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**Repetition as a mode of narration in Louis Couperus'
*Van oude mensen, de dingen die voorbijgaan***

In the critical literature it has been repeatedly pointed out that Louis Couperus (1863-1923) would have belonged to world literature if he had made use of a more accessible language than Dutch. When Couperus was honoured in England in 1921, one of the speakers ranked him among the five or six greatest writers of the period. The literary historian G. Knuvelde adds: "Perhaps one can say: the only one of a European level [among his Dutch contemporaries], the only one whose oeuvre can compete with that of some great authors of international fame."¹ (Knuvelde 1953: 106)

In his preface to the 1919 English translation of *Van oude mensen, de dingen die voorbijgaan* (1906 and rendered as *Old People and the Things that Pass*), Stephen McKenna calls the novel: "...his greatest...one of the greatest novels in any century or language... In *Old People* there is a combination of subject and treatment which only genius compounds. The result is a work of superlative genius. His observation and presentment of senility, old age, middle age and youth, conducted without pity or satire, make the book like a case of exquisite miniatures."(Couperus 1919: V,VIII)

The device of repetition is prominent in Couperus' works, so it is not surprising that it has been discussed in the secondary literature both in general terms and with special reference to *Old People*. P.H. Ritter, Jr., wrote, for instance:

...the basic characteristic of his treatment of style is repetition. Couperus' repetitions are acceptable because they are not being applied as the result of lack of technical means, but, on the contrary, because they are used in order to attain literary goals. This writer knows that certain kinds of repetition can have a magical effect on the human soul. Isn't it true that liturgical repetitions arouse religious moods? One speaks of "the power of repetition."

Repetition is different from evolution. Repetition puts us in front of something from which we cannot escape, repetition takes us to an irrational world. (Ritter 1952: 68,69)

W. Blok in his 1960 dissertation *Verhaal en lezer* (Story and Reader), which is entirely devoted to an analysis of the structural aspects of *Old People*, comments as follows on the device:

In *Old People* repetition occurs in three different forms. In the first place as a return of passages [*zinsneden*], situations and acts in precisely or almost precisely the wordings in which they occurred already earlier.(Blok 1969: 161)

(Actually, the repetition of single words - adjectives, adverbs, nouns - also plays an important part.)

In addition, Blok distinguishes repetition as *spiegeling* (reflection), when an event or act reminds the reader of something told previously although not in a similar wording; and thirdly, as *voorbereiding* (preparation), in essence the reverse of *spiegeling* in the sense that an event or fact told anew is not unknown to the reader and that he will recognize it because he has been prepared for it. These other two forms of repetition are, however, of lesser importance for this investigation.

Despite the slow unfolding in the narrative of an intensely tragic human drama, the major events forming the core of the tale can be easily summed up: sixty years prior to the events narrated in the novel, oma Otilie, at that time living on Java, induced her lover Takma to kill her husband Dercksz rather than being killed by the latter. Oma's daughter Otilie Steyn mistakenly thinks that she is Dercksz's daughter, although that is impossible, because the latter was murdered by his wife and Takma before she was born. The third major

character is oma Otilie's son Harold who, at age thirteen, witnessed the murder as an agonizing chain of unfamiliar sounds. Throughout his life a vague image of his slain father, called "The Thing" by the narrator, appears and reappears to Harold's tortured mind. In the description of its appearance and reappearance, the device of repetition functions as a means to demonstrate that "The Thing" will not pass until the murderers have died. It is interesting to establish that there exists a discrepancy between the latter part of the novel's title, "The things that pass," and the crux of the tale that can be summarized as the repetitious mention that the thing does *not* pass until the very end, after oma Otilie's and Takma's death. This specific aspect of the use of repetition, i.e. the fact that "The Thing" only passes after the repetitious description of its unwillingness to do so, has so far not been discussed in the secondary literature.

The repetition also forms Harold's personal experience of the passing of time: "The Thing"'s pernicious habit of returning time and gain makes his life utterly miserable. It appears for the first time when the poor man and the members of his family are introduced:

On reaching his study, Harold Dercksz turned up the gas and dropped into his chair and stared. Life sometimes veiled things, veiled them silently, those terrible life-long things, and they did not threaten so greatly, and until death came and wiped them away, they passed always, however slowly they might pass. But they passed away very slowly, the things. (Couperus 1919: 69)

It reappears after his daughter Ina finds out that in the distant past in the Indies something mysterious and terrible must have taken place and she burns with curiosity to learn what it was:

Harold Dercksz was sitting upstairs at his big writing-table... He stared before him. Sixty years ago he had seen the Thing. It was slowly passing, but in passing it came back again to him so closely, so very closely... The Thing was a ghost and came nearer and nearer in passing, before it would vanish entirely in the past... Oh,

if it would only pass!... For sixty long years it had been passing... And the old man and the old woman [Takma and oma Otilie], both in their respective houses or sitting together at windows, were waiting until it should have passed... But it would not pass, so long as they were still alive... Harold Dercksz felt pity for the old man, for the old woman... Oh, if it would but pass!...(Couperus 1919: 183,184)

It appears for the third time when oma Otilie is dying, a scene told from Harold's perspective:

The Thing... The Thing was passing... Listen, upstairs his mother was sighing away her last few breaths; and at each breath the Thing passed, passed farther, trailing its misty veil... but the Thing... the Thing was passing!...

Oh, for years, for sixty long years he had seen the Thing dragging past, so slowly, so lingeringly, as if it would never pass... Harold Dercksz gazed before him... The Thing: he saw the terrible Thing! It was turning at the last bend of its long, long, endless path...

And it plunged headlong, into an abyss. (Couperus 1919: 281)

Thus, the final passing of the Thing at the moment of oma Otilie's death marks the end of the murder story. In the three passages, quoted above, "thing" and "things" are mentioned thirteen times and "pass" and its derivatives eighteen times. It is obvious that in these cases the narrator uses repetition as a device to mark the hero's personal experience of the passing of time, as was already mentioned above. In his analysis of the novel, N.A. Donkersloot suggests a change of title because oma Otilie and Takma (at age ninety-seven and ninety-three respectively) are not only old but stricken with age, and for that reason the title should have been: "Van stokoude mensen, de dingen die voorbijgegaan zijn" [Of very old people, the things that have passed]. (Donkersloot 1952: 29) The change cannot be considered an improvement, however, because not only oma Otilie and Takma are major characters, but so are their children Otilie Steyn and

Harold, who belong to the next generation. But more importantly, replacing the present tense by a past tense in the second half of the title would result in a misrepresentation of the novel's contents. In essence, the tale is about the individually experienced painful process of the passing of time, and when that process is over the tale is told. A different title change could be suggested, though, namely: "de dingen, die niet voorbijgaan" [the things that don't pass]. The title, as chosen by Couperus, can be interpreted as a striving on the part of the naturalistic narrator to hint at the fact that, however torturous the passing of the individually experienced time may have been, everything passes because everything is closed off by death. Or the above-mentioned discrepancy between the title and the story's contents can be explained yet another way, as the narrator's intention to show that, although the most hideous things eventually will pass, they only do so after tormenting people over an extended period of time.

Sung-Hyun Jang, in her article, "The Conflict between Timelessness and Temporality in Louis Couperus' Novel *Van oude mensen, de dingen die voorbijgaan*," also naturally touches on the device of the repetition. Whereas Jang's discussion of the phenomenon of repetition is fully acceptable, it is difficult to agree with her understanding of the conflict between timelessness and temporality. She derives the concept of timelessness from the usage of the term *erlebte Zeit* [experienced time] by existential philosophers such as Heidegger and Jaspers. Although the conflict, or perhaps rather the opposition between objective clock time and *erlebte Zeit* may be even called a major leitmotif in the novel, it is not a conflict between clock time and timelessness. It is true that the novel's characters experience the past in a very personal way, but that does not mean that the concept of time is in any way suspended and replaced by timelessness.

The time experience is considerably slowed down and by means of repetition experienced over and over again and, precisely for that reason, more intensively. Jang writes: "Through endless repetition and continued duration of the same idea time becomes meaningless in man's consciousness." (Sung-Hyan Jang 1993: 97) We would argue that just the reverse is true: the time experience becomes more meaningful because it is

repeated.

