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Couperus' "De binocle," its antecedents and its meaning

Published in 1920, Louis Couperus' "De binocle" (The binoculars) has become a standard choice for anthologies of Dutch short stories. However, considering the prominence that the story has attained, it does not seem to me that critics have given a convincing account of its sources or of its meaning.

The plot is this. A young man visiting Dresden decides to see Wagner's *Die Walküre*. However, his seat is at the front of the upper balcony, far from the stage, so he buys a pair of binoculars, although he feels he is being unwise and finds the optician uncanny. Soon after the performance begins he is seized with an insane desire to drop the binoculars on the bald head of a man in the orchestra stalls below him. At the first interval he regains control of himself somewhat, but he watches the rest of the performance from a safe position in the back of the balcony, and he leaves the glasses behind, feeling they are somehow accursed. Five years later, remembering almost nothing of the incident, he is again in Dresden, again *Die Walküre* is being performed, and again the only seat available is at the front of the upper balcony - indeed, a vaguely familiar-looking man returns that ticket just in time for our hero to buy it. To cap it all, the usher rents him his own glasses. This time, screaming and as if out of control, he hurls them down into the orchestra seats; he happens to hit a man on the head, who yells and dies, "terwijl de hersens spatten."

Of the critics who have discussed the stories that may have inspired elements of "De binocle," G. van Woudenberg[1] argues a similarity to a story by E.T.A. Hoffmann, "Der Sandmann." It is a far more complicated story, with a double and other diabolical goings-on, including a beautiful young singer who is in fact an automaton (yes, this is one of the three stories that Jacques Offenbach used in his operetta *Tales of Hoffmann*), but there are some parallels with Couperus's story. The main character buys a telescope, and at the end he jumps off a tower, led to this fate by a series of uncanny apparent coincidences. Woudenberg considers also that both protagonists are modelled on their authors, and points out that in both stories some events recur (that is part of the uncanniness). And in both cases the last words of the story evoke splattering brains. Although Couperus never mentions reading Hoffmann, Woudenberg finds it plausible that he did, perhaps when visiting Dresden in 1898 (Hoffmann lived there for some years and was the conductor of

the city's orchestra).

Jean Weisgerber, replying to Woudenberg[2], agrees that Couperus may have borrowed details from Hoffmann, but recalls that the story is told in quite a different manner. The plot is far simpler and more realistic: the whole disaster is caused by the main character's internal weaknesses, which may be medical; the apparent struggle with evil at the end may be an epileptic fit. Weisgerber is reminded rather of Prince Myshkin in Dostoyevsky's *The Idiot*. Myshkin's fiancée invites him to her mother's house and warns him, since he is given to wild gestures, to be careful to avoid a large Chinese vase. He becomes obsessed with the object and, inevitably, breaks it. Both he and the protagonist of Couperus's story stare at objects that fill them with alarm, both of them feel disaster coming on and are helpless to prevent it. And in both cases, Weisgerber maintains, this state heralds an epileptic fit.

These influences may well be present. None the less I venture to suggest that if we step out of the department of Germanic and Slavic studies for a moment, we can see other - indeed, I think more direct - ancestors for Couperus's story. I begin my survey with an American, the great exponent of the Gothic horror story, Edgar Allan Poe.

Our hero's desire to destroy, it seems to me, could be a definition of "the imp of the perverse," and that expression is the title of a Poe short story published in 1845. As is common with Poe, theoretical considerations take up more than half of it. The author takes issue with all the moralists who assure us we are purely rational and do only what God intends us to do. On the contrary, he argues, there is an impulse in us called perversity, which often is stronger than all others: "...the assurance of the wrong or error of any action is often the one unconquerable *force* which impels us, and alone impels us, to its prosecution."[3] Nor is this the instinct which makes us fight in our self-defence, for in fact it leads us to do ourselves harm. Poe gives examples: we deliberately tell a story in a long involved manner to a powerful man who wants a terse account, knowing we will pay for this insolence; we delay doing something we could do very well, till it is too late; we are tempted to jump off a cliff. Or in the case of the narrator, he inherits a fortune by committing an undetectable murder, but many years later he is driven to confess it on the street. It is "as if the very ghost of him whom I had murdered... beckoned me on to death," or - for Poe never uses one image when two will do - "some invisible fiend, I thought, struck me with his broad palm upon the back. The long-imprisoned secret burst forth from my soul."

