The “Dutch Conrad” Louis Couperus’s De stille kracht (The Hidden Force, 1900) working between Joseph Conrad and Oscar Wilde

Boehmer, E.; Veer, C.B. van 't

The "Dutch Conrad" Louis Couperus's *De stille kracht* (*The Hidden Force*, 1900): working between Joseph Conrad and Oscar Wilde

Elleke Boehmer, *University of Oxford*
and
Coen van 't Veer, *University of Leiden*

Like Joseph Conrad, the late-nineteenth-century Dutch writer Louis Couperus (1863-1923) can legitimately be described as both colonial and metropolitan. His major work addresses interests that are distinctive for both terrains. He spent a formative part of his childhood and young adulthood in the Dutch East Indies, the sprawling Netherlands colonial possession that is now Indonesia, and wrote about his colonial experience in stories and memoirs. Of these, the novel *De stille kracht* (*The Hidden Force*) is by many accounts the most evocative and at the same time ambivalent. Yet, though he has therefore been seen as the Dutch counterpart to Conrad, he was arguably as much metropolitan in milieu and preoccupation.[1] He based himself in the genteel Dutch capital of The Hague as well as on the French Riviera and in Italy for much of his writing life, and it was here that he set a number of the social drama novels with which his name in the Netherlands is most often associated, such as *Eline Vere* (1889) and *De boeken der kleine zielen* (1901-3, *The Books of the Small Souls*). These works reflect the rarefied aesthetic and the sense of ennui and enervation that beset many cultural figures at this time, and found particular expression in the decorated, coded style now closely associated with Oscar Wilde and other fin-de-siècle writers in Britain.[2] Following the theorist Eve Sedgwick, this essay describes this coded style, including its oblique allusions to deviant desire, as "queer".[3] Certainly, Couperus's metropolitan writing with its distinct homoerotic fascinations and hectic, iterative mode of expression, represents the clearest example at least in

[1] See Bel 2006 and Van Gemeren 2016: 315-316.
[2] See Showalter 1991 and Boehmer 2015: 132-180.
[3] Sedgwick 1990: 29-32 (and throughout).

Dutch fiction of late nineteenth-century decadence. In this sense his work comes as close to Wilde as it does to Conrad.[4]

For readers of Conrad, the mix of Wildean and Conradian elements in Couperus is especially interesting for the way in which the Dutch writer adopts and adapts the style he shares with Wilde to deliver a critique of social, racial and sexual relations in the colony that can be understood as at least in part anti-colonial and hence inclines his trajectory closer to Conrad's. In a sense, therefore, Couperus's most colonial and yet subtly anticolonial work most nearly approaches Conrad at those points where it appears stylistically distant from him. As we will explore, *De stille kracht* articulates an anxiety about western degeneration in the colony and the overall hopelessness and untenability of the colonial project that is also reflected in Conrad's work. Like "An Outpost of Progress" (1897) or *Heart of Darkness* (1899), *De stille kracht* (1900) shifts away from the progressive evolutionary plot that distinguished the colonial adventure tale, to explore white dissolution on the margins of empire.[5] This shift was epitomised for both writers in a new kind of European protagonist, a hero figure exhibiting a fatal flaw or weakness associated with "going native" and taking on the (often stereotyped) qualities of the colonised, for example, savagery, lawlessness and barbarism. Similar flawed protagonists appear in the South Sea tales of Louis Becke and Robert Louis Stevenson, of whom Stevenson's self-deluded Wiltshire in "The Beach of Falesá" (1892) is perhaps the most memorable.[6]

The epitome of this degenerate character type is, of course, Conrad's Kurtz, the cynosure of civilized Europe, motivated by an idealistic belief in the "power of good" in imperialism, who comes to practice barbaric rites, while Couperus's Van Oudijck in *De stille kracht*, the dull and limited colonial administrator who eventually goes native, is clearly another (Boehmer, 2005: 33). Flawed colonial heroes such as these embodied uncertainties about maintaining imperial rule that went hand-in-hand with

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[4] Nisha Manocha observes that *Heart of Darkness* fashions an opaque linguistic universe in part through using intertextual citation – a universe that invites some comparison with Couperus. Manocha 2014: 42. For Janes (2020), Oscar Wilde was both the starting point for queer figuration at the turn of the century and the pivot around which later Georgian figures and twentieth-century camp turned.

