

A

Forgotten Classic

The Work of Louis Couperus in English



On 10 June 1930 Mayor Patijn of The Hague unveiled the memorial tablet on the house where Couperus was born (Photo Letterkundig Museum, The Hague).

Louis Couperus' prolific talent as a storyteller, virtually unrivalled among his contemporaries, won him many admiring readers in English translation at the turn of the twentieth century, and provoked favourable comparisons with both Galsworthy and Henry James. His versatility and range of settings, from the contemporary Netherlands and Dutch East Indies to ancient Greece and Rome, and from medieval Europe to the quasi-Ruritania of *Majesty* (Majesteit, 1893), had a wide popular appeal. (The film rights to *The Hidden Force* (De stille kracht, 1900) were sold to Hollywood for \$2,000, and the commercially-aware author saw the American book market as potentially more lucrative than the British one.)

The preoccupation of many writers of his generation in the Low Countries with linguistic expressionism and experiment leaves more than residual traces in Couperus' mature work, in a tendency to over-lush, 'purple' description. But equally important narrative influences are Tolstoy's short-chapter technique and the Wagnerian motif: *The Twilight of the Souls* (Zielenschemeringen, 1903), the title of the third volume of Couperus' tetralogy, is an obvious *homage* to the composer. Less exaltedly, Couperus (1863-1923) was a lifelong admirer of the Romantic melodramas of the popular English Victorian novelist Ouida (the pseudonym of Marie Louise de la Ramée). The story 'The Binoculars' ('De binocle', 1920) below may serve to illustrate some aspects of Couperus' style and tone.

Taken up first by the circle around Oscar Wilde and *The Yellow Book* (Wilde's appreciative letter on Couperus' first translated novel, *Footsteps of Fate* (Noodlot, 1891), is now sadly lost), and by the influential critic Edmund Gosse, who wrote an introduction to *Footsteps of Fate* and later a memoir (1923), Couperus' evocative studies of heredity, conditioning, guilt and (often ambiguous) sexuality won extravagant praise from such respected voices as John Cowper Powys and particularly Katherine Mansfield, who wrote memorably of the four-novel cycle *The Books of the Small Souls* (De boeken der kleine zielen): '(...) We do not know anything in English literature with which to compare this delicate and profound study of a passionately united and almost equally passionately divided family (...) The real head of the family, the grim, ghostly shadow whose authority they never

question, is Fear.' On his broadest fictional canvas, Couperus plots the disintegration of a great Dutch colonial clan, the Van Lowes. The first volume, *The Small Souls* (De kleine zielen, 1901), deals with the return from the wilderness of Constance van der Welcke, née Van Lowe, who scandalised her family by eloping with the outsider she loved. *The Later Life* (Het late leven, 1902) chronicles Constance's flirtation with social reform and trade unionism, while in *The Twilight of the Souls* madness strikes one of the ostensibly most solid members of the family, her brother Gerrit. In *Doctor Adriaan* (Het heilige weten, 1903) Constance's son Addy attempts to escape the legacy of the past by committing himself to the alleviation of human suffering as a doctor, but the author leaves us in doubt whether the attempt is totally successful. Many of these themes are powerfully and more succinctly present in the masterly *Old People and the Things that Pass By* (Van oude mensen, de dingen die voorbijgaan, 1906).

Couperus' popularity peaked in the years preceding and following the First World War. In 1921 the critic A.W.G. Randall expressed the hope that 'today, when Louis Couperus is again beginning to be translated and admired (...) he may yet produce an effect on the development of English fiction.' In the event, after a brief surge of interest in his shorter fiction and in his travel writing, the revival petered out. As early as 1927 D.H. Lawrence damned *Old People and the Things that Pass By* with faint praise as 'quite a good contemporary novel', but inferior to Multatuli's *Max Havelaar* (1860), 'a far more real book'.

J. Kooij (in an article in the magazine *Merlyn* in 1964) seeks to explain the decline in Couperus' fortunes in translation through the demise of the three-volume novel as the staple of the English subscription libraries. While this may be a contributing factor, it is at most a partial explanation. Ian Buruma, reviewing the paperback reissue of *The Hidden Force* (1994), finds the writer's international eclipse equally puzzling: '(...) he has been largely forgotten outside Holland. I don't know why. The translation, first published in 1922, is not great, but Couperus's precious, elaborate, sometimes quite bizarre prose seems less dated in English than in the original Dutch. The reason is not just that the translator was unable to produce the luxuriance of Couperus' style, but that the Dutch language has changed far more than English since 1900.'

