

## Aristocracy, *Roman Fleuve* and Culture History

### Louis Couperus' *The Books of the Small Souls* and Dutch High Society around 1900

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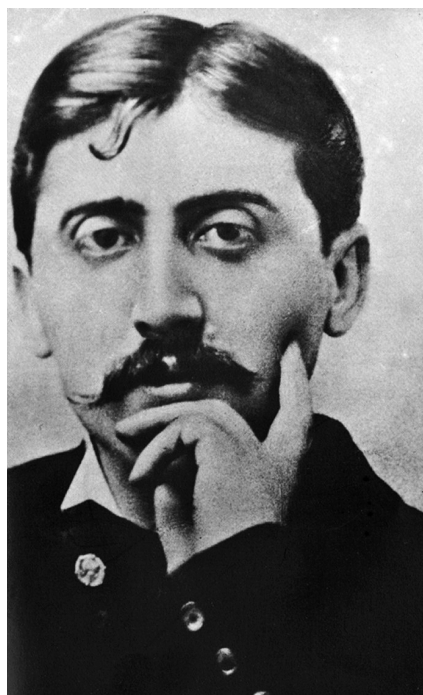
‘Ten generations of Schulzes and Lehmanns are by no means as interesting as three generations of a single branch of the Von Maritz family. Who would abolish the nobility would abolish the last vestige of poetry in our world.’  
(Theodor Fontane, *Briefe an seine Familie*)

For many years, the Italian director Luchino Visconti had cherished the idea to turn Marcel Proust's *roman-fleuve* *À la recherche du temps perdu* into a film. What fascinated him in the novel was not Proust's idiosyncratic literary imagination, but rather his social satire of the Parisian *beau monde* of the 1900s. Initially, Proust (1871-1922) had been keen to blend into the *chic* of the famous Faubourgs, only to discover bit by bit that these impressive *façades* were merely hiding ruins. This was anyway how Visconti, himself born an aristocrat, saw Proust's fictional cathedral: an autobiography, in all its intimate details, but written by a dreamer.<sup>1</sup> The film was never realised, yet this remarkable appropriation of Proust's view on the aristocracy leave two questions unanswered. Was the downfall of the French aristocracy really imminent in the eve of the Great War? And can a literary source serve as evidence in this context? The historian (of German nobility) Conze argued recently that in research on nobility in fiction, one should make a clear distinction between 'aesthetic and historical worlds': a novel about aristocratic forms of life is not a transparent social-historical source or historical treatise. Just like memoirs written by noble men and women, the production of 'noble novels' seems to increase when the world of nobles is under pressure or threatens to collapse, Conze supposes. But to this observation Conze immediately adds that the connection between crises of noble existence or identity in modern European history and the striking presence of nobility in fiction needs further research.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Y. Kuiper, 'Marcel Proust en de adel: tussen snobisme en voyeurisme', in: A. Gevers e.a., ed., *Mensen van adel. Beelden, manifestaties en representaties* (Hilversum, 2007) 34-35.

<sup>2</sup> E. Conze, "Adelsmemoiren" and "Adelsroman", in: idem, ed., *Kleines Lexikon des Adels. Titel, Throne, Traditionen* (München, 2005) 33-34, 38-39.

Marcel Proust (1871-1922). His novel *À la recherche du temps perdu* ('In search of lost time') was published in seven parts between 1913 and 1927. The author died before he was able to complete his revision of the final volumes



#### Aristocratic culture and the *roman fleuve*

During the *Belle Époque*, Europe was going through radical changes in many fields: science, technology, politics, social stratification, religion, the arts, gender relations, leisure and the cultivation of nature and the body. These changes were evidently reflected in the self-perception and the self-presentation of groups at the top of the social pyramid. The Dutch historian Jan M. Romein (1893-1962) argued that in Europe in the 1900s 'status' had not yet been subjugated to 'money', although 'status' admittedly was no longer a clearly circumscribed concept.<sup>3</sup>

Moreover, Romein explicitly related the rise of the *roman-fleuve* around 1900 to that of a European *haute bourgeoisie* which had alienated itself increasingly from the rest of society, often assuming an air of quasi-nobility.<sup>4</sup> The finest novels of this *genre* expose with unerring clarity how this segment of the *bourgeoisie* actually created its own social and political vacuum. From an insider's point of view, they expose the frequent feelings of insecurity hidden behind the attitude of aristocratic-bourgeois life styles. Romein quotes the examples of Thomas Mann's *Buddenbrooks* (1901), John Galsworthy's *Forsyte saga* (1906-1921) and Marcel Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu* (1913-1922). These three authors were all born into the classes they described so pregnantly and meticulously, both in terms of their outward appearances and intimate moods and feelings. Their lack of sociological distance and conceptual acumen

<sup>3</sup> J. Romein, *Op het breukvlak van twee eeuwen* (Amsterdam, 1967) 43. English edition: *The watershed of two eras. Europe in 1900* (Middletown, 1978).