Poe's ideas about the inherent evil of humanity found a deep echo in Charles Baudelaire, who translated many of his short stories. This one, which he called "Le démon de la perversité," is the lead story in the second volume of them, the *Nouvelles histoires extraordinaires* of 1857. Baudelaire also produced one text of his own in which this Poe theme is clearly present, "Le mauvais vitrier" (The bad glazier); it is one of his *Petits poèmes en prose*, published posthumously in 1869[4]. We have all seen glazier's trucks, with the window panes fixed in frames on the sides. A century ago the glazier walked the streets carrying the glass, his entire stock in trade, in a frame on his back. Three days without a job, or one accident, and like other such small tradesmen, he starved to death. Imagine then how nasty is the narrator's trick.

He calls a glazier up to his attic room, yells at him for having no coloured glass to "make life look beautiful," and sends him away. As the man emerges from the building, he drops a flower pot on him and smashes his whole livelihood.

The story opens with an extended character sketch of the kind of person who, normally "contemplative and quite unsuited to action," is suddenly moved to do something - often what one has long been putting off. "It is a kind of action that springs from boredom and daydreaming." Moralists and doctors, says Baudelaire, cannot explain such behaviour. Such sudden actions are "most absurd and often most dangerous." This kind of generalisation, and the giving of examples before the main story, are structural elements we have seen in Poe, and as in Poe, occupy half the story. We will notice one major difference, however. Poe's narrator, like Hoffmann's character and Myshkin, is driven to harm himself; Baudelaire's harms somebody else (Baudelaire's sadism has long been remarked on). Couperus's character is in the Baudelairean stream: he kills someone.

Couperus's story has been praised for its realism. True, the events and the protagonist's feelings are reported without comment, but that is a different matter: he has presentments of the uncanny, and that is presumably not realistic. He doesn't like the look of the optician, with his "onbehagelijke vogeltronie" (uncanny bird-face), he doesn't know why he is buying such big heavy glasses, more suitable for a racecourse, he feels he should leave the store - but he brushes it aside as "ongemotiveerd."[5]He blames the feeling on hunger - the opera started too early for him to have dinner - or on a fear of heights, the latter explanation being indeed all he remembers five years later of the incident.

A typical story of the uncanny, a century ago, would end with that explanation. The French-Canadian writer Louis Fréchette's stories of the lumberjack Jos Violon, for example,[6] often have strange goings-on, but a rational (if sometimes implausible) explanation is always forthcoming. For example, in "Tipite Vallerand" (1892), it seems for a moment that a lumberjack has been hauled off to Hell by the Devil, whereas in fact he has been suddenly hoisted over the campfire by a noose tied around his feet by someone who is tired of his horrible swearing.

Couperus, however, is deliberately ambiguous. The "jonge toerist" has to make an effort to fight off his forebodings. He is more or less aware of a number of strange coincidences. The same opera is being performed on a similar fall evening, a man who looks just like the storekeeper who sold him the fatal glasses now sells him the fatal seat (otherwise there are none left), the same glasses turn up, and he sees down below him in the same seats the same couple as five years before (or an identical one), the "duivegrijze dame" (dove-grey lady) and her companion with the bald head that tempted him then. (That is not the man he hits, however.)It is as if a trap is set; the first time it misses, but the second time it is set so carefully it forces him to the random killing. I repeat: it is as if. The ambiguity is skilfully maintained throughout the story's eight pages. When the disaster strikes, we are offered alternative interpretations: the protagonist "zich schreeuwend wrong of een aanval van vallende ziekte hem overviel, of hij worstelde met een macht sterker dan hij" (struggled and screamed as if he was either having an epileptic fit or wrestling with a force more

powerful than himself). The second explanation accords with the protagonist's feeling five years earlier that "iets hem krachtig imperatief dwong den kijker te slingeren" (something powerful was imperatively forcing him to throw the glasses).

I therefore think Weisgerber over-simplifies things when he asserts that the character has an epileptic fit. He thereby has Couperus explain away strange events with common sense, like other authors of the time. Such an account makes him less interesting than Fréchette, who at least gives his explanations with boisterous good humour so that we know it is just a tall tale. We need to look for other causes of these uncanny events, if causes there are, and in so doing we will see whether any symbolic meanings emerge from under the events.

