

A Handful of Maeterlinck from Wales



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W I M D ' H A V E L O O S E]

Maurice Maeterlinck is the answer to a quiz question: who is the only Belgian ever to have won the Nobel Prize for Literature? Yes, it was Maeterlinck, a century ago, in 1911. Half a century ago, when I was on a European Literature course at the university in Ghent, the city where he was born, the name Maeterlinck (1862-1949) was never mentioned. He was Flemish and wrote in French, in 1914 found himself on the Catholic index of forbidden books and at the start of his career as a writer moved to France for good. Education and the cultural life of Flanders had been 'Dutchified' in the first half of the twentieth century. All those Flemings who wrote in French, and Maeterlinck in particular, were sidelined: they were still the object of academic study (often outside Flanders), but were no longer read by the general public. Not even by the more limited group of professional readers, among whom I must count myself. But chance played a part in changing this.

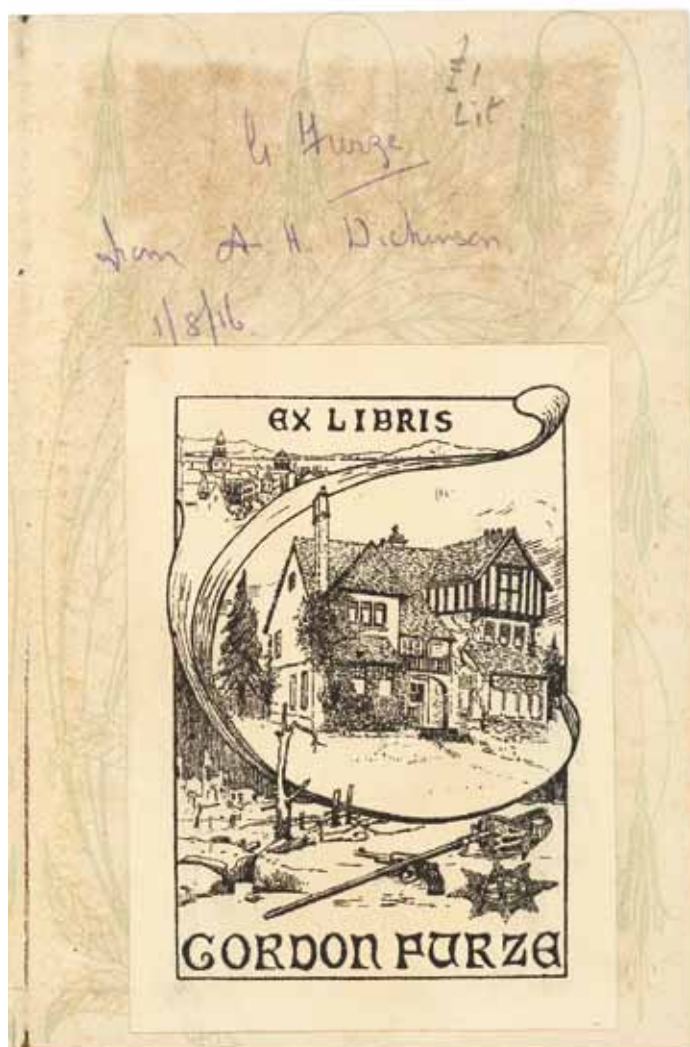
Twenty-five years ago I visited the book village of Hay-on-Wye in South Wales. In an old cinema that had been converted into a secondhand bookshop I picked up my handful of Maeterlinck. A small pile of five books. They were fine little books with hard cloth covers and one was even bound in leather. They gave off the delicious aroma of mature dust and all five volumes suffered from brown age marks, which in any English book catalogue would have earned them the damning description of 'slightly foxed'. Without much thought I got out the round sum of five pounds and took possession of this pile of Maeterlincks. Translated into English. Why does one do such things? A vague sense of guilt, perhaps, as occasionally arises when one sees books by well-known writers one has not yet read. And after all, this was a writer from my home town *and* a Nobel Prizewinner. A typical encounter with a compatriot abroad? People with whom you would otherwise never exchange a word are greeted as old acquaintances. It must have been something like that: I clasped Maurice to my bosom.