<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*, 304.

are generously compensated by their intimate knowledge and imagination. Romein perceptively notices that all three authors mentioned here were ‘both inside and outside their class’ – and that their *magna opera* were all but bestsellers at the time of their publication.

Quite remarkably, this Dutch historian did not mention *The Books of the Small Souls*, a novel published in four volumes under the Dutch title *De boeken der kleine zielen* between 1901 and 1903 by his fellow-Dutchman Louis Couperus (1863–1923).<sup>5</sup> This masterpiece of roughly one thousand pages was written by Couperus in the fashionable French resort of Nice, where he and his wife had settled permanently in the Fall of 1900. The novel is a family history situated in the upper classes of The Hague as well as in the rural aristocracy of the province of Utrecht around 1900. This latter fact has largely been ignored in discussions on *The Books* so far.<sup>6</sup> The four volumes appeared in English translation (by the talented Alexander Teixeira de Mattos) between 1914 and 1918 with Heinemann in London and Dodd, Mead & Co. in New York.<sup>7</sup> The Anglo-American reception was at once much more sympathetic than the Dutch. Katherine Mansfield wrote in 1920:

We do not know anything in English literature with which to compare this delicate and profound study of a passionately united and yet almost equally passionately divided family [...] The real head of the family, the grim, ghostly shadow whose authority they never question, is Fear.<sup>8</sup>

Fear of life, Mansfield suggested – indeed, but also, and crucial for our argument, a fear to lose status.

This short essay aims to show the relevance of Couperus’ novel for studies of the development of attitudes, aspirations and ideas of both men and women in noble, patrician and bourgeois circles around 1900, which are of major interest to current lines of cultural-historical research on aristocratic and noble culture.

### Towards a new paradigm

The historiography of modern Germany has recently given a remarkable deal of attention to the theme of noble culture. Following in-depth investigations into the origins and vitality of bourgeois culture, with all its varieties of *Bürgertum*, especially in the nineteenth century, there is now also increasing attention for noble culture (*Adligkeit*).<sup>9</sup> At the basis of this cultural turn in historiography is the notion that the

<sup>5</sup> L. Couperus, *The Books of the Small Souls* (London-New York 1914–1918; orig. *De boeken der kleine zielen*, Amsterdam, 1901–1903). In this essay we used the 1991 Dutch edition of *The Books of the Small Souls* (including the translated citations).

<sup>6</sup> H.T.M. van Vliet, ‘Driebergen en Den Haag. *De boeken der kleine zielen*’, in: idem, *Eenheid in verscheidenheid. Over de werkwijze van Louis Couperus* (Amsterdam, 1996) 89–143.

<sup>7</sup> Teixeira de Mattos (1865–1921) married Lily Wilde, the widow of Oscar Wilde’s older brother Willie. He translated also works of De Tocqueville and Zola.

<sup>8</sup> K. Mansfield, *Novels and Novelists*, J. Middleton Murry, ed. (London, 1930) 205–208.

<sup>9</sup> For research on the German bourgeoisie, for example: J. Kocka, ed., *Bürger und Bürgerlichkeit im 19. Jahrhundert* (Göttingen, 1987); idem, ed., *Bürgertum im 19. Jahrhundert. Deutschland im europäischen Vergleich* (München, 1988). And about both groups: H. Reif, ed., *Adel und Bürgertum in Deutschland* (Berlin, 2001).

recent *Werdegang* of the nobility is an ongoing process of invention and reinvention, construction and reconstruction of nobility as well as of founding and refounding social and cultural distance. Family history and family awareness are important focal points in this type of research. How do self-awareness and self-composition develop in and among noble families over time? In order to achieve these goals, education, choice of partners and professions, perceptions of society, nature and gender, and the rise of noble associations and family foundations have been identified as significant; the same is true for connections to the past, which can be cultivated in various ways.<sup>10</sup> In relation to the latter, the concepts of ‘memorial community’ (*Erinnerungsgemeinschaft*) and ‘memorial culture’ have become increasingly popular. Apparently, the belief expressed by the protagonist in Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa’s novel *Il gattopardo* that ‘[t]he meaning of a noble lineage is entirely in its tradition, that is: in its vital memories’, has recently become the subject of studies of the nobility in its entirety.<sup>11</sup>

Recent historiographical portrayals of elite groups in Europe around 1900, with varying quantities and qualities of power, property and prestige, include such different



Adultery tragedy: a scene from the German movie *Effi Briest* by director Hermine Hunthgeburth. The still shows the actors Sebastian Koch (Effi’s husband Baron von Instetten) and Julia Jentsch (Effi Briest, daughter of a nobleman). Theodor Fontane published his ‘roman fleuve’ *Effi Briest* as a book in 1896

<sup>10</sup> M. Wienfort, *Der Adel in der Moderne* (Göttingen, 2006) 153-157.

