FLANDERS LITERATURE

The Convert

Stefan Hertmans

An extract pp (13-15; 49-52; 61-65)

Original title De bekeerlinge
Publisher De Bezige Bij, 2016

Translation Dutch into English
Translator David McKay

p 13-15

Mount Jupiter

It's early in the morning. The first rays of sun are just coming over the hilltops.

From the window where I'm looking out over the valley, I see two people approaching in the distance. I suppose they've come down from the heights of Saint-Hubert, where you can see both the peak of Mont Ventoux and the valley where Monieux lies. Then they must have passed through the sparse oak forest on the plateau, where wolves roam free.

The famous Rocher du Cire – a steep, majestic cliff where bees swarm up beyond reach and the stone glistens in the summer sun with honey that literally drips from the rock face – now rises desolate and indomitable, its great mass sunk in the morning mist. The two travellers have seen all that and moved on in silence.

Their forms, still tiny, are raked by the morning light. They descend with difficulty to the place where nowadays the farmhouse of La Plane stands over the valley like a guard dog and take the winding road down to the left bank of the river – the right side, for them, because they're headed upstream. They appear and disappear from view, now concealed by trees, now re-emerging. Then they come to a large sloping field of grass, and their pace quickens slightly. From there, they can see the half-finished turret rising atop the high stone wall like a reassuring beacon. Now that the sun is a little higher, its rays reach the low valley and they see the village light up. Since all the houses are made of stone in their day, it's hard to tell in the half-light where one ends and another begins, as if the village has sprung miraculously from the cliff, carved by the sunlight – as if someone has pulled aside a great curtain to reveal a sleeping landscape.

The blue of dawn fades quickly, and yellow-grey tones predominate. The warmth of the morning swells the last clouds into slow, gigantic boulders in a purple sky; over the length of the river the white veil evaporates before my eyes. A swarm of bee-eaters is already swooping over the rooftops.

Once the two of them have come a few hundred meters closer, I can see that the man is using a crude wooden cane. The woman is limping; walking is obviously difficult for her. They both look drained. Did the woman sprain her ankle on one of the stony mountain paths, or do her shoes chafe her feet during their long, exhausting daily treks? I adjust the binoculars and can now see that she is big with child. The man wears a loose-fitting smock and has a primitive hat on his head. Sometimes he takes the woman's elbow to help her over an obstacle. A second man comes into sight behind them, carrying a large sack on his back. He follows in their footsteps, leading a hinny.

What time did they get up this morning? Were they roused by the cold at the foot of a tree? Or did they wake in an inn? In the quiet panorama of this spring morning, nightingales sing in the bushes by the river. You can hear them from here, letting out their demented, melodious yelps. As the sun lifts off the crest of the hill, an owl sails silently over the twisted oaks, not to be seen again until nightfall. Timeless peace; the distant howl of a wolf-dog; the cuckoo's monotone cry as it flutters over the lonely woods near Saint-Jean. The landscape smells heavenly in these early hours; it glows with an ethereal beauty. On this spring morning all the irises are open, the wild cherry tree is in blossom, the rosemary is dense with bright little flowers, and the scent of thyme rises with the warmth of the dew. Warmth of the dew – Hamoutal. This Jewish name pops into my head, the woman's familiar name.

I know who they are. I know who they're running away from.

I wish I could welcome the two of them into this house, offer them a hot drink they might not recognize – a cup of coffee, for instance. Where are they to live, now that their house has been gone a thousand years and the medieval section of the village is lost under grass and shrubs? At any moment, the day's first car may give them the shock of their lives, sending the young woman into premature labour.

The two of them are now straggling into my village.

I wake with a start from my daydream, close the window, light a fire for the cool morning hours, make coffee. Now and then I feel the foolish urge to look out the window. Patches of sun slide across the old tiled floor; the day is still and empty.

---

p 49-52

Rouen

Seagulls wheel over the Seine; the morning sun shines over the roofs of Rouen. It is now the spring of 1088. David is about twenty; Vigdis Adelais is seventeen.

The Western world is a place of growing unrest. Prophets of doom, beggars, and heretics roam the land, spreading tales that agitate and confuse the gullible masses. They denounce the priesthood and claim that the true faith is no longer found in Rome. Now and then a fellow is lynched, a peasant beaten, a farm set on fire, a score settled with blunt knives or an axe. The knights hold unchecked power over the countryside, and after centuries of relative freedom, the commoners now feel their iron fist. The lords in their castles feast on what they have plundered from the

farmers. The Normans keep an eye out for disturbances and riots. By maintaining order, they enhance their status in the eyes of both the populace and the seigneurs.