While much of Couperus' most significant work is available in English translation, thanks in large part to the dedication of a single translator, the Dutch émigré Alexander Teixeira de Mattos, the omissions are equally telling: neither *Iskander* (1920), the study of the disillusion and decadence of Alexander the Great (De Mattos did not live to complete his version) nor *The Mountain of Light* (De berg van licht, 1905-1906), with at its centre the tragic figure of the androgynous boy-emperor Heliogabalus, found English publishers. Both were probably too outspoken for an industry still smarting from legal clashes with the moral establishment over 'indecent' foreign literature such as that of Zola. Today a translation of the latter book particularly, a dark literary pendant to the painting of Lawrence Alma Tadema, whose work Couperus knew and admired, might have more than a simple 'period' appeal.

E.M. Beekman's 1985 edition of *The Hidden Force* (Ian Buruma's review of which is quoted above), a study of colonial incompatibilities in the



Louis Couperus (1863-1923) in his study (Photo Letterkundig Museum, The Hague).



'*East is East...*' tradition quite worthy of comparison with a work like Forster's *A Passage to India* (1924), retains Teixeira de Mattos' contemporary version, while restoring many explicit passages previously bowdlerised or omitted, including sex scenes and the graphic description of red betel juice streaming mysteriously down the naked limbs of Léonie van Oudijk, the promiscuous wife of a Dutch district commissioner, as she takes a shower. It is one of only two titles by Couperus currently in print, the other being *Ecstasy. A Study of Happiness* (Extaze, 1892), co-translated by De Mattos and Oscar Wilde's acolyte John Gray. (A translation of the symbolic novella *Babel* (1901), announced in a publisher's catalogue, appears to be a 'phantom'.)

One can only concur with Ian Buruma's praise of Couperus' vision of colonial life in *The Hidden Force*: 'His insight into the tragedy of European colonialism made Couperus a great writer. And his sympathy for the hybrid, the impure, the ambiguous, gave him a peculiarly modern voice. It is extraordinary that this Dutch dandy, writing in the flowery language of fin-de-siècle decadence, should still sound so fresh. But we can only be grateful. For now that dreams of ethnic purity are making a comeback, his voice is more urgent than any other.' Perhaps Hollywood may yet exercise its option.

PAUL VINCENT

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The Binoculars

by Louis Couperus

It was about five years ago, one morning in Dresden, at the Opera, that a young tourist, a Dutch journalist of Indonesian descent, a refined young man of somewhat nervous disposition, very mild-mannered despite his tropical blood, bought a ticket for the first row of the fourth circle to hear *The Valkyrie*. At that time the fourth circle was where all the foreigners sat who could not afford the luxury of a box; indeed, even those who could often preferred the fourth circle to the second or third, because one could see and hear so well, despite the chasm of the wide auditorium that gaped between that circle and the stage. It was a glorious day; the parks were arrayed in gold-leafed splendour; through the clear sky there wafted a sweetness that made life seem worth living, and the young tourist, his solitude tinged with sadness, enjoyed wandering through the lovely town, dropping into a museum, having lunch somewhere under an arbour by the sun-lapping water of the Elbe. While he dreamed happily of hearing *The Valkyrie* that evening, an opera he did not know, a cause of self-reproach, since he adored Wagner.

The hours passed without his speaking to anyone but the waitress and the tram conductor. He drank tea and had a bite to eat, since as the opera started very early he knew he would have no time to dine. And then, contentedly and gently, quietly happy, as was his nature, despite a nervous disposition and periodic bouts of melancholy, he walked calmly – he had plenty of time – to the Opera House. Several shops in the Pragerstrasse were already closing and trading had almost stopped and when he saw an optician indicating to his assistant that it was time to put up the shutters in front of the window, he realised that he had no opera glasses. It struck him that the fourth circle – where he had sat before, at the back – was quite a long way from the stage and that a pair of opera glasses would come in useful... he also reflected that he had had a cheap day and that his ticket cost only three marks, and now he chanced to meet the optician's scanning gaze he motioned to him, as though on impulse, quickened his step and, still on the pavement, called out:

'Are you closed? Or have I time to buy a pair of opera glasses?'

With a good-natured grin the tall, gaunt optician nodded and beckoned him inside the half-darkened shop. And scarcely had the tourist entered than it flashed through his mind that he was doing the wrong thing and that it would be better if he left the shop, because the shopkeeper's face was like an unpleasant bird's. But the flash was so rapid, groundless and vague, that it did not enter his logical consciousness. So the young man stayed and continued:

'Then I'd like a pair of opera glasses, please, a simple pair, not too expensive.'

The optician showed him several and praised the makers' names.

'These are so small,' said the young fellow, who, himself small and slight, liked large-sized accoutrements, unconsciously out to impress with a large handkerchief or gloves that were too big for him.

'Try these then,' recommended the shopkeeper.

'These are more for the races,' laughed the tourist. 'They're rather heavy too...'

He looked through them for a moment, adjusting them until they were focused. He could see very clearly with them, out into the street.