In other works by Couperus, the uncanny is connected with the East Indies. In *De stille kracht* (1900) local poltergeist-type forces drive a Dutch official's family out of his house on Java and leave him a broken man; they target his half-Indonesian wife, who is indolent and unfaithful.[7] In *Van oude mensen, de dingen die voorbijgaan* (1906) a "thing," a ghost, the memory of a murder, haunts the child who hears it committed, for sixty years, till the murderers die; again, it was a half-Indonesian woman who, with her lover, killed her brutal husband.[8] The protagonist of "De binocle" is half-Indonesian and, while not oversexed or immoral, he is neurasthenic (as Weisgerber says, but there is more to it than that). In the crowded opening sentence, he is described as "een jonge toerist, Indo-Nederlander, journalist, een fijne jongen, eenigszins nerveus aangelegd, zeer zachtzinnig trots zijn tropisch bloed" (a young tourist, a Eurasian, a journalist, a delicate young man, of a somewhat nervous disposition, gentle despite his tropical blood). Even evil that lurks in Europe, it seems, is especially successful with "people of mixed blood." Or alternatively, if we accept the thesis that his action is due to nervous weakness or epilepsy, then his "mixed blood" is still responsible, albeit for medical reasons.[9] But there seems too much evidence for the objective existence of a force of evil for us to dismiss it in these terms.

We must also consider whether this force resides in Wagner. Many non-admirers found his music all too German, barbaric, sentimental, full of false idealism - and too loud, too indiscriminate in its use of the full power of a modern orchestra.[10] For his admirers, however, a Wagner opera was more like a religious service; our short story speaks with at most gentle irony of the audience's "vrome aandacht" (devout attention). The critic Eep Francken[11] feels that, although we know Couperus disliked Wagner's librettos, it is not convincing to argue, as does J. Fontijn, that something in this opera's plot, for example the love between Siegmund and Sieglinde who are brother and sister, may have caused a psychological disturbance in the protagonist. I agree with Francken, for on the contrary, Wagner's music soothes our hero: "De Feuerzauber overweldigde hem heerlijk en zijn zuiver genot bracht hem heel in evenwicht" (The magnificent Feuerzauber [magic fire] overwhelmed him and his pure enjoyment brought him into perfect balance). Francken tells us that Couperus did like Wagner's music. He recalls that "excitement caused by music was commonplace in Dutch literature" and cites Emants and van Groeningen as examples,[12] but I feel we have here a counter-example of this trend.

But if this superbly ambiguous tale of the uncanny is not also an anti-Wagner tract, I think it does have an additional layer of meaning. (Readers of this article may perfectly well accept what I have said thus far yet regard what follows as a postscript with which they disagree). Let us consider the plot again. A weak-nerved young man resists the grave temptation to kill someone (for at some level he surely knows the binoculars will do that); but five years later the crisis recurs and he gives way, and a man "noodlottig getroffene" - that is, a random victim - dies in horrible violence. There can be no better image for the First World War. The very alliances formed to prevent it made it inevitable; and it was violent and horrible and destructive - 9 million soldiers dead and 22 million wounded - beyond anyone's power to foresee. From the safe haven of neutrality the Dutch must have watched in disbelief and horror.

The recurrence of the crisis was in fact multiple (one recurrence is enough for fiction, of course). On March 31st 1905, Kaiser Wilhelm II stepped off his yacht in Tangier and claimed German interests in Morocco, which France and Spain were in the process of carving up. A bold move designed to break up the alliances France was forming to contain Germany, it woke France up to the dangers of that policy; people began to feel they were not at peace, just in a prewar period. Other crises followed: Balkan wars in 1906-8 (some things never change), an incident involving deserters in Casablanca in 1908, another intervention in Morocco by Germany, who sent a gunboat to Agadir in 1911, more Balkan wars in 1912-13; and finally the decisive event in Sarajevo in 1914. From all these warnings everyone seemed helpless to learn.