On arriving home I took the package from my luggage and subjected the books (octavo: 11 by 17 cm) to a thorough examination. None of the titles was familiar. There was a short biography of the writer and all the books had been published shortly before or during the First World War. In one of them I even found an *Ex Libris* decorated with military paraphernalia: a revolver, sabre and

medal, plus a rudimentary WWI landscape with a ruin and the skeletons of trees. The name was Gordon Furze, and written in pencil above it was 'from A.H. Dickinson 1/8/1916'. Had these books once lain in a British officer's knapsack? Had they picked up their damp stains in the trenches? Books should have a black box that records their history. What was I going to do with these impulse purchases? I picked them up in one hand and looked at the shades of colour in their spines: grey, rust-brown and greenish, with gold lettering. A fine set. I couldn't find the right place for them in the bookcase so for the time being I put this quintet amongst the porcelain in a small English glass case. They lay there exuding their scent for twenty-five years. They survived a house-move and were then returned to the same place.

And then these dormant little books were brought back to life. First of all there was a play entitled *Maeterlinck* at Ghent's civic theatre that irritated me immensely. Maeterlinck wrote a couple of dozen plays, hardly any performances of which are ever given in his own city or country, and then they had the nerve to make a collage on his life and work which at no time referred to the

Ex Libris in *The Treasure of the Humble*, translated by Alfred Sutro, Pocket Edition, December, 1915.





Saint-Barbara College, Ghent, run by the Jesuits. Photo of the "Rhetoric" class, i.e. the final year of secondary school. Maeterlinck is seated first on the right. The symbolist poet Charles Van Lerberghe is the second from the left in the second row. Grégoire le Roy, also a writer, is the second from the right in the same row.

essence of his message or dramatic work. Maeterlinck was the first and most important representative of symbolism in the theatre and is seen as an inspiration for such theatrical innovators as Beckett and Ionesco. Why couldn't the repertory theatre in the city of his birth present some authentic Maeterlinck rather than this odd cocktail of words and images for which the writer really only provided an excuse? Fortunately, the theatre-goers of Ghent were compensated a month later by two French-language productions brought in from abroad: *Pelléas et Mélisande* by the Comédie de Reims and *Les Aveugles* by the UBU company from Montreal. The former was an unadventurous, fairly traditional performance. The elements that continue to resound are its repetitions and echoes, techniques to which Beckett and Pinter have accustomed us. It was the latter play that was the big surprise. The Canadian company had made it into a fascinating multimedia production. It is a one-act play set on an island. A group of blind people led by an old priest has lost its way in a wood. While they are resting the priest dies. The blind people aren't aware of it, and bombard the audience and each other with existential questions.

*Quelqu'un sait-il où nous sommes?
D'où venez-vous?
Pourquoi êtes-vous venus ici?
Qu'allons-nous faire? Où irons-nous?*

This Litany of Lost Souls was delivered by the projected faces of twelve actors who, with increasing urgency, confronted the audience with their metaphysical fears. Anyone looking for the origins of *Waiting for Godot* and *le drame d'attente* was offered it on a plate here.

A few weeks later, when friends were visiting, I told them about these Maeterlinck plays and one way or another the five English Maeterlincks found themselves being used as evidence. They were out of the case now, and they stayed out. At first I started just browsing through them, but that changed into reading. Systematic reading. But before I say any more about that, I'll give you a brief introduction to the 'Wales Five'.

Gérard Harry, *Maeterlinck: A Biographical Study*, George Allen & Sons, London 1910.

This 'biographical study' is the first edition of the English translation and is recognised as the first biography of this writer. Gérard Harry was born in Paris of English parents and established himself in Brussels as a journalist, where he made friends with Maeterlinck. In 1890 he translated *Princesse Maleine* into English. This was very topical, because *Princesse Maleine* was the first play by Maeterlinck to be reviewed by the authoritative French critic Octave Mirbeau, who praised it extravagantly on the front page of *Le Figaro* on 24th August 1890: '... supérieure en beauté à ce qu'il a de plus beau dans Shakespeare.' And Mirbeau didn't write this after seeing a performance, but after only reading the play.