[5] In this essay we use the original title *De stille kracht* and the translated title *The Hidden Force* interchangeably: in general, we use the Dutch where the published book is designated, the title in English where we refer to the translation.

[6] First published in the *Illustrated London News* and first collected in *Island Nights' Entertainments* (1893).

the Social Darwinist pessimism of the period. The concern was that unless Europeans kept progressing and their empires expanding, their colonial authority was doomed (Veer, 2020: 270). Moreover, as in Kipling's work, a blurring of social and sexual distinctions between the colonisers and the colonised would threaten to undermine the necessary asymmetry of colonial power relations.[7]

In literature, fears about degeneration found an outlet in colonial horror tales or what Patrick Brantlinger calls imperial gothic, as well as in various forms of colonial misadventure. Typically, in these tales, the European hero comes up against a challenge to his moral integrity, or the threat of reversion to a lower state, and anarchy threatens the colony or community.[8] In the ironically titled "An Outpost of Progress," the already weak and degenerate Kayerts and Carlier come to plumb "the depths of horror and despair" (*Tales of Unrest*: 97), first by condoning slavery to acquire ivory, and then by turning on each other in murderous rage. Even the eponymous Lord Jim, for all that he fosters a romantic self-image as an adventure hero, by the novel's conclusion is forced to make choices that bring him to a comparable end.

Couperus and The Hidden Force

Named after three dead sisters, Louis Marie Anne Couperus was born in The Hague on 10 June 1863, and mistakenly registered as female until his eighteenth year. His family had formed part of the colonial elite from the earliest days of Dutch rule in Southeast Asia, and most of his siblings had been born in Batavia. When Couperus was nine, his father's extended period of European furlough ended and the family moved back to Batavia. The following five years spent in the Indies captured the young Couperus's imagination, stimulating fantasies and fears that would thread through his life and work. In 1891, Couperus married his cousin Elisabeth Baud (1867-1960), who had herself grown up in the Dutch East Indies. By this time, he had already developed a reputation as an androgynous literary personality famous for his louche and decadent literary manner, and had produced a range of novels all concerned with upper-class colonial families retired to or on furlough in The Hague, like the eponymous *Eline Vere* (Van Gemeren, 2016: 59). He had also established contact with Oscar Wilde in London. Wilde had enthusiastically

[7] See Stoler 2010: 43-111, Rosen Jacobson 2018: 37-40 and 44-46.
[8] Boehmer 2005: 33. On imperial gothic, see Brantlinger 1990: 227-253.

responded to Couperus's gift to him of *Footsteps of fate* (*Noodlot*, 1891), and reciprocated with a copy of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890).[9] Elisabeth Baud's translation of Wilde's novel into Dutch appeared in 1893.[10]

In 1899 Couperus and his wife embarked on a voyage to the Indies, specifically East Java – an experience of reconnecting with his Indies roots that incubated *De stille kracht*. While staying with family, Couperus encountered a terrifying ghostly presence that would form the inspiration for the novel – his only work of fiction entirely set (and partly written) in the Indies. For Couperus, this was the point at which the full irrationality of the East, as he saw it, and its implacability vis-à-vis colonial rule, was revealed to him.[11] As he wrote: "*De stille kracht* particularly represents the mysterious feud coming from the Javanese soil and sphere and soul against the Dutch conqueror."[12] Although this sense of a terrifying Eastern mystique is generically orientalist, for Couperus it also bears very particular points of cultural reference. In the novel, it is specifically associated with the Indies' heady tropical environment and also with Islam, encapsulated for the writer in the figure of the white-clad *hadji* returning from pilgrimage to Mecca. A phantasm-like *hadji* appears at each moment in the narrative when disaster or radical change threatens to strike the European characters. In Conrad's work, by contrast with Couperus, Islam is generally treated with respect, as forming part of the social fabric of the east, though it perhaps assumes a more threatening aspect in *Lord Jim*.[13] Thus, while the *Patna* Jim abandons is engaged in the routine business of transporting Muslim pilgrims to Mecca, undertaking the *hajj*, one of the factions in Patusan, led by Sheriff Ali, has been incited to rise up "on purely religious grounds" (*Lord Jim*: 195).

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[9] In a 22 June 1891 letter, John Addington Symonds wrote to Edmund Gosse, Symonds observed that Couperus's *Footsteps of Fate* featured a number of "Urnings" (or homosexual characters). This reminded him, he further wrote, of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Letter in Brotherton Library, Department of Special Collections, University of Leeds.