"De binocle" was published in 1920, but Couperus's widow believed he wrote it in 1898, "tijdens onze winter in Dresden".[13] Depending on which date is correct, Couperus may have used immediate impressions of Dresden (and no doubt going to hear Wagner), or memories. The date of composition, of course, affects the precise interpretation. If written in 1920, the story is a metaphorical reflection on the repeated crises that led to the unforeseen violent destruction and loss of life in the First World War. If it was written in 1898, before all the political crises, it is a prophecy of war, to be ranked with Paul Valéry's *Une conquête méthodique* of 1897 and other such non-fiction forecasts of the results of German expansionist policy, and more pertinently, with H. G. Wells's novel *The Island of Dr. Moreau* (published in 1896). This is the story where a mad scientist crosses humans and animals to produce highly intelligent beasts of prey. After the narrator has returned to Britain, he begins to feel that he has not left the dreadful island behind, for evolution is reversing itself and all mankind will soon become as savage and dangerous as those animals:

> ...for several years now, a restless fear has dwelt in my mind, that [human beings] would presently begin to revert... I see faces keen and bright, others dull or dangerous, others unsteady, insincere; none that have the calm authority of a reasonable soul. I feel as though the animal was surging up through them; [I fear] that presently the degradation of the Islanders will be played over again on a larger scale.[14]

As I read "De binocle," that murderous force is external to humanity, not in us, and threatens us unceasingly. Its agent inside us is the complacent belief that the signs of its stirring don't mean anything, that nothing will happen, that the world is civilized.

I agree with Francken that the story's outcome is undecidable, that at bottom the reader "knows nothing at all."[15] It is also logical to conclude from this fact, as he does, that the story tells us "Man does not know himself" and that this is "the tragedy of life." But that is a general philosophical conclusion. I believe Couperus also means us to apply it to the particular case of the horrible events of World War I, which he had just seen or - what would be more striking - foresaw.

NOTES

[1] G. van Woudenberg: "Over enkele détails van Couperus' verhaal 'De binocle' in verband met 'Der Sandmann' van E.T.A. Hoffmann," *Levende talen* 166 (Oct. 1952), p.316-322. I thank Alexander Zweers, who kindly lent me the articles by van Woudenberg and Weisgerber, and Gus Dierick for a copy of the short story.

[2] Jean Weisgerber: "Couperus en Dostojewski, naar aanleiding van Couperus' novelle 'De binocle,' *Tijdschrift voor levende talen* 1953, p.203-9.

[3] *Complete stories and poems of Edgar Allan Poe*, Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966, p.271-275. Poe's italics.

[4] Baudelaire: *Petits poèmes en prose* and *La Fanfarlo*, 1948 ed. Geneva: Pierre Cailler (Les Trésors de la littérature française), preface p.11-12, story p.28-31. Translations mine. The cry of the glazier echoing up to the sixth floor attics of the big smoky city, he writes in the preface, sets the kind of mood he has tried to capture in this picture of modern life.

[5] Note that he uses the same term in the theatre. Poe uses it too: he describes the imp of the perverse as something we have no reason to give way to, "a motive not *motiviert*." And in the theatre, the idea of throwing the binoculars down begins as a movement of curiosity: "what if?" - which is the same attitude that Poe's narrator feels towards the temptation to publicly confess his crime. - Weapons which cause anyone who takes hold of them to commit murder are not unknown in tales of the uncanny.

[6] "Jos Violon" (1892) in Louis Fréchette: *Contes*, ed. Aurélien Boivin and Maurice Lemire, Montreal: Fides, 1976, Vol. II p.155-166.

[7] Cf. Tineke Hellwig: *Adjustment and discontent, representations of women in the Dutch East Indies*, Windsor: Netherlandic Press, 1994, p.50-53.

[8] Cf. Alexander Zweers: "Repetition as a mode of narration in Louis Couperus's *Van oude mensen, de dingen die voorbijgaan*," *Canadian Journal of Netherlandic Studies* XVI i (Spring 1995), p.35-39. Hellwig recalls that *De stille kracht* is Couperus's "only Indies novel," but adds that "In Couperus's other work the Indies often play a role in the memories of the characters or as a place where earlier events took place." (p.43) This is the case here.

[9] This is frankly racist nonsense, but that is perhaps clearer to us now than it was then, and Couperus (himself half-Indonesian) seems to

have internalised it, or else was prepared to play up to it in his readers.

[10] Cf. Claude Digeon: *La crise allemande de la pensée française*, Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1959, p.453-4.

[11] Eep Francken: "'As the brains splattered:' J. Fontijn's psychological interpretation of 'The Binoculars' by Louis Couperus," *Dutch Crossing* 47 (Summer 1992) p.87-94.

[12] *Ibid.* p.91 and n.8.

[13] *Ibid.* n.9 and 10.

[14]H.G. Wells: *The Island of Dr. Moreau* (1896), ed. Leon Stover, Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1996 (The Annotated H.G. Wells, 2), 206-7.

[15] Francken p.92.