

And Underneath the Everlasting Arms

1. on the combination Beckett - old polyphony (from the Compline office)

The initial question came from the Konzerthaus in Vienna to consider a program around the music/chant for the Compline office, which is the last office the monks pray before going to sleep, and in this sense it is a prayer for a good and safe sleep, in those days a necessary invocation because you never knew if you would wake up the next morning, so to say...

Sleeping is like the little brother of death, and for this reason people in the Middle Ages would never really sleep completely flat, because they feared they would mimic or imitate to much the position of a dead corpse, and who knows, in a sympathetic way also invoke death in stead of sleep...

So this element of fear of sleep, sleep connected with death, being still but moving at the same time, all these elements linked with the anthropology of sleep in medieval culture, brought up also quite spontaneously the work of Beckett, and Beckett himself, as one of the great insomniacs of the 20th century...

When I started to dive in late medieval music for the Compline office, one text stroke me above all: '*Mediā vita in morte sumus*'...in the midst of life we are in death...and it continues with a prayer, an incantation not to be pulled into the bitterness of death etc....One of the three versions we will perform is by John Sheppard, a relatively unknown English composer from the 16th century. His version of the prayer is at the same time the longest motet ever written in the Middle Ages and Renaissance. I think it's more than 23 minutes...and it repeats the same material over and over...

This I found striking and interesting in our context: the strange paradox of invoking a good sleep but in this way, not going to sleep, postponing sleep, exhausting it completely...this is what happens with the Sheppard motet too. You would expect for the Compline office rather some short pro-forma-chants...just to do the job, we pray and hopla, we go to sleep...no, Sheppard writes exactly for this office the longest motet ever...as if he wants to tell us: you will never go to sleep, if you don't first exhaust it all....this strange paradox of being tired, but as a consequence not going to sleep but squeezing out this tiredness to full exhaustion...this is what happens in these motets but also in Beckett...and it is Deleuze who wrote exactly about this, who saw that in Beckett...His text 'The exhausted' was very helpful for our dramaturgy...I will come back on this later....

So the question was also: how will that work: Beckett and this old polyphony...also, what is the link and why...well, first of all, to me, Beckett has nothing to do with modernity, I don't find Beckett modern, or avant-garde, and in fact it's also why I find him so interesting...for me he is like a musician or a mystical painter...using language against itself, against the attempt to communicate messages etc (no invention of modernism at all!)...and what happens is the miracle of repetition and exegesis (to use a medieval term): you start to get it, not by a cognitive process of explanation or critical reading, close reading etc...no you start to get it by 'rumination', saying it again and again and again...That's also what happened during the rehearsals: in the beginning the singers who were not involved with the texts, didn't understand what it was about...and we refused to explain...so slowly slowly something emerged just by listening it over and over...this is the miracle...

Beckett has a big incantatory aspect, it's very strong...his prose uses descriptions, images, movements, actions, but they are weird, uncommon, at the same time, language is not just descriptive but sometimes rather prescriptive, this gives the texts a feeling of sorcery, an incantation of a witch...do this, do that, look outside, lift your arm, you are completely still now, but in reality you are completely trembling all over etc...this kind of stuff...it's like an inner voice who talks to the one that should act but is unable to act...this inability to act becomes part of a strange descriptive mood in between almost molecular movement and athletic stillness...listening or incorporating this prose does something to your body, it's as if you start to feel it on a molecular level...well, sorcery is not far...

So this is one connection: the prose as music, as incantation: an incantation is a prayer, a chant with the aim to change something in the constitution of the listener, in the inner substance of the listener (it was used a lot in Flanders for animals who were sick, or refused to give milk etc...peasants would call a sorcerer who would incantate prayers or chants, mostly a mixture of some pseudo-Latin and sacred texts..) it works with repetitions, imitations, metaphoric connections, crooked grammatics that bring up things in the memory or on the contrary, give you an uncanny feeling...