<sup>11</sup> See for Di Lampedusa and *Il gattopardo* the essay of Costadura in this yearbook.



labels as nobility, aristocracy, patriciate, the upper ten, *haute bourgeoisie*, *haute finance*, the *beau-monde*, ruling class, landed elite, notabilities, and *nouveaux-riches*.<sup>12</sup> The historical studies quoted here specifically deal with the upper strata of single modernising nation-states. There is also a young school of comparative research on the transformation of traditional elites based on birth.<sup>13</sup> A constant and dominant theme in this comparative research is the *embourgeoisement* of the nobility and/or the aristocratisation (or gentrification) of the bourgeoisie: either slow or rapid processes of attraction and repulsion, integration and segregation, fission and fusion between old and new elites, nobility and *haute bourgeoisie*, peerage and gentry, and other titled and untitled aristocracies in different European countries.

Researchers increasingly find classic grand narratives of fall, decline, decadence and disintegration inadequate to describe the positions of noble and aristocratic groups in many European countries around 1900.<sup>14</sup> It has become a common practice to define their behaviour in terms of the adaptation of both defensive and rather more offensive strategies to adapt to new circumstances. As such, the interaction amongst the nobility, *haute bourgeoisies* and the middle classes is believed to have proceeded at a much slower pace and in a much more complex manner than suggested by discourses of historical watersheds such as change of regime or electoral reform. In terms of methodology, the influential sociologist Pierre Bourdieu has ordered a meticulous analysis of the old and new social fields in which the 'old' elites would be able to deploy and convert different types of capital in order to maintain their social prominence.<sup>15</sup>

According to Bourdieu (1930-2002), class distinctions are determined by a combination of the varying degrees of social, economic, cultural (for example education, taste) and symbolic capital (prestige, honour). Elites, including 'traditional' ones in modern society, make use of symbolic goods, especially those regarded as the attrib-

<sup>12</sup> P. Horn, *High Society. The English Social Élite, 1880-1914* (Gloucestershire, 1992); M. de Saint Martin, *L'espace de la noblesse* (Paris, 1993); Y. Kuiper, *Adel in Friesland 1780-1880* (Groningen, 1993); D. Cannadine, *The Fall and Decline of the British Aristocracy* (New Haven-London, 1990); idem, *Aspects of Aristocracy. Grandeur and Decline in Modern Britain* (New Haven-London, 1994); A. Cardoza, *Aristocrats in Bourgeois Italy. The Piedmontese Nobility 1861-1930* (Cambridge, 1997); P. Mandler, *The Fall and Rise of the Stately Home* (New Haven-London, 1997); J. Mordaunt Crook, *The Rise of the Nouveaux Riches. Style and Status in Victorian and Edwardian Architecture* (London, 1999); E. Conze, *Vom deutschen Adel. Die Grafen von Bernstorff im 20. Jahrhundert* (Stuttgart-München, 2000).

<sup>13</sup> H.-U. Wehler, ed., *Europäischer Adel 1750-1950* (Göttingen, 1990); D. Lieven, *The Aristocracy in Europe 1815-1914* (Houndsmills, 1992); E. Conze and M. Wienfort, ed., *Adel und Moderne. Deutschland im europäischen Vergleich im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert* (Weimar-Wien, 2004); E. Wasson, *Aristocracy and the Modern World* (Basingstoke-New York, 2006).

<sup>14</sup> Recently Philipp Blom's *The Vertigo Years. Change and Culture in the West, 1900-1914* (London, 2008) has – rightly – been applauded as 'narrative history at its best'. However, Blom's overarching view on the aristocracy in Europe, the so-called 'Defeat of the Nobility', is rather trivial and therefore disappointing; Blom, *The Vertigo Years*, 29-43. Just one example: 'The Netherlands, though nominally a kingdom, had never had a strong aristocracy [no problem'; YK], at least in part, and significantly, because it simply was not large enough in area [curious argument] to sustain a substantial landed class'; Blom, *The Vertigo Years*, 29. See for a much more balanced view on the landed aristocracies in Europe, based on recent literature and research: M. Malatesta, 'The Landed Aristocracy during the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries', in: H. Kaeble, ed., *The European Way. European Societies in the 19th and 20th Centuries* (New York-Oxford, 2004) 44-67.

<sup>15</sup> P. Bourdieu, *La distinction. Critique sociale du jugement* (Paris, 1979); idem, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (London, 1984); Conze, Wienfort, ed., *Adel und Moderne*.