[10] See Bastet 1989: 131, 142, 148, 166-167, 223-7, and Van Gemeren 2016: 172-183, 311-12. In 2003 two letters from Louis Couperus and Elisabeth Baud to Oscar Wilde were published. See Couperus 2003.

[11] See Bastet 1989: 223-227; Van Gemeren 2016: 311-312.

[12] "*De Stille Kracht* geeft vooral weêr de geheimzinnige vijandschap van Javaanschen grond en sfeer en ziel, tegen den Nederlandschen veroveraar" (Bastet 1989: 226). Bastet is quoting from an unpublished 3 April 1919 letter from Couperus.

[13] Lester 1981: 163-79.

De stille kracht recounts the professional and personal downfall of the hardworking but inflexible Otto Van Oudijck, the governor or "Resident" of the district of Labuwangi. The novel opens as animosity breaks out between Van Oudijck and the Muslim "Regent" or indigenous ruler Soenario after the Resident fires the latter's brother due to alleged misbehaviour. As a colonial "older brother" within the Dutch colonial system, Van Oudijck is officially tasked with building and safeguarding amicable relations between the ruling Dutch and the indigenous elite. Tensions also manifest on the domestic front, though the insensitive Van Oudijck is oblivious to them. His beautiful second wife Léonie, a creole European woman born and raised in the colony, is involved in adulterous (and loosely incestuous) relations with her stepson Theo, the eldest of her husband's four Eurasian children.[14] She soon also seduces the fine-featured and hedonistic Eurasian Addy de Luce, her stepdaughter Doddy's fiancé. Meanwhile, Eva Eldersma, the wife of a Dutch civil servant, who is represented as cultured and properly Dutch (and Dutch-born), vicariously carries out the social responsibilities that, strictly speaking, should fall to Léonie. The situation is entangled both racially and sexually, in ways that might remind readers of Conrad's first two novels set in the Dutch East Indies, *Almayer's Folly* (1895) and *Outcast of the Islands* (1896), though in *The Hidden Force* the entanglements appear more complicated, and manifest in a more openly sensual and luxuriant way.

The build-up of these domestic intrigues is further marked by new spiritual manifestations, beginning with the appearance of the white *hadji* in the surroundings of the Van Oudijck home. When Léonie and Theo meet in secret, "pontianaks" or female demons howl in the waringin trees, glasses and mirrors break spontaneously, and stones are mysteriously thrown. A climax is reached following Van Oudijck's move against the Regent's brother, when invisible mouths spit blood-red *sirih* or betel juice at Léonie during her bath. Following an investigation, Van Oudijck initiates negotiations with Soenario and his mother. Soenario's brother is reinstated, the mysterious events come to an end, and Van Oudijck and his household leave Labuwangi. The novel closes with Eva Eldersma's final visit to Van Oudijck before her return to her native Netherlands. Now divorced from Leónie, Van Oudijck is living together with a Eurasian woman and her family in a kampong or indigenous village: from the point

[14] Si-Oudijck, a man who claims to be Van Oudijck's illegitimate son, lives in a kampong nearby.

of view of the colonial elite, it is a complete downfall.[15] In conversation with Eva, Van Oudijck reflects that the "hidden force" coerced him into leaving Labuwangi:

> *that* – and that alone – did it. *That* made it impossible for me to stay there. *That* caused me to be struck stupid, to become a sort of idiot in the midst of my normal life, in the midst of my practical good sense and logic, which suddenly appeared to me in the light of an ill-constructed theory of life, of the most abstract speculation, because, right through it, things were happening that belonged to another world, things that escaped me and everybody else. That, that alone, did it! I was no longer myself. I no longer knew what I was thinking, what I was doing, what I had done. Everything in me was tottering.[16]

Eldersma then confides that she, too, has experienced this force or spirit, and agrees with Van Oudijck that every European in the Indies is affected by it, depending on their character and predisposition. Then, at the very moment of their farewell, a train full of *hadjis* enters the station, once again reminding them of the east's "hidden force":

> They both felt it, the unutterable thing, the thing that lurks in the ground, that hisses under the volcanoes, that slowly draws near with the far-travelled winds, that rushes onwards with the rain, that rattles by in the heavy, rolling thunder, that is wafted from the far horizon of the boundless sea; the thing that flashes from the black, mysterious gaze of the secretive native, that creeps in his heart and cringes in his humble salutation; the thing that gnaws like a poison and a hostile force at the body, soul and life of the European, that silently attacks the conqueror and saps his energies, causing him to pine and perish, sapping his energies very slowly, so that he wastes away for years; and in the end dies of it, perhaps by a sudden, tragic death: they both felt it, both felt the unutterable thing.[17]

A moment later, a tall *hadji* spectre rises up from the crowd and seems to throw a derisory grin in Van Oudijck's direction, though the two Europeans fail to see it.