'I do like them,' said the tourist. 'How much are these?'

The price came as a shock. If he bought them he would have had an expensive day. But these glasses made the street scene so clear!

'All right then,' said the tourist. 'I'll take these.'

He paid for them. And left, with the opera glasses in their case. Now he had to hurry. Suddenly he realised that he had really disliked the birdlike face of that optician. But he dismissed this silly aversion; he often had these strange dislikes, as well as likes, and they were sometimes a nuisance in everyday life.

Now he hurried. There was the Opera, with the black-silhouetted public already streaming across the evening square into the wide illuminated entrances. Nervous, although he knew he was not late, he still hurried. He bounded up the flight of stairs between the slow-moving file of people. He quickly found his place in the first row. He settled down in happy contemplation of enjoying the music.

He took his opera glasses out of their case and placed them, together with the case, in front of him on the wide ledge. Close to him, to the left and right, and behind him the seats were quickly taken up: it was becoming increasingly full: down below the boxes and stalls were also filling up.

Suddenly, it occurred to the young man that the glasses might fall ... into the now darkened auditorium, and he put them on his knees.

The performance began in rapt and devoted attention to Wagner. Apart from the tremendous waves of music there was scarcely a sound or movement in the large auditorium, scarcely a cough, just the occasional hand lifting a pair of opera glasses.

In order to bring the scene closer, the young tourist also turned his glasses on Siegmund, whose voice was vibrating blissfully through him.

Suddenly, in the midst of his enjoyment, it flashed through his mind that the auditorium, seen from up there in the gods, was a chasm, and the glasses were heavy. At the same moment, some way off, a programme floated down. It distracted him. He saw it flutter down and come to rest on the head of a grey-coiffured lady whose hand now clutched it as though it were a bird. Seated next to the lady was a gentleman with a gleaming bald skull.

Sieglinde, however, again captured the attention of the young tourist. The pale-blond Teutonic maiden fascinated him and completely imprisoned his surrendering soul in a magical spell of song. He found her, together with Siegmund in Hunding's hut, movingly poetical.

The opera glasses felt heavy on his knee. Again, he set them on the ledge where they stuck up like twin towers. They were safe enough there.

Then, in an almost humorous train of thought, the young man leaned over in order to see who was sitting just below him in the stalls and, should they fall, on whom the glasses would land.

It was an almost mischievous curiosity, welling up around the growing thought of an almost impossible possibility. Because he had now thought of it - that the glasses *could* fall, the glasses would certainly *not* fall.

He could not see clearly who was sitting right beneath him. The auditorium was very dark there. But it was precisely because of that darkness, in which the outlines of the audience were blurred, that further along he again

saw, more clearly, the dove-grey lady who had caught hold of the fluttering programme and, seated next to her, the bald-headed gentleman...

Whose skull gleamed. Among the thousands of closely-packed, attentive silhouettes, coiffured ladies and bald male pates, gleamed that faraway skull... It gleamed about three-quarters of the way down between the fourth circle and the downstage area. It was a gleaming sphere, like a haunting full moon sunk among all those shadowy forms: reverential heads and backs motionless in attention: it gleamed like a goal, like a target; it gleamed white; it shone...

The young tourist was vexed with his odd and annoying introspectiveness, and forced himself to concentrate on Hunding, after which he greatly enjoyed the love aria for the polished tenor voice which sang of love and surging spring. But he could not forget the shining sphere over there and could not make it disappear. Time and time again his gaze turned diagonally towards the skull, which, in the dim light of the auditorium, now appeared to shine like an immense billiard ball.

A stirring of impatience and irritation in himself shocked the young man. At the same time he gripped the opera glasses, suddenly afraid that they would fall. But the glasses did not fall and the young man's hands gripped them more tightly than was necessary... and turned them on Siegmund and Sieglinde.

Then it was as if he could not control himself, or as if something - a powerful imperative, forced him to propel the glasses high through the chasm of the auditorium, aiming at that tempting sphere, that giant billiard ball, the shining target, down there, in the depths, three-quarters of the way between himself and the stage....

He threw himself backwards in a violent motion of resistance...And, trembling, just managed to put down the opera glasses...The effort was almost too great for him. Then he pressed his arms to his sides. So as not to grab the glasses and hurl them at the round target. Gleaming there.

The lady in the next seat shot him a sideways glance. He reacted to her movement as if it were a motherly act of rescue.

'I do apologise,' he mumbled, pale and half-crazed. 'I don't feel well. I feel really ill. If you'll excuse me, I'd like to leave.'

The first act was coming to an end. He got up; trembling, but without a sound, he slipped past the legs of the five or six people between himself and the end of the row.

'You're forgetting your binoculars!' the lady in the next seat whispered after him.

'That's all right, Madame. I'll be back shortly, I hope.'