utes of excellence, as an instrument in strategies of distinction. Bourdieu emphasises the dominance of cultural capital early on by stating that ‘differences in cultural capital mark the differences between the classes’.<sup>16</sup> However, he does not disregard the importance of economic and social capital in the formation of cultural capital. Class distinction is ‘most marked in the ordinary choices of everyday existence, such as furniture, clothing, or cooking, which are particularly revealing of deep-rooted and long-standing dispositions because, lying outside the scope of the educational system, they have to be confronted, as it were, by naked taste’.<sup>17</sup> And how individuals describe their social environment relates closely to their social origins because the instinctive narrative springs from early stages of development. A key concept in Bourdieu’s view on the persistence of class distinction is *habitus*. It can be defined as a system of dispositions (lasting, acquired schemes of perception, thought and action), which is somewhat reminiscent of the concept of socialization. But habitus also differs from it in important ways. For instance, habitus does not primarily function at the level of explicit discursive consciousness. The central aspect of the habitus is its embodiment and its internal rules work in a deeper, practical and often pre-reflexive way. In his writings Bourdieu refers sometimes to the field and habitus of aristocracy and nobility (and incidentally to Marcel Proust’s work).<sup>18</sup> However, it was one of his nearest colleagues, Monique de Saint Martin, who would publish an ethnological monograph *à la Bourdieu* on the French nobility in 1993: *L’espace de la noblesse*. The book has chapters about symbolic and social capital, the title and the family name, and noble tracks in space and history. Its central thesis is to unravel the ways in which the descendants of this traditional elite reproduced and transformed (‘reconverted’) their different forms of capital during the twentieth century.<sup>19</sup>

The adoption of this new paradigm of adaptation and transformation still recognises the importance of tendencies towards equality, democracy, and nationalism manifest in Europe around 1900 as threats to the continuity of aristocratic authority, leadership and self-confidence. After the 1850s, the claims of aristocrats to hereditary public privilege had indeed become ever less accepted, although they may on average and for most of the time have met with less social resistance in rural areas and local communities than in urban societies.

In his synthesis *Aristocracy in the Modern World*, the American historian Ellis Wasson argues that aristocrats all over Europe, at least until 1914, continued to dis-

<sup>16</sup> Bourdieu, *La distinction*, 69.

<sup>17</sup> Ibidem, 77-78.

<sup>18</sup> W. van Bunge, ‘Smaak en distinctie: elites in de achttiende eeuw’, *De Achttiende Eeuw*, XLII (2010) 1, 7. Van Bunge refers especially to: Ph. Smith, ‘Marcel Proust as Successor and Precursor to Pierre Bourdieu: A Fragment’, *Thesis Eleven*, LXXIX (2004) 112-123. Compare also: P. Bourdieu, ‘L’illusion biographique’, *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, LXII-LXIII (1986) 63-72. For example: ‘The structure of the novel as a linear narrative was dropped at the time when the vision of life as an unfolding strip, both in terms of meaning and direction, was brought into question.’ And: ‘The proper name [...] can only attest to the identity of the personality, as socially constituted individuality, at the price of an enormous abstraction. This is exemplified in the unusual use that Proust made of the proper name preceded by the definite article (‘the Swann of Buckingham palace’, ‘the rainy-day raincoated Albertine’).

<sup>19</sup> M. de Saint Martin, *L’espace de la noblesse* (Paris, 1993) 289-296.

tinguish themselves from the rest of society in their concentration on lineage, military service, land, endogamy, paternalism, and social exclusivity'.<sup>20</sup> 'Aristocrats' are roughly understood as the high and mighty among the nobility and the gentry.<sup>21</sup> A vast majority of them were large landowners and they all cherished an exclusively aristocratic lifestyle of education, equipage, hospitability, rural leisure and dressing. Their authority and prestige were related to public office, diplomatic service, access to the court, and religious ritual; their collective values and mentality connected with family and class awareness, social responsibility, and the expression of civilisation and tradition. There was nonetheless a certain division between the very rich, often engaged in banking and business, and the (often less wealthy) rural aristocracy. The latter are not the local petty nobility and gentry; the last two are actually excluded from Wasson's aristocratic domain.

At first reading, Wasson's study appears to be revisiting Arnold Mayer's *The Persistence of the Old Regime. Europe to the Great War*, whose central, historical-comparative thesis was that the nineteenth-century nobilities in most European states were quite capable to adapt to changing class relations, and that 'in fact, it was the rising national bourgeoisies that were obliged to adapt themselves to the nobilities'.<sup>22</sup> However, Wasson's objection is that Mayer is taking this too far, and is actually creating a pseudo-opposition between aristocracy and modernity.<sup>23</sup> Admittedly, the aristocracy as a class and as a corporation had lost its hegemony in grand politics, Wasson argues, yet many aristocrats successfully retained their social and cultural primacy in several countries into the twentieth century, in some countries even after the Great War. In a way Wasson's argument has its counterpart in Kocka's view on the upper margin of the middle class around 1900:

Recent research has effectively relativised the notion of the 'feudalisation' of the late nineteenth-century upper middle class, and for very good reason. To acquire land and live for part of the year in a mansion outside the city, to consume conspicuously and enjoy hunting and cricket, to mix socially with aristocrats not only during the London season or Berlin 'season', to think about marrying one's daughter into an aristocratic family – all this did not really make a nobleman out of a wealthy bourgeois.<sup>24</sup>

### Dutch aristocratic families: the ways of Van Lowe and Van der Welcke

Louis Couperus has been praised by Dutch and foreign critics for his rich portraying of the forms of life and thought of the aristocracy and high bourgeoisie of The Hague around 1900.<sup>25</sup> The writer's perspective in his novel *The Books of the Small Souls* is

<sup>20</sup> Wasson, *Aristocracy*, 118.