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[15] Olf Praamstra has suggested that the woman is Eurasian rather than Javanese or Sundanese (Praamstra 2014: 29).
[16] Couperus 2010: 311-12.
[17] Couperus 2010: 318-19.

Colonial outcasts in Conrad and Couperus

During his four trading voyages in the *Vidar* in 1887, Conrad came into close contact with the Dutch East Indies – an experience that inspired him, as it did Couperus, to capture these divided yet entangled worlds in fiction.[18] Meeting the part-indigenised and discontented Willem Carel Olmeijer (1828-1900) in the outpost of Berau (Borneo) was a defining moment for Conrad, the Dutch trader subsequently becoming the model for the eponymous protagonist of his first novel, *Almayer's Folly*.[19] In this section, our reading of the links between Couperus's *The Hidden Force* and Conrad's contemporaneous fictional works rests on the key recognition that both writers were responding to colonial lives at a period when justifications for empire were in rapid transition, not least in the Dutch East Indies, but also in the wider imperial world.

For the colonial Dutch, while the alleged superiority of western civilisation remained the ideological basis of colonialism, ideas about the justification and implementation of colonial rule changed dramatically at the century's end. After 1895, the focus on the civilising mission became far stronger, as it also did in the British Empire in India as a reaction to the rising forces of nationalism, especially in Bengal.[20] Within both colonial realms, stricter social hierarchies were enforced, European values promoted, and "Eastern" and "Western" cultural worlds more rigidly separated. The acculturation which in the Dutch colony had given rise to such "Indies practices" as concubinage and "racial mixing", as featured in Ann Laura Stoler's work, for instance, was strictly renounced from that moment onwards.[21] Colonial fiction reflected this censure. The fear of white degeneration through social and sexual contact became ever more prominent, as it did in the British Empire, even as Decadence grew as an aesthetic movement in London. Cultural and moral backsliders, it was thought, would compromise the claims of superiority and progress that were believed to underpin white western civilisation, and that legitimated Empire itself. In the colonial novel, characters incapable of keeping up

[18] See Hampson 2000, Francis 2015.
[19] Sherry 1966: 1.
[20] Boehmer 2002:34-78.
[21] Stoler 2010: 43-111; Rosen Jacobson 2018: 37-40 and 44-46.

colonial standards and appearances—what Kipling termed "the Law"—were condemned as outcasts.[22]

While there is considerable debate amongst Dutch critics about the categorization of *De stille kracht* as either colonialist or anti-colonial, there is no such division of opinion about Otto Van Oudijck.[23] He is widely understood to bear all the characteristic hallmarks of white degeneracy—characteristics that, we suggest, he shares with Conrad's prominent Dutch Indies protagonists in the Malay novels. So, for example, in *Almayer's Folly*, the trader Kaspar Almayer hopes to make his fortune in the trading post of Sambir after Captain Lingard persuades him into marriage with his adoptive daughter, the (unnamed) survivor of a boatload of Sulu pirates. However, despite her convent education in Singapore, his wife reverts to her "native" ways as soon as she is in Sambir, sabotaging Almayer's ambitions for their Eurasian daughter Nina. As in Couperus, miscegenation combined with weakness of moral character undermines the colonial European's desire for professional and social elevation.[24] Nina marries a Balinese prince, thereby shattering her father's dreams of social success in Europe. Ironically, Almayer himself ends up completely nativised and dies in poverty.

In his second novel, *An Outcast of the Islands*, Lingard helps the clerk Peter Willems to flee from Makassar after a charge of fraud – a crime that Willems instantly finds ways of justifying to himself, in the stereotypical manner of the weak colonial unable to keep up standards. Exiled to Sambir like Almayer, Willems's "second chance" is sabotaged from all quarters, by Almayer and local politics, on the one hand, and by his passionate affair with Aïssa, daughter of the blind *hadji* Omar el Badavi, on the other. True to form, Willems betrays his fellow Europeans Almayer and Lingard, retreats even deeper into the jungle and away from western civilisation, and is finally killed by Aïssa.