Maurice Maeterlinck, *The Treasure of the Humble*, George Allen & Unwin, London 1915.

The English translation of *Le Trésor des Humbles* (1896), a collection of essays, was first published in 1897. By 1915 it had already been reprinted fourteen times: Maeterlinck was a bestselling author. The collection was dedicated to the French actress and opera singer Georgette Leblanc, who was Maeterlinck's partner from 1895 to 1918. The most important piece is 'The Tragical in Everyday Life', a sort of manifesto for his early plays ('*le premier Maeterlinck*').

Maurice Maeterlinck, *Wisdom and Destiny*, George Allen, London, 1911.

A translation of *La Sagesse et la Destinée*. The French edition appeared in 1898 and the first edition of the translation came out in the same year, which once again proves how popular Maeterlinck was in England. By 1911 the translation had been reprinted nine times. Unlike *The Treasure of the Humble*, this collection does not consist of separate essays, but of 112 short chapters in which the author unfolds his philosophy of life.

Maurice Maeterlinck, *Life and Flowers*, George Allen, London, 1914.

A translation of *L'Intelligence des Fleurs*. The French edition came out in 1907 and the first edition of the English translation appeared in the same year. A fairly heterogeneous collection which includes essays on boxing (surprisingly one of the writer's hobbies) and making perfume (Maeterlinck lived for a while in the perfume town of Grasse). The *pièce de résistance* is 'The Intelligence of Flowers', the title piece in the French collection.

Maurice Maeterlinck, *Death*, Methuen, London, 1911.

The fifth book is the thinnest and the most intriguing. It appeared in 1911 and is a first edition. In that year there was as yet no French edition available. It was only in 1913 that a full French version of this essay, *La Mort*, came out. Shortly afterwards, in January 1914, Maeterlinck was put on the Catholic Index. Celebrated in Sweden in 1911, denounced by Rome in 1914. The year of publication is notable: a year prior to the outbreak of the First World War. Death is omnipresent in his early playwriting, so it comes as no surprise that the essayist also focused on the subject. Shortly before the greatest slaughter in history would begin. Once again the question arises: had this book ever lain in a soldier's knapsack?



Théo Van Rysselberghe,
La Lecture, 1903-1904, detail.
The man in red, reading, is
Emile Verhaeren. Maeterlinck
is sitting on the right. Left
of him is the French writer
André Gide.



Wounded to death, but radiant and free

A thousand pages of Maeterlinck in English and three stage performances. I was ready for Maeterlinck in the original. An excellent way to approach this was through the quite recent anthology (1999) by Paul Gorceix published by Complexe in Brussels, two volumes of which are devoted to the plays and one to poetry and the essays. I also got hold of the biography by W.D. Halls: *Maurice Maeterlinck. A Study of his Life and Thought*. An outstanding biography, but with two shortcomings: it dates from 1960 and is quite concise, comprising only 200 pages. There is still no 'standard' biography.

As a newly-graduated jurist, Maeterlinck stayed in Paris for several months in 1885, ostensibly to study the pleas of the French lawyers in court. However, he spent most of his time in literary cafes and one of the people he met there was the poet Villiers de l'Isle Adam, under whose influence he turned radically against realism. The theatre that Maeterlinck advocated was intended to restore wonder and mystery. To achieve this he recommended two techniques: 'dialogue of the second degree' and 'the third character'.

Dialogue of the second degree is any dialogue that doesn't contribute directly to the unfolding of the plot. These dialogues are an unconscious exchange of intuitions between congenial characters. As chance would have it, the Flemish

director Ivo Van Hove, in connection with his production of *Cries and Whispers*, a scenario by Ingmar Bergman he had adapted for the stage, gave a perfect explanation of what a dialogue of the second degree is: 'Bergman talks about something that no one wants to experience, but which everyone is faced with: death. Not in grand contemplation, but in short, simple sentences such as 'Come here for a moment' and 'Shall I wash you?'. Behind this lies a world of silence, full of fear, frustration and yearning.' (*De Standaard*, 20th March 2009). And the third character? This is precisely the mystery that is evoked by one of these dialogues of the second degree. The magic of theatre works when the ordinary words – with all their hesitations, repetitions and silences – are able to evoke the mystery of existence. When seemingly trivial dialogue is able to give presence to this third character, which is mystery, fate, death or some such. In many cases you also sense the characters' inability to express their deepest thoughts and feelings. In 'Silence', the opening essay in *The Treasure of the Humble*, Maeterlinck suggests that the highest form of communication between two people – especially two lovers – consists of silence: 'Speech is of Time, Silence is of Eternity'.