Counting leaves, counting hours, counting days, counting moons. Vigdis Adelais, a budding Flemish-Scandinavian beauty, comes home from the market with her governess. Her hair – oiled with butter, combed straight, and gathered up in a chignon woven with pearls – shines brilliantly. She has the sharp features of her mother's forefathers: a small straight nose, an ever so slightly receding chin, chiselled cheeks, a high forehead. She looks like a woman with a rich inner life – the type who nowadays would become an intellectual or an art-house diva. Her blonde eyebrows have largely been plucked away, in keeping with the fashion of the time, as illustrated in paintings by Flemish primitives or Jean Fouquet's renowned Madonna. To picture her in her natural state, imagine one of Lucas Cranach's youthful Eves. When she goes out in the streets, her light blue eyes are almost always lowered. She wears elegant, sharply pointed red leather shoes, open at the heel—with each step, one is concealed and the other revealed—which discreetly contrast with the emerald of her dress and the deep blue of her coat. The older woman who accompanies her is dressed in black; she's a widow, employed by Vigdis's father to care for the girl as she reaches womanhood. Ahead of them is a servant with a mule, which carries the food they've bought. It's unseasonably cool.

At the gate of the Talmud school, a few young men are speaking in low voices. They pause as the young woman passes with her governess. Vigdis looks up for an instant and finds herself staring into two twinkling eyes. The young man, who looks like a southerner, appraises her shamelessly. He wears a small yellow pointed hat of the kind often mandatory for Jews in those days. His mouth creases into a smile. Before she knows it, she's smiling back and blushing to her neck. A Jewish boy, she thinks, a Jewish boy smiling at me. The memory flashes through her mind of the bloody, monstrously misshapen head of the young thief. She feels foolish and embarrassed; for the rest of the day, she's peevish and says little.

*

Her parents must have had marriage plans for her. Her brothers surely kept an eye on her too; if she could make a good match, her marriage portion would increase the wealth and prestige of the whole family. Her style of speech was cultured and reserved. She learned Latin, took singing lessons, played a five-stringed viol (a novelty in those days), liked to joke with the young knights who were always hanging around the stables, and adored the beautiful horses. Even though she was officially forbidden to ride, a few of the stable boys had given her lessons. She'd stopped when one of them could no longer keep his hands to himself. She learned to spin, to weave, to run the kitchen; she liked to chat with the peasants who had a small house behind theirs, even though her mother didn't approve. She questioned her father about the Scandinavian gods, the heathen doctrines of her distant ancestors.

Accompanied by her governess, she goes to a singing lesson. It's in the nearby church, just a few streets away. But instead of walking home through Decumanus, later known as Rue du Gros Horloge, she asks her escort if they can take a little detour through Rue aux Juifs.

One early evening, this has the desired result: the young man is there again, talking to his friends in front of the Talmud school. Feeling her breath grow shallow with excitement, she moves closer until she is just a few steps away from the group. She needs to lift her eyes, she has to, she must. She does, and looks straight into his. The shock is greater for him, because of the diffidence and forwardness mingled in her gaze. She seems to bore into his eyes; she senses that her gaze is causing him pain. That knowledge brings a strange, carnal satisfaction that makes her cruel and imperious for a moment, even as her heart races under her finely embroidered clothing. The students are not merely silent; they look with a kind of surprise at young David Todros, who stops halfway through his argument, swallows, and blinks.

By then Vigdis Adelais has vanished around the corner.

For weeks, on her daily walks, she goes back to taking the Decumanus. She doesn't know what to do with herself. Finally, one evening, she confesses to her governess that she is sick with longing to see that young man again. Thinking back wistfully to her lost marriage, her governess shows enough worldly wisdom not to betray the girl's confidence. She warns her that to desire a Jewish boy is forbidden – more than that, unthinkable. When Vigdis starts to cry and pull her hair in anguish and frustration, overcome with emotion, her governess puts her to bed – but she too is torn, and lies awake that night brooding, with no idea what to do.

---

p 61-65

For a few weeks now, she has repeatedly refused to wear the refined city clothing laid out for her in the morning. Instead, she wants a dark dress to wear over her simple undergarment. She even asks her governess if a black dress can be made for her, as plain as possible, with a matching hooded cape. The question raises immediate suspicions. It's like the daughter of a modern-day Christian family announcing she plans to start wearing a headscarf. When her mother hears about her request, she storms into the girl's room and demands an explanation. Vigdis bows her head, remains silent, lets the torrent of words crash over her, and then raises her head slowly, looks her mother straight in the eyes, and says nothing.

That vacant stare and stiff-necked silence are enough reason for her mother to talk to her father about the matter that evening. The next day, he summons Vigdis to the front room so that he can speak with her in the presence of a priest. The girl's explanations are muddled; she's certainly not going to give away her secret, so she mumbles whatever comes into her head. The priest commands her to make the sign of the cross; she does, but with such a spooked look in her eyes that he launches into a harangue about the many threats to a young woman's spiritual welfare. He conjures up visions of hell and the devil; she turns away, squeezing her eyes shut. Her father's intuition cannot be thrown off so easily. He snorts, throws down his hunting glove on the table, and brusquely informs her that she's not to leave the house for a month, and that she'll be sent to a convent for six months if she doesn't shape up. She stamps her feet, shakes her head in despair, wrings her hands, but still says not a word. She goes out into the garden and cries, convulsing with sobs; her parents are still talking about it that evening. Vigdis is roughly escorted to her bedroom. She sits moping in the chambers to which she's confined, watching the rims of the clouds glow red in the dusk.