He stumbled down a few steps; there were angry hisses of 'Shh!'. Then the curtain fell, the house lights came up, and there was applause. He had deliberately left the binoculars there, afraid of the things. Now, in the interval, he regained his composure. How stupid he'd been! In the now brightly-lit auditorium the obsession of a moment ago struck him as a foolish, ridiculous impulse to which he would never have given in! He wasn't a lunatic! Hurl his binoculars into the auditorium?! Come, he would put the crazy notion out of his head with a minimum of willpower and common sense. He felt hungry and went to the bar for a roll and a glass of beer. That would calm him down after that nonsense of just now.

However, when the second act began and the house lights dimmed, he decided that what had surged through him had been a kind of giddy delirium induced by heights, what the French call *vertige de l'abîme*... Although he had felt no compulsion to plunge down himself. Perhaps it might be better not to sit so far forward in that first row, so high above the abyss of the auditorium... No, it would be better if he stayed back here, in the aisle. Even if the obsession had been nonsense, it might take hold of him again in that seat and so detract from his enjoyment of the music.

He stopped. Down there his seat remained unoccupied and the twin towers of his black opera glasses rose sarcastically but harmlessly on the wide ledge in front of his empty seat. But if he stood on tiptoe, he could just see the white pate in the auditorium, gleaming like a target...

He shrugged his shoulders in annoyance, dismissed that annoyance with a 'tut-tut', and gave his full attention to Brünnhilde's exultant cries, atop the rock on which she had appeared. And became calmer. And was transported.

The magic fire motif overwhelmed him and his pure rapture completely restored his equilibrium.

Still, when the opera was over, he determined never again to sit in the first row of the fourth circle. At any rate never again with such large opera glasses in front of him. And also not to take the opera glasses with him ...since their weight had felt so strange in his hands and together with the sense of depth, and because of that stupid target down there, might have triggered that mad obsession... to leave them there... with their small twin black towers... on the wide ledge... outlined against the void of the auditorium, now emptying below and on all sides.

And he almost fled down the stairs, afraid that someone would call out after him that he had forgotten his binoculars.

Five years had passed. He had certainly been successful in his career. He was married. He had travelled during the summers, during the winters, on business and for pleasure. He had not been back to Dresden, but this year he was there by chance. In the early autumn when the parks there are arrayed in gold-leaved splendour. The Opera playbills announced a series of performances of the *Ring* cycle. That evening *The Valkyrie* was playing. He remembered the lovely performance of five years earlier. His obsession had faded in his memory to no more than the vaguest recollection of vertigo. But why had he sometimes smiled and shrugged his shoulders since? Certainly, he would attend *The Valkyrie* again that evening. But at the box office he was told that it was sold out.

He was disappointed. He turned away. Just then someone approached and informed the ticket agent that he wished to make the seat he had in the first row of the fourth circle, available that evening. He was unable to come.

The young man eagerly purchased the ticket and asked himself where he had seen that disagreeable birdlike face before... Come now, once again it was the first row of the high fourth circle, but this time he would not get dizzy and would not let himself be upset by any freak notion. For that matter, he would not even take any binoculars with him. He had none with him and he would not buy any.

He arrived rather later that evening. The auditorium was already dark and full; the music had begun. He was reluctant to disturb the people in his row,

but the usherette assured him that he could easily reach his seat by passing only four people. So he shuffled past their legs, mumbling an apology, and sat down.

When the usherette bent over him and asked in a whisper, proffering a large pair of binoculars:

'Would you like to hire some opera glasses perhaps? For one mark?'

He thought he detected sarcasm in her voice, started and looked at the opera glasses she was offering. They were his opera glasses, of five years ago, that he had left behind, that had never been claimed, had not been taken to the police station but constantly hired out by the usherette, whenever she was able. They were his opera glasses. Before he was able to refuse, he had grabbed the things in an irresistible impulse. Angry voices cried 'Shh!' and the usherette withdrew, motioning to him that he could pay later...

Then it happened, that in the middle of Siegmund and Sieglinde's duet, high up, in the first row of the fourth circle, someone started squirming, shrieking as if seized by a fit, as if he were wrestling with a power stronger than himself, and across the auditorium, startled out of its pious concentration, a hand hurled through space a heavy object which plunged like a stone in an arc into the chasm.

Down to where next to a dove-grey lady a bald-pated man, a different one, although never aimed at or noticed, was fatally struck and gave a dying roar, as his brains splattered.

This collective version of a favourite anthology story by Couperus (first published as 'De binocle' in De Haagsche Post of 28 August 1920) was produced in the 1996-1997 Session by an M.A. translation workshop at University College London consisting of: Willem Alling, Paul Charters, Kathryn Ronnau-Bradbeer and Paul Vincent. We should like to thank Professor Frédéric Bastet for his helpful advice.