<sup>21</sup> In this essay we will use this definition of 'aristocracy'. However, in the context of Dutch high society around 1900 'aristocracy' will also refer to a combination of '(titled and untitled) nobility' and 'patriciate'.

<sup>22</sup> A. Mayer, *The Persistence of the Old regime. Europe to the Great War* (London, 1981) 80.

<sup>23</sup> Wasson, *Aristocracy*, 154.

<sup>24</sup> J. Kocka, 'The Middle Classes in Europe', in: Kaeble, ed., *The European Way*, 31.

<sup>25</sup> Y. Kuiper, 'Aristocraten contra burgers. Couperus' *De boeken der kleine zielen* en het beschavingsdefensief rond 1900', in: R. Aerts and H. te Velde, ed., *De stijl van de burger. Over Nederlandse burgerlijke cultuur vanaf de middeleeuwen* (Kampen, 1998) 186-217.

VIRTUS 17 (2010)



Fact or fiction: Marcel Proust's Duchess of Guermantes? Portrait by Paul Nadar (1896) of Countess Henry Greffuhle, born as Élisabeth de Caraman-Chimay in 1860

that of a detached insider, who describes with sympathetic understanding his male and, especially, female protagonists.<sup>26</sup> Using penetrating psychological insights, Couperus, as a good therapist, did not condemn his characters. Some critics in Couperus' own time even wrote that the novel showed a complete and realistic picture of the Dutch high society. But Couperus himself wrote once about the so-called life-like character of the descriptions of persons in his own aristocratic circles: 'Here in The Hague, they say they are all portraits, but I can assure you, they are pure fiction, but of course: put to the test of reality'.<sup>27</sup>

At the root of this *roman fleuve* are several basic oppositions. For this essay, the social and mental contrast between the patrician Van Lowe family, with roots in The Hague as well as in the Dutch East Indies, and the noble family of the Van der Welcke's, traditional landowners living in the village of Driebergen, is perhaps most relevant. The *chef de famille* of the Van Lowe's, a retired governor general of the Dutch East Indies, has died when the narration begins. Every Sunday, his Indian-born widow ('*mama* Van Lowe') invites their children and grandchildren for dinner.

The eldest of these children, who were all born in Holland, is the mayor of a tiny Dutch town. The *mater familias* also invites members of her own partly Eurasian family and their partners. Envy rules amongst her four sons and four daughters, who are all preoccupied with their material status (although they have more offspring than money) and with keeping up appearances: small souls indeed. Daughter Constance, the black sheep, married young. Her husband, a much older nobleman and diplomat, is her own father's old study and fraternity friend. When he is ambassador in Rome, Constance has an affair with another diplomat: a very young *attaché* – and also a nobleman from an old, respectable family. The deeply religious parents of this Henri baron Van der Welcke pressure him into a marriage with Constance, who has obtained a divorce. They move to Brussels and here their son Addy is born. When they decide to return to The Hague fifteen years later, their family is not amused. Constance's brother-in-law Van Naghel van Voorde, who is Minister of the Colonies, even refuses to receive the couple at his *soirées* and is challenged to a duel by Van der Welcke. Here ends the first book of *The small souls*. Three sequels: *The Later Life*, *The Twilight of the Souls*, and *Dr. Adriaan* followed rapidly. Couperus' wife was his first proofreader and editor.

In *The Later Life*, the focus is rather more on the tiny family universe of Constance, Henri, and Addy. Constance falls in love with Henri's old study friend Brauws, an industrial's son turned Tolstoyan and devoting himself to world peace and the emancipation of labouring classes. While Constance is inspired by Brauws to become an avid reader, her husband and a niece (from the family where they had been unwelcome) become enamoured. For Addy's sake, Constance and Henri eventually drop the idea of a divorce. At a party in their little villa at The Hague, Paul, Constance's brother who is a bachelor, an aesthetic and a cynic, observes that she has gathered all 'social elements' at her table: court aristocracy (a club mate of Henri's who will eventually marry the enamoured niece), rural and old nobility (Henri), patri-

<sup>26</sup> Cf. J.G. Kooij, 'Couperus en Engeland', *Merlyn*, II (1963-1964) 11-28.

<sup>27</sup> F. Bastet, *Louis Couperus. Een biografie* (Amsterdam, 1987) 116.



cians (Constance's brother Gerrit) and the entrepreneurial class (the Tolstoyan Brauws). Paul qualifies himself as 'a *bourgeois* and full-blooded capitalist'.<sup>28</sup> As a young girl, Constance already loved 'brilliance, nobility; spacious, well-lit rooms, the fine carriages of decorated gentlemen, and court costumes'.<sup>29</sup> In *The Later Life* she muses:

Oh, people like they all ... people of their *côterie*, of other *côteries*, with their nuances of birth, creed, position, fortune ... 'decent' people... which Brauws sometimes called the 'bourgeois' .... had they ever ... lived ... ever looked beyond that very narrow little circle [...] She had never felt this before. She herself was like this, too. And she found herself and them all – small.<sup>30</sup>