In *Lord Jim* (1900), Jim does not appear to fit the model of the degenerate European as obviously as do Almayer and Willems, or indeed Kayerts and Carlier, yet his character and story nonetheless bear telling similarities to theirs. Like Almayer and Willems, he is a median figure between European and eastern worlds. He buckles under the pressure at once of romantic egotism and, it would seem, an unsustainable proximity

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[22] Boehmer 2005: 33-34, 66-71.

[23] Içöz 2005: 245-74.

[24] His loss of the trading monopoly in Sambir, which is the subject of Conrad's second novel, plays an important part in this process.

to native life – though it is the arrival of the disreputable 'Gentleman' Brown and his scheming with Cornelius that triggers the final crisis. Like Almayer, he is unable to fulfil his own dream – in his case of being "as unflinching as a hero in a book" (*Lord Jim*: 11) and hence of redeeming his earlier action of abandoning the *Patna* (and its eight hundred pilgrims). Helped by Marlow and Stein to start a new life in Patusan, he gains the respect of the indigenous people, whom he heroically protects against the corrupt local raja. However, Jim's fragile sense of himself is exposed when confronted by a fellow European in the shape of the marauding "Gentleman" Brown, no matter how corrupt a counterpart he may be. Brown betrays Jim's trust—a trust that Jim felt unable to refuse him—and Jim is obliged to face the consequences of a second failure by choosing honour and death (at the hands of Doramin, his friend's father), rather than ignominious escape and flight together with Jewel.

As these brief summaries begin to suggest, in spite of some undeniable differences, most notably involving Jim, the parallels between Conrad's colonial European characters in the Dutch Indies, and Couperus's Van Oudijck, are striking. Considered as a group, they can be seen to warn against racial and cultural mixing under empire. To become involved in "native life" mostly entails personal downfall, yet such involvement at the same time exposes the fragile myth of white superiority and European progress upholding the imperial project. In all these works, flawed white characters are set against easterners who constantly threaten to undermine them – the seductively dangerous dark lover, the treacherous Eurasian, the often nameless "native woman"; in short, the other to whom Couperus chooses to give frightening spectral form. In each case, the threatening orient overwhelms the European protagonist, unmasks their deluded white self-confidence, and dismantles their moral character

However, there are differences between Van Oudijck and Conrad's Almayer, Willems or even "Tuan" Jim to be noted as well. Although he ends up as an outcast, Couperus's rational Resident is the representative of the Dutch colonial government in the Indies and, as such, sees himself as an emissary of progress. In this sense, the flawed Conradian hero he most closely resembles is Kurtz, a man of eloquence and civilisation, into whose making "all Europe" (95) has (famously) been distilled. The rise and the ultimate fall of both characters strongly recalls Edward Said's thesis in *Culture and Imperialism*, that not only colonial probity, but also "going native", "[depends] on the rock-like foundations of European power" (Said 1993: 194).

Couperus's colonialist concerns

The resonant closing lines of *Heart of Darkness* express the ultimate colonial anxiety that white degeneration is imbricated in the very heart of Europe: the frame narrator observes that "the tranquil waterway leading to the uttermost ends of the earth flowed sombre under an overcast sky – seemed to lead into the heart of an immense darkness" (126). In *De stille kracht*, by contrast, the hidden forces of moral degeneration and decay prevail in particular in the colony. To leave the Indies is to escape from them.

As this suggests, aspects of Couperus's novel are undeniably and even simplistically orientalist in ways that the more complex and layered Conrad tends to sidestep. Yet Couperus's tendency to eastern stereotyping is tempered by his recognition that systems of colonial governance fail to take proper account of cultural differences in the Indies – differences for which he evidently had respect. This cultural relativism has generated considerable debate amongst literary scholars as to whether his novel can be seen as straightforwardly colonialist or as in some measure anti-colonial.[25] In this sense, it differs markedly from its closest Dutch counterpart, the explosively radical and more obviously (though still ambiguously) anti-colonial *Max Havelaar* by Multatuli (Edouard Douwes Dekker).[26] Seventy and more years after the formal end of Dutch rule in the Indonesian archipelago, consensus has emerged only around the acknowledgement of the complexity of *The Hidden Force*. Couperus's novel certainly remains difficult to categorize as colonial fiction, much more so than equivalent works by colonial writers of British India, say, such as Rudyard Kipling's *Plain Tales from the Hills* (1886) or *Life's Handicap* (1888). True, the novel subscribes to classic colonialist concerns about fragile European authority and white degeneration, as in the portrait of Van Oudijck. However, at a deeper level, what we call its queer or coded approach complicates and even undoes its efforts to uphold and support those colonialist attitudes.

