

## Reading as a Form of Writing

*On the Texts in the Work of Ana Torfs*

### The Last Variation

Are they images or are they texts? Should we be looking or should we be reading? There are images here: photographs, slides, film, video. She likes to show things. But there is always also text. The text is not subordinate to the image, but not really above it, either. I am looking for the right preposition: *alongside* the image, *opposite* the image?

How do you label a text that is placed there, adjacent to the image? Is it written (then Ana Torfs is a writer), quoted (this would make her a copyist), is it read (that makes her a reader), is it deciphered (then Ana Torfs is a student), or read aloud (now she is a mentor). However this may be, she studies her texts. They are at once a source for a preliminary investigation and the material for a written document. Study becomes a literary form in its own right. Torfs does not put language at her service – which is what usually happens in writing – but puts both herself and language at the service of documents. She does not invent, but listens. Listening is here an ethical imperative: the penetration of her listening does not aim towards identification, but towards the individual letter. At the letter, it breaks down. Only then does the text – a statement by Joan, a reminder for Ludwig – achieve its maximum objectivity. It becomes a sentence that reaches to the marrow, through the bone. Like a solidified clot in the vein of semantic intercourse. Not specification, but bafflement.

### The Next to Last Variation

She offers something to see. She offers something to read. In what relationship? In each case, it is not just about the contrast between image and sound. For the text is not placed in the image, but outside it. The text is not an instrument being played from within the image, but from outside the image, read to us *against* the image. Here, by the way, reading and reading aloud are two sides of one and the same figure. In the reading aloud, we hear the text, but we also hear it because it is being read by our eyes. With its being read aloud, we thus feel the paper, the print, the writing.

Ana Torfs, writer. Yes. But an out-of-the-ordinary writer, above all one who reads, and one who reads aloud. She is a writer who mostly writes things over. Only when she rewrites them does she understand them. Reading is reading the text aloud and writing it over, penetrating the text with the voice and with the hand, the way someone would constantly draw lines alongside and underneath what they read. She writes this way, already reading herself into the text. Take note: she does not take possession of the text, does not take it over. It remains toneless deciphering, not an interpretational performance. She does not play the text in a literary scene, but remains industrious in her *studiolo*. He who deciphers as he reads is dumbstruck at each letter, at each word, after every punctuation mark. Every element stands independent and sharp in his field of vision. Philological attention as style.

The letter of the text performs in the foreground, so that understanding tends to be veiled over. The texts appear as opaque objects, meanings as massive dolmens. Meaning

becomes essentially enigmatic, creating a matte, virtually material impenetrability of the texts and their meaning. Torfs collects them in many colours and forms – hard, like boulders. She lays them out together and every time they touch one another, there is that ever-so-light, yet still hard sound of minerals – sharp, but in no relationship whatever to their exceptional, uncommon compactness.

### **Variation Number 13**

She makes objects from texts – objects from paper, with an incisive layout (the books, *Beethoven's Nephew* and *Du Mentir-Faux*, or the book-in-the-making from *Elective Affinities/The Truth of Masks & Tables of Affinities*), semantic objects in the mouths of actors (the off-screen voices in the film *Zyklus von Kleinigkeiten*), conceptual objects in her long meditation on history (the “reading tables” from *Elective Affinities...*).

She has a preference for documentary texts: the inhuman objectivity of a trial transcript, the functional objectivity of the notebooks of a deaf man, diaries and memoirs, quotes from the press. It is not an identifying reliving, not a clarifying interpretation, but neither is it an objectifying diagnosis. Again and again, she hones and polishes the appreciation that is produced spontaneously, the way you rub away the slimy moss around a boulder from a riverbed. The texts then lie on the table, more exposed. As naked as a motif by Cezanne.

### **Variation Number 12**

For their journey, she gives her audience notes, good quotations, warm recommendations to take along with them. When we are already outside, she calls to us with something else we must certainly not forget. Her tone remains flat, without expression. Nonetheless, the way she handles the texts points to a devastating urgency – to the fragile body, the catastrophic history, the lost soul. She listens to a series of awkward actions that determine a biography, a history. She hears how they fall, in any case, and then, how badly they fall, inevitably. But still she swallows back that urgency and never reaches out with a helping hand. The awkwardness does not seduce her into meddling or interfering. This is what makes her recommendations so intriguing. Exactly what does she concern herself with, where lurks that danger that she seems to be warning me about?

What she gives me to read is a secret message, a coded text. Her whispering and impersonal touch is at the same time the code to an agreement to escape an all-devouring conspiracy. This conspiracy goes by the name of forgetting. The deeper we dig ourselves into the jungle of the New Life, the thinner that life seems to become. Before us, a thick curtain of intense, violent events, and immediately behind us the amnesia, the way a team of cleaners follows the euphoric demonstration, like a shadow.