*The Twilight of the Souls* is about the suicide of Constance's brother Gerrit, apparently a jovial officer and a loving father, but at heart a melancholic whose mind becomes more and more erratic, and about the swift decomposition of Minister Van Naghel's family following his sudden death by a stroke. Van Naghel's brother, provincial governor of Overijssel, attempts in vain to prevent his sister-in-law's children from derailing. When they move house from The Hague to Baarn, the old lady Van Lowe tells one of her grandchildren: 'The coherence among you has gone. Oh, it is so sweet to stay together ... one big family, together ... Why did mama have to go to Baarn now ... Nothing but rich merchants there ... that is not quite our genre.'<sup>31</sup> One other brother and sister from the Van Naghel family have by then left for Paris, where he makes a living as a clown and she is painting. Her abandoned husband appears and kills her brother, whom he mistakes for her lover. At his funeral, the family quibbles over seats in and the order of the carriages. In the meantime Constance's brother Ernst has become insane. Addy, who has noted him, now decides to become a psychiatrist. This upsets his grandmother: 'Diplomatic service is the finest career, she said sharply'.<sup>32</sup> In the final scene, she informs Constance that there will be no more Sunday dinner parties and that she will now be moving in with her.

The final volume shows the transformation of the young Addy baron van der Welcke into a *pater familias*. Couperus already prepared the ground for a shift to the big villa at Driebergen in the previous volumes. Shortly before dying old Mrs. Van der Welcke, who had come under the attraction of spiritism and had probably read Allan Kardec's *Livre des esprits*, forgives Constance for her sinful behaviour in Rome.<sup>33</sup> The old baron Van der Welcke, an orthodox protestant until his death, has always kept his grudge against her and bequeaths the large family estate at Driebergen to Henri, who generously put it to the disposition of his in-laws. *Mama* Van Lowe; Gerrit's widow and children; the brothers Paul and Ernst, both single; two other nieces of Constance; and finally Addy with his newly wed wife Mathilde, the daugh-

<sup>28</sup> Couperus, *The Books*, 379.

<sup>29</sup> Ibidem, 32.

<sup>30</sup> Ibidem, 427-428.

<sup>31</sup> Ibidem, 559.

<sup>32</sup> Ibidem, 628.

<sup>33</sup> Van Vliet, 'Driebergen en Den Haag', 132.



ter of a navy officer, all move in. From an aristocratic point of view, Addy's marriage is a *mésalliance*, yet all he desires now is a healthy wife bearing his healthy children, and certainly no more talk of class distinctions.

The way Addy, his father and mother take care of the family at Driebergen, and also Addy's care for his poor patients, exposes the distance Couperus wants us to see between the materialism and the keeping up of appearances in The Hague, as opposed to the altruism and the life of relative simplicity practiced in the community at Driebergen – as if some kind of rural aristocratic ethos has reincarnated in Addy's idealism as well as in his practical action. Addy also has special talents.<sup>34</sup> He has an open mind for (Blavatsky's) theosophy and practices therapeutic hypnosis. His wife Mathilde fails to comprehend this mystic side of her husband. She is the only person in the family mansion who addresses her small children as 'mylady' and 'young master'. She still hopes that Addy will open a medical practice at The Hague, allowing her to spend her days as a society baroness. In the end, Addy returns to Driebergen while Mathilde settles in The Hague with her children. The final scene shows *mama* Van Lowe quietly, passed away in her large armchair, 'knowing of sacred knowledge and her old mouth smiling about it'.<sup>35</sup>

#### The author, his family and his novel

What makes *The Books of the Small Souls* both a literary masterpiece and a treasure trove for researchers of the history of the Dutch aristocracy around 1900? The consensus among literary critics is that Couperus' novel is certainly not a naturalistic family chronicle based on genetics. Couperus himself has pointed to its symbolist and romantic aspects, especially in terms of the attention paid to the paranormal and to the psychology of the female experience, especially as regards to Constance's feelings and ideas. James Anderson Russell believes that not even John Galsworthy and Thomas Hardy have portrayed a woman with such psychological and perceptiveness since Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*.<sup>36</sup> Mario Praz has called the author of *The Books of the Small Souls* 'one of the great fatalist *romanciers* of the nineteenth century'.<sup>37</sup> There is some exaggeration in Praz' praise: although fatalism and decadency are both ingredients of Couperus' novel, they are not its leading themes. The novel's strength and power is in Couperus' successful transformation of his characters into real people who are struggling to maintain themselves under increasing outside pressure. Their shrinking world has begun to break loose. Couperus' novel reveals his profound psychological, sociological, and anthropological insights, showing on many occasions how the actions and thoughts of his characters are grounded in the social figurations (the 'small souls') of which they are part and parcel. The conventions and rituals of theatre and receptions, visits and countervisits are not only functional as a means to position oneself and others in a mutual social hierarchy: they also fail to function when they lead to sometimes fatal neuroses.