For me this polyphony has the same incantatory capacities. It works with strange motivic imitations, works on the memory, builds these strange harmonic climates...you think of images, as in Beckett, but if one would ask ok, tell me, what do you see, you would not know, you would not be able to describe it, it's from another order, maybe more formalistic (patterns, movements) or more climatological (an atmosphere, a gesture, a vagueness)...As a child I had these kind of nightmares which all the time came back, but when someone would ask what the content was of these nightmares I was not able to explain or describe it, the only thing I know was that it repetitive patterns, or awkward (anamorphic) perspectives...

This is what Beckett connects with medieval music and culture in general...creating images without representation (sounds really Bergsonian too), they have no extensive form, they are more like movements or dynamics...this is what gives this thrilling, ecstatic feeling listening to Beckett...

2. making the dramaturgy

The idea to start from the repertories of the Compline office (the paradox of the insomniac: trying to get asleep, by postponing, suspending sleep etc..) What the French call '**le sommeil**'...what's happening there? what are we

doing there, or who or what is doing something with us in this strange in between state, this state of somnambulism: passive activity, active passivity...

Beckett was interested in this, the psychoanalysts and Freud not: we don't know who speaks or acts, the patient does not completely control his actions, or rather in a secret way, there is this secrecy of intention and automatism...

and so the psychoanalyst can not work with this, on this level, there is no control possible...

(the biggest mistake of psychoanalysis is probably this refusal of somnambulism, of hypnosis....Stengers wrote a book about it...)

And also the interest of rehabilitating something that was happening during *Compline*: a clinical analysis of the phenomenon of *Compline*, and also of its repertoire: official musicology will never ever accept clinical interpretations...but what if it was something useful, maybe even necessary, a collective therapy almost: what was it exactly and how did it work? We have to engage in an archeology of insomnia...tracing it back to the ritual of *Compline* (a toolbox, a collective event for insomniacs...) and finding its traces in the writings of Beckett, for example...

So let's say we wanted to rehabilitate this office of *Compline*, a ritual, a premodern event in times of belief and superstition...but what if it was something useful, maybe even necessary, a collective therapy almost: what was it exactly and how did it work? We have to engage in an archeology of insomnia...tracing it back to the ritual of *Compline* (a toolbox, a collective event for insomniacs...) and finding its traces in the writings of Beckett, for example...

So we work on two dramaturgical levels at the same time: a selection and integration of Beckett texts and a selection and integration of *Compline* chants...

Concerning Beckett we select two prose texts, in the collected works known as Fizzle 7 and Fizzle 8, but with their own proper titles: *STILL* and *FOR TO END YET AGAIN*....they have no real content connection, Beckett put them just one after another, as penultimate and last text in the Fizzles collection (but as all things that are found next to each other, at random at first glance, like two books next to each other in a library, there always emerges this kind of strange, secret connection: so although there is no dramaturgical continuation of the two texts we dealt with them as if there was one...and it worked we think...)

STILL reminds me of *ROCKABY* and other similar texts: someone in a chair on the window looking at the sunset, trying to get to rest or to sleep etc...it's a perfect text to start our performance with...it's like a prescription how to get to a sleep...I told Katy while learning the text by heart to say it as if she was reading a recipe on a package of pudding...it should sound practical, no bullshit, to the point, as if it is a pure actionist text, do this, now that, go there etc...

A lot of times Beckett is performed in such a cerebral way, while the language is in fact very witty, and in some sense very practical, not abstract at all...very physical also, as if the hands or the body are talking while going through experiences and not the head or the brain. So in this sense also building an earthly contraposto against these sacred polyphony...

To *STILL* we connected some variations on the chant *Si dederō somnum oculis meis et palpebris meis* (If I would give sleep to my eyes and to my eyelids...also written for *Compline* office and invoking sleep for the eyes etc...)

This was a very popular song for 3 voices around 1500 by Alexander Agricola: composers used it in their own songs or composed even full masses based on the three voice song. So in fact what you hear is all the time the same melody and often even similar counterpoint in infinite variations from different composers...this repetitions, imitations etc fit well together with this constant repetition of the same lines 'quite still again' (the word 'again' is itself repeated again and again)...