### **Variation Number 11**

Her relationship to text is that of the scriptorium: preserving by writing over, keeping alive by annotation. Her page expresses more than one voice. On the unfolded sheets in *Elective Affinities...* you read in the margins – a different tale running parallel to the main text, and in larger font – a series of reports and comments from the press: the harvest of the daily reading during a break; while the main text comprises the investigation, the work of looking things up, and takes us far back into the past.

Writing, but not as an author writes: writing as manual labour. Torfs pushes the act of writing – setting it to paper and copying over – to the forefront. She makes no effort whatsoever to disguise this humble, subservient role. One who sets out to tackle the forgotten must let the texts pass through his body, literally re-feel the work of the text in writing it over. Only when you let this physical labour share the weight does the text, and the reality that clings to it like a fishing line, slowly penetrate through to the inside of the body, where memory takes on substance.

Her work suggests a labour-intensive remembering, an incarnated memory.

### **Variation Number 10**

The broken continuity takes over. The story stumbles in the starting blocks. There are never any conclusions. No emotive synthesis comes to force its way forward. In her sources as well (the record of a trial, the conversation books used by a deaf man), the unravelling prevails. The trial is a procedural maze. In order to circumvent his deafness, Ludwig develops procedures. No conspiracy, just gruff moves on a chessboard. No coherent tale, no unity of meaning. The intonation grows flat. There is less and less “me” that the text could modulate from a standpoint, from an interest. The speaker becomes some “him” to whom she herself refers.

Nonetheless, it is she who is the attentive reader, and therefore the one who binds. Listening is perhaps the most important position in Torfs’ work. She ensures that listening becomes the great theme in her work. She puts this listening at the disposal of her public. Her “Listen!” is a very complex imperative, saturated with tears and horror, with outrage and helplessness, with sacral humility and merciless, insistent domination and control. Here, “Listen!” is not a request to listen to a story – stories require no active listening, but a passive giving over to the dynamics of a narrative – but to listen with a stethoscope, on the breast of the text, to the rumbling and rattling that secretly, disconcertingly and obscenely carries on beneath the surface, after forty years, or after four centuries.

In *Elective Affinities...* the insistent listening has been raised to a principle of construction. Torfs cuts and pastes biographies against one another in brutal shifts in thought, mental leaps, associations in feelings, but most of all according to an aleatory, unpredictable discovering – sometimes literally at a flea market, from the one orange crate full of books to the next. That coincidence is very objective – nobody can claim it, nobody gives it sense. A flat objectivity that demonstrates how loosely the precious found object hangs on to life. One by one, drowning figures lifted up by a rescuing glance, vomiting out the water that had been sucked in, with barbaric gasping. Thus do the quotations that she, dutifully aware, notes down for us, slap us in the face. Supported by a reflex, by mad panic. The panic of the pursuit – for that is perhaps always what it is about in this work – but also the panic of the opposite of being pursued: forgetting.

### **Variation Number 9**

An interrogation is a stereotyped dramaturgy. It enlarges the bewilderment that question and answer mutually exercise on one another. The voice of the duet never comes, even though you understand that it could do so at any moment: the unwanted song, the

harmony of power and powerlessness. Equally strong is the structural need to keep the gulf between the two as sharp, as deep, as extreme as possible.

The transition between question and answer, between text and “glossing up”, between a first quotation and the next is of that double, duplicitous order: together and divided, bound and without binding, consecutive and opposed. Continuously, you see the scalpel cutting loose, together with its opposite gesture, like a film played backwards: the way the most awful cuts are seamlessly welded back together with the aid of a knife.

Still, there is never the joy of insight, of a connection. On the contrary, the bewilderment about the particular takes over, bewilderment about the inexplicable. So she never poses the question – accusing and at a loss for a reconciling explanation – “why”?

### **Variation Number 8**

Her material is text, her supporting medium is a page of type, her work the notation of reading. From her audience, she expects study. Her utopia: that her act of reading reaches the past, so that it can be touched, just briefly, as in a trance.

Texts are like illnesses. Reading is like a stay in hospital. Understanding is like losing consciousness. The injury of the body – how it slips away from itself – is not only a part of her biography, a benchmark for her values, but a model for thinking and writing. In her work, quotations are shattered, crushed.