The colonialist concerns that *The Hidden Force* shares with other turn-of-the-century colonial fiction include not only the typecasting of colonial

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[25] See Bel 2006, Murwani 2010, Watson 2013, Praamstra 2014, Sudibyo 2017.

[26] Although there is no direct evidence, Couperus must surely have read Max Havelaar. In Couperus's autobiographical novel Metamorfoze (Metamorphosis, 1897), for example, his alter ego, Hugo Aylva, declares a dislike for Multatuli. Bastet 1989: 85 and Van Generem 2016: 71-72. Cf. Van Gemeren 2010.

characters such as the corrupt Regent's brother, or the untrustworthy mixed-race Addy, as well as of the Europeans, like the stolid Van Oudijck (Boehmer, 2005: 58-93). They also comprise the prevalent sense throughout that colonized spaces and peoples are incomprehensible or unreadable, not unlike the African forest in *Heart of Darkness*. Hence, they are also ultimately uncontrollable and pregnant with threat or "hidden force". This power links to the combined fear and fascination about "going native" and succumbing to that force, as Kurtz does.[27] In the colony, to both Conrad and Couperus, European moral decay seems inevitable. As the passages quoted above show, Couperus's titular hidden force even overwhelms characters like the disciplined Eva Eldersma. Meanwhile, creole (Indies-born, racially European) characters like Léonie are given up to a different kind of overwhelming force, which is expressed as pure, depraved sensuality. Throughout, the novel lays particular emphasis on words like "angst" and "vrees", synonyms for "fear", which are reiterated thirty-four and fifty-four times respectively across its course. Moreover, the sense of brooding threat that in Conrad pervades the surrounding African environment, though less so the Malaysian interior, in Couperus is interestingly captured in the form of Islam, which is represented in the novel as both powerful and mysterious.[28]

Yet, unlike many contemporaneous colonial novels, *The Hidden Force* also departs from certain characteristic colonialist aspects, in particular from the belief in the "inevitable antagonism" between the native and the white that is required to maintain European civilization in India, to quote British writer Flora Annie Steel in her Indian Mutiny novel *On the Face of the Waters* (1897). In *De stille kracht*, the typical anxiety about the all-conquering yet degenerate European male slipping down the chain of civilization is replaced by a compulsive interest in exactly those indigenous cultural features that were believed to undermine dominant colonial culture—feminine softness and weakness, moral unease, and unquenchable appetite, all features associated with Léonie and her lover Addy. As the next section explores, the novel gives free and often celebratory expression to these characteristic features of decadence, including through its interest in artifice over nature, and through its delight in a kind of polymorphous sensuality (Desmarais and Weir, 2020).

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[27] See Stoler 2010: 41-55, 61-70; Watson 2013.

[28] Couperus 2010: 56-57, 77-78, 317-18. See also 119-21, 150-52. It may be relevant to mention here that Indonesia remains the world's most populous Muslim-majority country. See Boehmer and De Mul 2012: 25-6, 187.

Hyper-decadence

If *De stille kracht* would appear at least superficially to uphold colonialist obsessions, at the same time it luxuriates in the decorated aesthetic and extravagant emotions associated with the Netherlands Indies experience in a way that heightens rather than represses them. In this, the novel departs even from Conrad's (in other respects comparable) colonial fiction. We have seen, for example, that though *Lord Jim* is concerned with white downfall in the east, this is portrayed as largely a function of Jim's obsession with adventure heroism (rather than, say, a desire to indulge in "oriental pleasures"). Moreover, Marlow reserves judgement on Jim's culpability and remains interested in his fate till the end. In Couperus, by contrast, though sinuous "eastern" features are described in orientalist ways, these relatively superficial evaluations are undercut by the novel's evident relish in these same features, which are enjoyed by European (Léonie) and native (Addy) alike. The relish is further accentuated through the medium of the exaggerated, breathy style. This is captured, for example, in the characteristic chant-like rhythm of many of its descriptive scenes, as in the account of the train station encounter already cited.