It culminates in the *Agnus dei* of *Missa Hercules Dux Ferrariae* by Josquin Desprez, one of the most weird works of the renaissance, in which Josquin also integrated the 'Si dederō'-motive. Repetition and imitation transform here to something else, something deeply Beckettian...It is as if in the renaissance there were two sorts of repetition/imitation: the good one is the classical one: art imitates nature, imitation as neutral technique etc...but in music often imitation gets a counter-natural dimension and becomes like demonic repetition, demonic imitation: that's what happens with Josquin: there is exactly as in Beckett some exhaustive repetition there, or better the exhaustion of repetition...it gets an uncanny, diabolical dimension...the piece falls almost apart by its circular, whirling movements, really uncanny...sleep, peace, rest and death are very near here...it's the incantatory repetition...it's a purely transformational repetition, while nothing seems to change at first glance, on the contrary...it's an inner, intrinsic transformation...and it's a strong ending of the first part, already previewing the madness of the second part.

To *FOR TO END YET AGAIN* we connected three polyphonic versions of the antiphon *Media vita in morte sumus* by Nicolas Gombert, John Sheppard and Orlando di Lasso, respectively...

Another influence to our dramaturgy and the idea of two faces of this kind of intensive sleep, which the French call 'le sommeil' came from Deleuze's vision on 'sommeil' as analyzed in his essay "Pour en finir avec le jugement" ("To have done with Judgement") Here Deleuze gives two versions of 'sommeil'. The first is 'insomnia' (which is linked with our first part and Beckett's *STILL*) and the second is 'intoxication' (which is linked with the second part and Beckett's *FOR TO END YET AGAIN*.)

This was also the way we gave the singers/performers a sort of hidden narrative, which was not important for the public to understand the performance but more for the performers to act with more consistency. The idea of this hidden narrative was the evening meeting of a sort of rehab-group of insomniacs, they gather and sit around a

lamp waiting for instructions, for some coaching (as if they enact a sort of survival-ritual of the Compline office itself...) The first Beckett text is in this sense a way of dealing with insomnia, the soft face of 'sommeil'...It's all still very instructive, almost a strange pedagogy that goes off-track...All kind of experimental formations are formed according to the lamps that dim on and off, as if these lamps were the real instigators of the actions of people... In the second part another girl takes slowly over, continuing with FOR TO END YET AGAIN which leads insomnia into intoxication and a delirious vision with hard to imagine images...some scholar wrote about this texts: it's like an intertwining of multiple scenarios, all possible, all visible, but impossible to connect in a clear way, impossible to reduce to a simple story....

We liked a lot what Christian Kerslake wrote about this step from insomnia to intoxication:

"Insomnia lacks the raw visionary power of the nightmare, while the nightmare lacks the vigilance, the ghostly agency, retained by insomnia. But perhaps there is a state in which somniation appears in a pure form, with its visions finally divested of passivity and lability. Here Deleuze returns to intoxication, which appeared at first to be his main topic, before the detour into the phenomena of nightmare and insomnia. He now says that the peyote rites described by Artaud and the songs of the Mexican forest described by Lawrence 'are not dreams, but states of intoxication or *sommeil*.' We have to go to Mexico to discover this meaning of *sommeil*, where the dream now really does 'take the real movement upon itself'. It is the peyote rite, and Michaux's Western rendering of it, which takes the dream out of sleep and into somniation. 'The dreamless somniation in which one nonetheless does not fall asleep, this insomnia nonetheless sweeps the dream along as far as the insomnia extends - such is the state of Dionysian intoxication, its way of escaping judgment.'

(...)

Lawrence even suggests that the mind changes its activity at night-time, ceding its attention to life and submerging itself in a **consciousness of the past**. At night, the mind 'collects the results of the spent day into consciousness, lays down the honey of quiet thought, or the bitter-sweet honey of the gathered flower. It is the consciousness of that which is past. Evening is our time to read history and tragedy and romance - all of which are the utterance of that which is past, that which is finished, is concluded: either sweetly concluded, or bitterly (Lawrence 1923:172). However, dream, reverie, history and romance are still not, in Deleuze's words, 'adequate to the night'. There are nocturnal *activities* different in kind from nocturnal passivity or diurnal activity:

"Evening is the time also for revelry, for drink, for passion. Alcohol enters the blood and acts as the sun's rays act. It inflames into life, it liberates into energy and consciousness....That life of the day which we have not lived, by means of sun-born alcohol we can now flare into sensation, consciousness, energy and passion, and live it out. It is a liberation from the laws of idealism, a release from the restriction of control and fear. It is the blood bursting consciousness. (Thus the) active mind-consciousness of the night is a form of retrospection, or else it is a form of impulsive exclamation, direct from the blood, and unbalanced. Because the active physical consciousness of the night is the blood-consciousness, the most elemental form of consciousness." (Deleuze p.173)

Kerslake continues:

"Dream-consciousness is either dominated by empirical retrospection (the combing of the day's residues) or else yields to a sterile repetition of the past. How impoverished the dream looks when compared to the consciousness that actively becomes 'adequate' to the night, through intoxication or sex. How astonishing it seems that psychoanalysis, with its molar opposition of consciousness versus unconscious, cut off conceptual access to the kinds of non-egoic *consciousness* that grant the mind an *activity* that is no more ruled by the reality principle than by the economics of the pleasure principle. 'Sex is our deepest form of consciousness. It is utterly non-ideal, non-mental. It is pure blood-consciousness. It is the basic consciousness of the blood, the nearest thing in us to pure material consciousness. It is the consciousness of the night, when the soul is *almost* asleep'. (Lawrence 1923:173) The *sommeil* of sex, whether heightened by intoxication or not, is the liberation of the virtual body, the subjugation of the actual body by the virtual body, a spatiotemporal 'dramatization' where it is not the body that rules the mind, but where the somnambulistic mind rules the body."

Where the texts of Beckett in itself are a sort of individual expression of this, we put them into a sort of collective machinization, spoken and not read, but also spoken towards a collective, which in its term responds with polyphonic chants. Polyphony is not only vocality in multiplicity, but also individual expression becoming collective, becoming a collective exclamation or incantation...it's for us where we go beyond Beckett, or bring him to a collective utterance...

The *Media vita* of Sheppard is the most pure example of this: the singers whirl very slowly around a lamp during the singing of the 23 minutes motet while one of the performers, sitting on a chair, goes down very slowly, almost invisible, only visible after the movement when a new position of the body is established, till finally he arrives at a cramped sitting position, becoming a mere contour, a body-stone in the counter light....

3. making the scenography

The dramaturgy follows almost exactly the spatial indications of the two texts and is in this sense a spatialization of Beckett's texts. The music is an articulation of the anchor-points, cardinal points as mentioned in the two Beckett texts.

The scenography followed almost organically after multiple readings of the two Beckett texts and the possibilities of singing the polyphonic chants.

The scenography is based on the following parameters:

- a stage configuration based on a compass card, but slightly stretched out, made anamorphic, into a parallelogram (or rhombus or lozenge) with four cardinal points and a center. The five points are articulated by a bulb light, three are positioned on two meters height, while the center and south point are positioned on 50 centimeters.

Because of the scores the singers need to read, they can sing standing up at the west, north and east point and sitting in the center and in the south point where Beckett situates the position of a wicker chair with armrests.

- the movements and walkings of the performers are limited by two elements:

1. they only move towards a light that dims up and stay where the light is on...(the Beckettian idea of a secret instance, dominating human movement which he took from 17th century Antwerp cartesian philosopher Arnold Geulincx, elaborated in Beckett's novel Murphy)

2. They walk only on the lines from the cardinal points towards each other or to the center, a movement based somehow on Beckett's play without words 'Quad'...

During the performance lights dim on and off, sometimes quick, sometimes slowly, as obeying a secret rule...It's in fact the choreography of the bulbs, going on and off, which directs the whole of movements and actions. These movements and actions are anchored with the indications in the text.

The first part is dominated by the triangle made by West-Center-South while the second part is dominated by the triangle made by East-Center-North...this mirror is also found back on a micro-level inside the first and second part...

The whole performance is built 'ad more geometrico' , reflecting not so much the mathematical-affective structure of the polyphony, as the Beckettian logic based on 16th and 17th century philosophical treatises but also reflecting the geometry of divinatory practices and rituals....