brassinga throws a smouldering cigarette butt onto the street from the window of a Rotterdam hotel and it lands at the feet of a passer-by. 'He looks up, I look down – we wave. The aerial abyss is *gedicht*.' Here we have a nice play on '*gedicht*', which means 'closed' or 'bridged' but also 'turned into poetry'. Conclusion: '*Poetry is chance. Poetry is passing on the fire.*' And after a bizarre encounter with an unknown postman she remarks: '*Poetry is the unexpected. Poetry is that mysterious urgency, that glimpse*

of the bottomless melodrama. But what exactly makes such moments poetic is something that cannot be captured in language. Written poetry makes do with an imperfect tool, which can never accurately reflect reality. That's why a poem has to be something that wasn't there before.

Nothing is harder than to recreate a musical experience in poetic form. With most poets such attempts result in pretentious drivel; but not with Brassinga, who successfully evokes a Haydn trio by matching it with language of equally subtle musicality. Not only does this poem offer a successful evocation of Haydn's enchanting melodies, it also gives an impression of the Irish landscape and a pithy commentary on, among many other things, mortality and lucidity:

Haydn in Ireland – Trio in E

*Flee, muse who sighs rippling pearls, bites necks of mares,
stamps out fireflies from hooves, major third.
The hunt straggles peep-show-small through pasture-land,
twists and turns that would need crinkle-tube-crash-barriers:
ditches obstructing breakneck pizzicato-jumps.*

*A mole, an inky shape with little pinkclown's claws
as pacesetter in the underworld smouldering bog .
Peat flaming grey, white when consumed. His digging mirrors
well-tempered wandering of fugues through the heavens,
intimate as making love for the thousand-and-first time.*

*Autumnal the declining days of the enlightenment. Drizzle
with a low sun desires nothing but earth, a glowing
heirloom in which you cook rain soup. As fragile
as paling sky is that old service in the china
cabinet of your head: cleanest shards after the meal.*

In this poem so much is happening at once that it is impossible to paraphrase it, even supposing it would make sense to paraphrase poetry. In the original `flee' (`vlucht') and `sighs' (`zucht') of the first line are transposed, through the rhyme, into the `paling sky' (`verblekende lucht') of the last verse, the `cleanest shards' from the last line correspond with the pearls from the first, the biting of mares' necks prepares one for the eroticism in the second verse. Central to all this is the mole, a grinning comedian who is also Lucifer or Hades. Fireflies, burning peat, glowing earth: there is warmth enough still, but the end is near. Indeed, poetry is passing on the fire. ■