The Hidden Force is deeply interested in the multiply perverse and destabilizing ways in which desire expresses itself, as Eve Sedgwick has influentially analysed (Sedgwick, 1990: 29-32). Queer writing, she explains, explores how the binary oppositions on which Western culture is based – male/female, civilized/primitive – constantly threaten to collapse into one another; it probes how they may be endlessly disrupted, destabilized and "queered". The queer body is the primary zone of such disruption, as we find exemplified in Couperus's descriptions of Addy's "sublime" body, for instance.[29] For Couperus, clearly, queer expression gains heightened form in those intermediate zones of the colony between races and cultures. Indeed, he is radical in finding a more intense decadent frisson on the colonial margin than at the cosmopolitan centre, its more conventional domain, as it is in Wilde. This linking of the metropolis and the far colonial periphery also recalls that moment at the end of "Karain" when, to the reminiscing Jackson, the story of Karain's haunting is briefly more real than the noisy jumble of the city.

For the Dutch critic E.M. Beekman, Couperus's prose is not "a neutral conveyor of clinical detail" but rather "a stylized discourse": "It is a style that, like Conrad's prose, draws attention to itself, becoming an object of

[29] See Belizário 2016: 389-390, Lech & Klein 2014.

representation, an exhibition of virtuosity" (Beekman, 1996: 258). From which it follows, as Beekman further writes, that Couperus's ambivalent colonial masterpiece was also the first manifestation of the author's "obscene decadence" (Beekman, 1996: 270). However, Beekman might have gone further to suggest that the novel's oblique judgement on colonialism stems precisely from its openly queer and what we term hyper-decadent approach, and that this in fact marks its strongest difference from Conrad. It arises from its voluptuous surrender to images of over-ripeness and engorgement, to illicit gestures and states of mind, and so, without moral censure, to the racial and cultural deliquescence that these signified. At the same time, the novel deploys the remoteness of the colonial margin as a form of code or disguise to draw a protective veil over erotic interests that were strongly prohibited at the metropolitan centre.

These interests come together in the feverish description of Léonie Van Oudijck at the moment she realises that she wishes to take not only her stepson Theo, but also Addy, her stepdaughter's betrothed, as her lover. Indeed, she has fantasies of loving them both at the same time, like some sensual connoisseur:

> She wanted them both; she wanted to taste the different charm of their respective types, that white-skinned Dutch type, so very slightly Indian, and Addie's wild-animal type. Her soul quivered, her blood thrilled, while the long array of dishes was solemnly handed round. She was in a revolt such as she had not experienced before. The awakening from her placid indifference was like a rebirth, like an unknown emotion. She was surprised to remember that she, at thirty, was *feeling* for the first time. A feverish depravity blossomed up within her, as though bursting into heady crimson flowers. … And round about her the afternoon was one blaze of sunlight and the hot spices stung her dry palate. Faint beads of perspiration stood out on her forehead and trickled down her bosom under the lace of her *kabaai*. And she would fain have clasped them both, Theo and Addy, in one embrace, in one blending of different lusts, pressing them both to her amorous woman's body. (Couperus, 2010,114-16)

We observe how the narration dwells closely and sympathetically on Léonie's self-delighting body, her joy in her own passion and her willingness to surrender to the compounded indiscretions that embracing both Theo and Addy will involve. The emphasis throughout is on rising heat and clammy touch – the beads of sweat that run over her skin, first on her face, then down her bosom.

As the passage vividly illustrates, *The Hidden Force* stands out as a colonial work for the extravagant delight it takes in its own sensual decadence – an aspect that its heated style further amplifies. At key points such as this, the narrative accentuates its deviant features precisely to bring to the fore the triumph of the east's sensuality over the west's materialism, even where it might not appear morally to endorse that triumph. Its colonial ambivalence comes through in its fascination with what it on another level should most dread – wayward, unquenchable and over-mastering desire, which includes forms of spiritual desire, as expressed in the *hadji* figure. In this sense the novel is a multiply scandalous text, markedly more so perhaps than its exactly contemporaneous Conradian counterparts, *Heart of Darkness* and *Lord Jim*. The novel is interested in, not to say stimulated by, precisely the moral and spiritual distortions that the alien colonial environment was believed to arouse.