One of the most inspired pieces in this Welsh assortment is the long essay 'The Intelligence of Flowers'. Here, Maeterlinck repeatedly and convincingly commits the sin of the 'pathetic fallacy' (attributing human qualities to natural phenomena). He writes for example of the problem of the *Vallisneria*, a small water plant that lives at the bottom of ponds until it wants to reproduce. The female flower then slowly uncoils its stem until it reaches the surface of the water, where it subsequently blossoms. The male flowers in the surrounding water try to imitate this, but their stems are too short and they get stuck half-way. How do they solve this?



Maeterlinck as motorcyclist, 1909.

Did the males foresee the disillusion to which they would be subjected? One thing is certain, that they have locked up in their hearts a bubble of air, even as we lock up in our souls a thought of desperate deliverance. It is as though they hesitated for a moment; then, with a magnificent effort, the finest, the most supernatural that I know of in the annals of the insects and the flowers, in order to rise to happiness they deliberately break the bond that attaches them to life. They tear themselves from their peduncle and, with an incomparable flight, amid pearly beads of gladness, their petals dart up and break the surface of the water. Wounded to death, but radiant and free, they float for a moment beside their heedless brides and the union is accomplished.

Has anyone ever attributed human feelings more empathically to an insignificant water plant? Maeterlinck does not consider this a 'fallacy', but the central idea in his world-view. Man and nature are inspired by the same forces. It is above all in *Wisdom and Destiny* that he gives shape to this philosophy. Reason is not, in his view, the supreme human faculty. There are many situations and problems that reason is unable to grasp. He writes of intuitions that emerge from the unconscious and form the basis for many moral choices. When we do good it sometimes goes against all reason, and in everything related to love our decisions are also rarely informed by reasonable considerations. And yet we do not drift through our lives. These intuitions enable us to reconcile ourselves with our destiny in life. We are able to draw on our soul, our unconscious, for the necessary strength. Maeterlinck saw the soul and the unconscious as synonymous. The unconscious is no Pandora's Box, as Freud thought, packed with repressed sexual desires, but a source of wisdom, the most profound basis of our being, which connects us to the rest of the universe. At certain God-given moments, the soul even becomes accessible.

The heritage of unconsciousness is for all men the same; but it is situated partly within and partly without the confines of normal consciousness. The bulk of mankind will rarely pass over the border; but true lovers of wisdom press on till they open new routes that cross over the frontier. If I love, and my love has procured me the fullest consciousness man may attain, then will an unconsciousness light up this love that shall be quite other than the one whereby commonplace love is obscured.

The enchantment restored

Maeterlinck's place in world literature is unique. After his debut, the poetry collection *Les Serres Chaudes*, saturated with symbolism and surrealism, he introduced symbolism into the theatre. It is above all in *le premier Maeterlinck*

(published between 1890 and 1894), which includes *Les Aveugles*, *L'Intruse* and *Intérieur*, that the mystery is restored to its rightful place. The enchantment of the world having been so thoroughly eradicated by the Enlightenment and in literature by realism and naturalism, was now returned to the half-darkness of mediaeval castles, enchanted forests and deathbeds dimly illuminated by candlelight. Maeterlinck's symbolism is constructed around suggestions that the sensory world is an illusion behind which lies mystery. In the nineteenth-century *fin de siècle* and in the years prior to the First World War, Maeterlinck briefly restored enchantment. In the first place via the avant-garde theatre of the time, but through his essays also in the world at large. ■

Translated by Gregory Ball

Renée Dahon, Maeterlinck's wife, at Villa Orlamonde, Nice.

Villa Orlamonde, Nice.
Last residence of Maeterlinck.
He died here in 1949. Photo by
Nicolas Maeterlinck.