<sup>34</sup> For the material aspects of the forms of life in the high society of The Hague around 1900 see also the article of Jaap Moes in this yearbook.

<sup>35</sup> Couperus, *The Books*, 999.

<sup>36</sup> Kooij, 'Couperus en Engeland', 22.

<sup>37</sup> M. Praz, 'Il romanziere Louis Couperus. Un grande decadente', *Il Tempo*, 27 Oct. 1974.



The Kurhaus at Scheveningen, near The Hague, around 1900 (private coll.)

Couperus himself grew up in the circles he describes so perceptively. His father had been a senior judge in the Dutch East Indies. Among the many civil office holders in his mother's titled family was one Governor General.<sup>38</sup> The youngest of eleven children, at a tender age he had already acknowledged his literary vocation. He married a niece from the same circle of prominent repatriates from the East Indies in The Hague, who were only one step below the nobles at the royal court and the *corps diplomatique*. Yet Couperus did not write a *roman à clef*. He rather invented characters that he could freely model on his own familiar social reality. And, so to say, he also expressed himself in these characters. *The Books of the Small Souls* is not a reckoning, but neither is it nostalgia in disguise. Couperus observed his small souls with compassion. 'A novel of manners of our time', he once called it. That certainly is not a far cry from our own assessment of this novel as the sequel to the world of experience once shared by a group of people coexisting in certain places and times.<sup>39</sup> The places are obviously The Hague and Driebergen. As to the time, the author repeatedly hints at the 1900s. Queen Wilhelmina's coronation was in 1898. As Queen she resided in The Hague, which was also the centre of Dutch government and national politics. At one point, Constance and her sister Bertha are introduced at court, but they never gain full access to court circles. During the first decades of the twentieth century, several Dutch nobles showed remarkable initiatives to revitalise the corpo-

<sup>38</sup> Bastet, *Louis Couperus*, 41-43.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. J. Goudsblom, 'Problemen bij de sociologische studie van romans', in: J. van Bremen, S. van der Geest and J. Verrips, ed., *Romantropologie. Essays over antropologie en literatuur* (Amsterdam, 1979) 1-18.

Louis Couperus (1863-1923), drawing by  
H.J. Haverman, 1897 (private coll.)



rate identity of their own class and, in a way, to reinvent the Dutch nobility. An exclusive National Society of Nobles and several even more exclusively noble orders were incorporated; genealogical knowledge was collected and published for the first time in 1903 in *Nederland's Adelsboek*, a kind of Dutch *Almanach de Gotha*.<sup>40</sup>

The lack of public visibility of the Dutch nobility may indeed explain in part why Couperus hardly ever uses terms such as 'noble' or 'nobility' in his book. Characteristically, however, Paul van Lowe blurts out at a reception that he would rather be a baron than a squire – the latter being the predicate given to the recently ennobled in contrast to the baronial titles of the 'really old' families. The term 'aristocracy', frequently combined with the even more frequent '*côterie*', rarely carries a negative undertone. The words 'bourgeois' and 'bourgeoisie', however, certainly do, especially when used by the Van Lowes and their acquaintances. Specific word counts can serve a heuristic purpose: they may indeed clarify the author's *modus operandi* and his

<sup>40</sup> K. Bruin, 'Duitse connecties. De heroprichting van de Johanniter Orde in Nederland', *Virtus*, XIII (2006) 133; Kuiper, 'Aristocraten contra burgers', 193-194.





The palace of Princess Emma, mother of Queen Wilhelmina. Lange Voorhout, The Hague, around 1900 (private coll.)

strategy of evocation. Predictably, 'house' (365 occurrences), 'family' (220), 'soul(s)' (215), 'acquaintances' (100), 'money' (100), and 'blood' (75) are among the most frequent terms in the whole novel. Yet it may come as a surprise that 'book(s)' (120 occurrences) is twice as frequent as 'carriage(s)' (60 times). This is of course predicated by the agendas of the two main protagonists: Constance and Addy, who strive to develop themselves through study and move beyond their family backgrounds by expanding their knowledge. The number of appearances of male and female servants is only balanced if coachmen are included in the first category. The relations between upstairs and downstairs remain remarkably underexposed.

### Some concluding remarks

Which problems of this aristocratic society does Couperus' *roman fleuve* show and how does its discovery contribute to more insight in what Bourdieu would interpret as strategies of distinction and embodiment of aristocratic dispositions? As said before, the several oppositions in *The Books of the Small Souls* may have considerable heuristic value for recent historical(-anthropological) research of the culture of the nobility. Firstly, these aristocratic forms of life and thought are strongly embedded in emotional and material kinship ties.<sup>41</sup> A strong awareness of descent is here closely related to Dutch Indian *splendor familiae*. And the 'natural' counterpart of

<sup>41</sup> J. Fontijn, 'Het zit in de familie', in: idem, *Leven in extase. Opstellen over mystiek en muziek, literatuur en decadentie rond 1900* (Amsterdam, 1983) 110-137.