As soon as night falls she flees the house for the first time with the aid of her governess, through the kitchen and the little gate in the back of their urban garden. Her heart pounding, she heads towards the parish of Saint-Lo, past the Hôtel de Bonnevie, and then, again, past the synagogue, the Jewish bath house, and the slaughterhouse, towards the yeshiva. It has only one small window, an opening on the street side that reveals nothing. The first of the two heavy doors is still open. She goes down the stairs to the second door and knocks. Nothing happens. Dead silence, broken only by a cat's meow. For a moment, she stands in the gloom of the staircase, looking around in bewilderment. The half-moon barely illuminates the streets; her heart is thumping wildly. She doesn't fully realise how strictly women are forbidden to enter the school. She returns home, having accomplished nothing, sits on the old bench in the garden until her heart and mind stop racing, and then creeps back into the house with dew on her lashes. Back in her room, she sits in the alcove, incapable of sleep, and feels something inside her burning and tearing and pounding.

She stays in her chambers for a month and tries to pray, thinking the whole time about those two irreconcilable worlds and trying to decipher the few small scrolls that David has entrusted to her. After that, she resumes her walks with her governess, going to and from church, the market, the banks of the Seine, blind to the world around her, in constant, secret hope of catching a glimpse of her alien beloved.

King William of Normandy is dead; his successor is a hothead, she hears from her father, who's worried about the country's future. What in God's name does she care?

*

Not long afterwards, news of their clandestine relationship starts to leak out. There are tales and rumours; the sexton has seen them hand in hand. Again, Vigdis is confined to her chambers. This time, her father really does send her to a nearby convent for six months. When David is sighted near the convent one evening at dusk, the consequences are swift and grave. At the priest's request, the rabbi reluctantly orders a search of the yeshiva. This turns up a piece of parchment bearing her handwriting: a poem in calligraphy about golden butterflies in a garden, found on a rack for Torah scrolls among the personal effects of David Todros. She is told she will remain in her convent cell until her father has selected a suitable candidate for marriage. David receives a lecture from the rabbi, who threatens to send him back to Narbonne for his reckless behaviour. He promises to mend his ways, to search his soul; he shows remorse. But the next morning he's spotted near the convent again, with a piece of rich cloth under his arm. The rabbi writes to the elder Todros in Narbonne and asks him to summon his son back home for the time being.

This is a turning point in their lives. But her prospects look much bleaker than his. A high-born girl's future is usually mapped out well before she reaches the age of nineteen, or else she decides for herself by accepting a marriage proposal. Vigdis has already had to fend off three candidates while her brothers looked on in dismay. Her eldest brother comes to the convent to tell her their father will soon name a knight of their acquaintance as her intended spouse. Arguments, threats, and shouting matches follow. She tries to bluff her way out, telling her parents she'll become a nun if they force a husband on her. In the convent chapel she lies on the cold stone, trying not to think

of the Jewish prayers that David has taught her. Mortification, penance, but she is unchastened. Hunger, sleeplessness, moments of mystical rapture and panic, nausea and cramps, menstruation and self-mutilation. Prayer, but to whom?

And after a few weeks, a little miracle: the gardener, who has been watching her all this time with a covetous grin, passes on a message from David Todros. This illiterate go-between hopes that by delivering the note he can get into her good graces. The message is terse and factual: a date and time, in the back of the convent garden. No name. But she recognizes the handwriting, the strange curlicues on the letters.

It is eleven o'clock at night when she slips out the back door of the convent's large kitchen, dressed lightly. Shivering, she passes the stables, reaches the walled courtyard, and strikes her left foot against a line of rough rocks around the herb garden. She gropes for the little door that leads out into the fields. It is locked. Silence. The night owl; a dog in the distance. No moon, no light. Her breath quickens; her teeth chatter. Then she hears her name from the other side. A knife slides into the lock; the door rattles, creaks, and flies open. She sees a dark shape in front of her. She hears her name. It's not David's voice. She stumbles over the small stone threshold, is caught in someone's arms, gasps for air. The man takes her forcefully by the shoulder and grunts, This way. The grass smells cold under their feet; moss and bitterweed, trampled nettles. The man wordlessly leads her to a nearby house by the water. There a back door opens, and someone with a small torch lights their way. They are brought to a room; no one speaks a word. There she is left alone. The door is locked. She lies awake on the small couch, listening to the sounds of the unfamiliar house. If she's betrayed now, her punishment will be merciless – maybe even interrogation and torture. She has to be gone before Matins, when they'll find her cell empty. The door to freedom swings open, but it's a trap.

There's no way back.