Another function of the device, not discussed in the critical literature, is to highlight the complex relationship of the Dercksz family at large to the surrounding high society of The Hague. In this respect it is worth while quoting what L. Ross writes in "*Van oude mensen als indische roman*" [*Of Old People as a Novel of the Indies*]: "The socialist D.M.G. Koch wrote about the Indo [someone of mixed blood, like oma Otilie]: 'Many even went so far as to declare that in his character all bad qualities of the European and those of the native are piled up.'" (Ross 1985:20) Ross adds that such dicta "are Dutch variations on a set phrase from the English colonial world: 'The Lord made the Whites, the Lord made the Blacks, but the Devil made the halfcaste.'" (Ross 1985: 20) For this reason, it must have been difficult at times for the Dercksz family to have access to the snobbish coterie of The Hague's high society. Harold's daughter Ina, however, has managed to marry into the noble family of Jonkheer d'Herbourg. Moreover, over a period of sixty years the family has been subjected to intense suffering because of a crime that had been committed in a distant past, but which they have felt compelled to deal with in accordance with the etiquette of the class they so desperately want to belong to. Thus, the crime has had to remain a secret, because its disclosure would be the ruin of the family's good reputation. And therefore it was of particular importance for them to do the right thing. It can be said that for aunt Stefanie de Laders, oma Otilie's oldest daughter, it has grown into an obsession. Otilie Steyn's son Lot is going to marry Elly and before their marriage they pay a visit to aunt Stefanie. The latter inquires whether it will be a church wedding:

"I don't think so, Aunt," said Lot.

"I thought as much!"

"Then you made a good guess."

"But it is not the thing. Don't you want to get married in church either, Elly?"

"No, Aunt, I agree with Lot..."

"And there's no need to do it for my sake," said Aunt, self-righteously; and she thought to herself, "They shan't come in for a cent, if they don't get married in church and do the proper thing. I had intended to leave them something: now I

shall leave everything to Harold's grandchildren [Ina d'Herbourg's children]. They at least behave properly...."

But, when Elly made as though to rise, Aunt, who was flattered at having visitors, said:

"Well, stay a bit longer, come Elly! I don't see Lot so often; and he's aunt's own nephew after all... It's not the thing, my boy... You know, I just speak out. I've done so from a child. I'm the eldest: with a family like ours, which has not always behaved properly..." (Couperus 1919: 50,51)

Thus, aunt Stephanie hammers on proper behavior, especially for a family whose past conduct was not beyond reproach.

For Otilie Steyn with her sensual nature, inherited from her mother (and her father Takma) it has not been easy to adjust to the etiquette of the high society surrounding her. She has divorced two husbands and is utterly unhappy with the third. In chapter I she is introduced as follows:

Mrs. Steyn de Weert... sat with her book in front of her, like a child. She was a woman of sixty, but her blue eyes were like a child's, full of a soft beauty, gentle and innocent; and her voice, a little high-toned, always sounded like a child's, had just sounded like a naughty child. (Couperus 1919: 2)

At forty she had been so irresistible that Steyn de Weert, himself a good-looking first lieutenant of thirty, had unconditionally wanted her:

She was small, but perfect in shape and particularly charming [*lief*] in feature, charming in the still very young lines of throat and breast, creamy white, with a few pale-gold freckles; charming with blue eyes of innocence and very fair, soft, wavy hair; charmingly half-woman and half-child, moulded for love, seeming to exist only that she might rouse glowing desires. (Couperus 1919: 12)

Lot describes his mother to his sister Otilie in the

following terms:

Mamma has never had anything in her but love. She is an elementary woman: she needs love and caresses, so much so that she has not been able to observe the conventions. She respects them only to a certain point. When she fell in love, everything else went by the board. (Couperus 1919: 144)

Thus Otilie observed the conventions only to a certain degree, or did not observe them at all. She hates her third husband, Steyn de Weert with such passion that she almost chokes on her words when discussing with him matters like allowing Lot and Elly to move in with them after their marriage, or sending money to England to her beloved son Hugh, money that she actually badly needs for her own household. She is basically unwilling to come to an agreement with Steyn, but at the same time it is a *conditio sine qua non* for her to cultivate an image of herself that will fit into the society of which she has to be a part. And since her brothers have always said that she is doll-like, it is only natural that she has appropriated the appearance of a charming child. The narrator's repetitive references to her being like a child and being charming make it clear that these qualities, under continuous attack by a critical and at times hostile environment, have to be reactivated over and over again. And that is what the narrator does by making use of the device of repetition.

In conclusion then, this article discusses two functions of the device of repetition in *Old People*, to which so far no attention has been paid in the secondary literature. First, repetition highlights the personal experience of the passing of time, especially as it is connected with a terrible crime in the distant past which afflicts the "criminals" until the end of their lives; indeed, only their death liberates their children from it (but how the next generation lives after the things have passed and will not return, is not part of the novel). In addition, the device is used as a means to assure a social position that is continuously on the verge of being lost by the members of the isolated Dercksz family, in a critical and sometimes hostile environment.

NOTES

¹ All translations from Dutch, apart from quotations

from *Old People and the Things that Pass*, are mine.

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