the family is the wider circle of acquaintances. Couperus' initial working title for his novel was indeed *Family and acquaintances*. Whoever may have misperceived these upper classes as a homogeneous group is to find out through Couperus' eyes how several forms of status hierarchies exist within coteries.<sup>42</sup> Marital alliances between families may be important, but so is the risk of divorce as a constant threat to family solidarity – as well as the strong, and sometimes nearly incestuous-looking ties between some siblings.<sup>43</sup>

Secondly, the absence of 'old money' in most of the nuclear families in the Van Lowe clan is a threat to the status of that family as a whole, especially with the lack of social ambition and lucrative office in its younger generations. Although the new century is heralded in new forms of leisure like cycling, driving, tennis, cricket, and football, the future of Addy's many cousins looks all but bright.<sup>44</sup> Their lack of practical education is contrasted with Addy's, who has the additional benefit of the heritage of the Van der Welckes – his titled grandparents.

The third opposition highlighted by Couperus in his novel is religious indifference (for example, Constance assesses her own family as 'moderate liberals' with only shallow religious feelings) versus a keen interest in the mystic and the occult – especially among the women – which has a background of colonial history. It is unclear whether this is a mere temporary aristocratic fashion, or also some *rapprochement* to bourgeois circles.<sup>45</sup>

The fourth opposition is based on gender. How does Couperus describe aristocratic forms of masculinity and femininity? Most remarkable in this novel is the absence of a classic *chef de famille* in the development of the narrative and the extensive attention to the world of feminine feeling. One is reminded to the work of Theodor Fontane (1819-1898), the Prussian novelist who was, according to Bramsted in his study of German writers and the nobility between 1830 and 1900, 'the subtlest interpreter of the rapprochement between aristocracy and the middle classes in the new Empire'.<sup>46</sup> Bramsted found men rather than elderly noblewomen 'inclined to compromise' with the bourgeoisie: an interesting context for Couperus' sophisticated observations. *Mama* Van Lowe is the epitome of the old world from which the ageing Constance begins to set herself free, whilst her younger daughter-in-law Mathilde arrogates an aristocratic attitude by parading her newly-acquired baronial title. Young

<sup>42</sup> This heterogeneity is a nice illustration of a basic opposition in Bourdieu's theoretical universe: structure versus agency.

<sup>43</sup> Van Vliet, 'Den Haag en Driebergen', 117. Here we find core subjects of the European *roman fleuve* in general: decadence and degeneration.

<sup>44</sup> De Saint Martin, *L'espace de la noblesse*, 244. She interprets the involvement of aristocrats with new, mostly in England invented, sports as 'une stratégie de reconversion'. See for the cult of the body in Europe around 1900: Y. Kuiper, 'On Monte Verità: Myth and Modernity in the *Lebensreform* Movement', in: J. Dijkstra, J. Kroesen and Y. Kuiper, ed., *Myths, Martyrs, and Modernity. Studies in the History of Religions in Honour of Jan. N. Bremmer* (Leiden-Boston, 2010) 629-650.

<sup>45</sup> Just like Bourdieu De Saint Martin neglects the possible influence of religious practices on the construction of noble identity and habitus. It strikes that she typifies this construction as the production of faith ('la production de la croyance'), but for her religion in the aristocratic field is no more than a sort of totemism (according to the classical French sociologist Durkheim was totemism the oldest and most elementary form of religion); De Saint Martin, *L'espace de la noblesse*, 23; cf. E. Durkheim, *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse* (Paris, 1912).

<sup>46</sup> E.K. Bramsted, *Aristocracy and the Middle-Classes in Germany. Social Types in German Literature 1830-1900* (Chicago-London, 1964) 256.

Addy is not the only person to turn out as a socially engaged gentleman in the final volume of the novel. The titled diplomat who was once abandoned by Addy's mother also appears unvengeful at the end of his life when he arranges to meet Addy on his estate near Haarlem to donate a large amount to Addy's poor.

Obviously, *The Books of the Small Souls* are mainly situated in the Dutch upper class of the 1900s. The author's naturalist descriptions of Ruysdaelian skies and ominous clouds not only reflect the state of mind of his protagonists but also a Dutch *couleur locale* in his novel of manners. However, like Proust's observations in the *salons* of Paris, the far-reaching scope of Couperus' descriptions of 'small souls' may inspire further research on aristocracies in Europe by cultural historians.<sup>47</sup> The historical context of many romans fleuves published around 1900, in which noble or patrician families are prominent, was mostly that of diminishing political power and, generally speaking, of diminishing social relevance. But this loss of importance did not mean that aristocratic self-conceit or pride slowly disappeared – on the contrary, we would hypothesise. Even after the Great War aristocratic forms of life – such as the cult of the country house, the management of the estate, the ideology of being near to nature, the 'born' diplomats, the hunting parties, the marriage strategies – were more than just relicts of the past.

47 Cf. J. Goudsblom, *Sociology in the balance. A critical essay* (Oxford, 1977) 123-126.