### **Variation Number 7**

First is the research: like an institution for examining texts, deciphering their letters, bit by bit, letting their significance in, because she is most of all concerned with the individual letter. Here, “reading” very literally means playing with groups of letters, syllables, the putting together of sentences and paragraphs. You can imagine this research institute: in absolute silence, not to be distracted by anything at all, extremely concentrated. We do not get to see that reading personage, even though texts and images continually point to her. Implicitly, we see notations taken, passages underlined, cut out. Her reading oscillates like water flowing slowly through the landscape of words.

A closed layer of time fixes itself around the fragments, encasing them. A crust of time because the researcher does not pull them to herself, but holds them far away from her. No identification, rather the specific pathos of seeing something unfold that cannot be undone and having no control: Cassandra, for whom the future was already an irrevocable past.

### **An Early Variation: Reading**

She does not make the texts hers by interpreting them. She lets the texts say nothing other than what they themselves can say (this is one of the most gripping advantages of her method: she lets us see the defencelessness, the powerlessness of texts). What is there is shown in the scope of its own import: that is what was there. With her finger, the reader glides over the text, decoding and emphatically spelling out. The voice, movements of the eye and understanding are monotone (I would prefer to write “monochrome” – expressly, she lays not a single colour into her reading material.). There is so much effort needed to

read what is there that she leaves understanding behind: she does not take hold of the text, but points to it.

### **The Sickness of History**

Here, the end is a given, repeatedly. Her characters die, never reconciled. About that end we must no longer deliberate. No questions. The sluices are shut, the meaning stagnates, the material just dams up, driven. A reverse motion begins to build. The need for narrative progression is turned into narrative upheaval. This upheaval is her situation. She looks at how she can use the claustrophobia, the need for breath, the need for meaning, in order to show something that is obscured beneath the consoling clarification, again and again. From the stricture she creates a magnifying glass (the suspense of Hitchcock is such a magnifying glass; so too the inserts of Bresson).

How do you tell about the breaking up of the dead-end street? It produces a specific kind of reading matter: flat, neutral, distant. Short sentences with no emotional modulation. Sentences in which only the third person of the pronouns remains available. Sentences with only just the line of the contour: no volume, no incoming light, no movement. Sentences that report. Writing reduced to transcription. Conjunctions are out of the question: they create hierarchy and bind. What it comes down to in the immense overabundance of data is to cut so precisely that you retain only the objective building blocks of a scene. You have to stick to the facts, to what is said, what is done. This is the technique of the stenographer, the clerk of the court, the script girl. Taking notes, without questioning the relevance.

This attentive reproducing of documents generates no trust. This is something else she does not want to give us. She distrusts the demand from her audience to be able to trust her. Stubborn, she puts herself outside that contract. She studies, she does not sell. She knows that with her level voice, she instills neither trust nor distrust. She is not a person, but a function.

### **Variation Without Person**

Ana Torfs, writer? It is this odd claim that is being examined here. It is peculiar because she has stubbornly worked on a certain sort of written material - trial proceedings, notebooks - or developed a relationship to other texts that is a pure taking of inventory. A writer? More like someone taking the minutes of a meeting. In this role, she chooses a specific position in relation to language: very close to the most intimate significance, but at the same time divided from it by the immense distance of who the one is who is transforming that intimacy into a document. In the extreme, she does the very opposite of what a writer does, the writer who has the ambition of adding a coherent and identifiable standpoint by which to be identified. Torfs' work - her specific intellectual, stylistic and emotional labour - is comprised of eliminating the finite forms and seeing what happens to those forms when people submit them to the pressure of the "the" in *the* document: grammatical atrophy.

The great Joan of Arc film adaptations have made us all familiar with the specific emotional energy that is created in the wake of such identification with the text of the note-taker. Right through him - "him" being a function, not a person - we receive something to see, something that disappears completely when we identify ourselves

emotionally, because of the grammatical introduction of the personal pronoun. What is being said is disconnected from the one doing the saying and therefore takes on the radical autonomy of an “*en soi*”, an object enclosed within itself. Nonetheless, the objectifying note-taking seduces the reader into putting a great deal of energy into trying to project himself into the place of the subjects.

#### The “End” Theme

She does not like endings. The end of a story, the conclusion of an argument, the summing up of a narrative trajectory, the ambition of an evaluation, the equal sign that causes the one to lead to the other, all an illusory luxury, an indulgence she does not permit herself. So she arranges things into a circle. The beginning sits fixed to the end, so that both positions are nullified, eradicated. It is not an open end – not that sort of happy ending – but a closed beginning. It is not “how to end?”, but “where to begin?”. Nowhere, anywhere – wherever.

Dirk Lauwaert, Autumn 2004

(Translated from the Dutch by Mari Shields)