For Arthur Symons, a British poet closely associated with Decadence and, not insignificantly, a correspondent of Conrad's, the movement was characterized by qualities that "mark the end of [a] great period" in art, "intense self-consciousness", the interrogation of all settled truths, over-refinement and "spiritual and moral perversity"; in short, the symptoms of a society in the throes of "a new and beautiful and interesting disease".[30] All of these features can be found in Couperus's descriptions of social and sexual life in the Dutch Indies, as they are in a similarly "indecent" and scandalous work that, we suggest, influenced its making, Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* – a novel inflamed by homoerotic passions that always appear in coded form. Here desire is everywhere, and yet secret. In both works, decadence is most strongly expressed where it is most hidden. It comes through in a shared preference for artifice – an interest in masking and subterfuge, most obviously in the descriptions of natural things like plants and flowers using artificial metaphors, such as where in Couperus trees by night are said to resemble black velvet. 'Velvet' is a word used twenty times in the Dutch novel (Couperus, 2010: 19). As Sedgwick writes, a queer style encodes what cannot be openly designated. Couperus clearly uses it as a form at once of disguise and display.

However, where Couperus departs from his model is in giving his obsessions a colonial venue. For him, it is in the Indies that these passions most freely luxuriate and thrive – in the exquisitely corruptible beauty of

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[30] Arthur Symons, 'The Decadent Movement in Literature', originally in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* (November 1893): 858-867, in particular p. 866. Boehmer 2015: 131-190.

a young man like Addy, resembling that of Dorian Gray himself; in the unbridled lusts of Léonie; in invisible and grotesque hauntings and secret obsessions of all kinds, including quasi-incest (Léonie's lovers are her step-son and her step-daughter's sweetheart). In this, Couperus acknowledged, radically for the time, the homophilic and queer nature of empire itself – that it encouraged and stimulated the expression of wayward desire, including love between men (Lane, 1995). For, as Robert Young recognises in *Colonial Desire*, and Laura Ann Stoler in *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power*, European life in the colonies was redolent of an increasingly forbidden and furtive (and, yet, for all that insistent) obsession with transgressive, inter-racial sex.

However, Couperus's fascination with colonial desire was not so much to the end of exposing colonial hypocrisy alone – and this aspect arguably represents a further difference from Conrad. Sexual relations in the Dutch Indies were probably already too mixed and complicated for such an exposé. Rather, Couperus lays bare, yet also finds exquisite beauty in, the extreme selfishness and egotism that drove life in the Dutch Indies. To Couperus the other is at times comprehensible to the point of transparency, because motivated by entirely recognizable colonial passions. Therefore, it is significant that, while the egotistical (like Kurtz or Jim) in Conrad's fiction expire, in Couperus those who single-mindedly indulge their bodily pleasures (whether European or Indies) tend to survive, if with their social status destroyed. Each character in *The Hidden Force* is given their own animating obsession or fanaticism: Léonie and Addy, sex; the Javanese royal family, gambling; Eva Eldersma, social form; Van Oudijck, a Marlow-like yet limiting commitment to the redeeming quality of work. In the eyes of Europe, the latter two are valued qualities, whereas an obsession with sex or gambling is not. Yet in the east there is no distinction, or only to the extent that sensual indulgence is dangerous but not deadly, unlike in Wilde. Desire runs rampant through the novel – insatiable, unavoidable, and degenerate in a literal sense, tending away from reproductive generation (Léonie herself has no children). It is perhaps the ultimate hidden force. By contrast, in so far as Europe represses luxuriance and desire, its fate in the east is sealed, as we see in the case of Eva.

Louis Couperus's *De stille kracht* is a distinctively queer colonial novel – a work of "obscene decadence" in Beekman's phrase – pervaded by its author's interest in the multifaceted forms through which desire could be openly expressed on the colonial margins despite official censure.

Therefore, interestingly, the Dutch writer's one colonial novel invites comparison with Conrad's fiction of the same period in precisely those areas where it then also departs from him. Couperus's queer style allows him to adopt a more radical position vis-a-vis the Dutch colonial presence in the Indies than has hitherto been considered to be the case, or that the plot mechanics of white degeneration make possible – one that compares in interesting ways with the inescapable ambiguities of Conrad's colonial fiction. More so than we find in Conrad, the novel relies on an orientalist vocabulary of eastern difference, yet at the same time, grants its Indies characters' obsessions and passions cultural validity and coherence. Whereas Conrad expresses moral uncertainty about the colonial project through a range of features, atmospheric, symbolic and stylistic, in Couperus it soon becomes clear that colonial rule is untenable, as it takes no account of the cultural differences and relative sensual freedoms of the Indies. Neither writer is straightforwardly anticolonial yet both express ambivalence about the colonial project that resonates through their writing itself, in Conrad's chiaroscuro and indirection, in Couperus' un-Conradian delight in code, artifice and passionate display.

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