

20TH CENTURY CLASSICS

TURBOTT WOLFE



WILLIAM PLOMER

introduced by Laurens van der Post



OXFORD

TURBOTT WOL

WILLIAM PLOMER was born in Pietersburg in the Northern Transvaal in 1903. After his education in England at Rugby School, he temporarily became a trader in Zululand and an apprentice farmer on the border with Basutoland (now Lesotho). Later he settled in Japan, and at the age of twenty-five was offered the Chair of English Literature in the Imperial University. *Turbott Wolfe* was written when he was twenty-one, and was followed by a succession of novels, including *Sado* (1931) and *Ali the Lion* (1936), short stories, and poetry. In the 1960s he collaborated with Benjamin Britten on a number of librettos, including *Curlew River* (1964) and *The Prodigal Son* (1968). In 1968 he was awarded the CBE, and from 1968 to 1971 he was President of the Poetry Society. He died in 1973.

LAURENS VANDER POST was born in South Africa in 1906. He completed his education there at the age of seventeen, and joined the Durban newspaper, the *Natal Advertiser*. At the same time he began his lifelong friendships with William Plomer and Roy Campbell, who were living at Sezela on the South Coast of Natal. Subsequently he has distinguished himself as a film producer, with such films as *The Story of C. G. Jung* (1971) and *All Africa Within Us* (1975), and as a writer, notably for *The Dark Eye of Africa* (1955), *The Lost World of the Kalahari* (1958), *The Seed and the Sower* (1962) and *Journey Into Russia* (1964). In 1947 he was awarded the CBE, and in 1981 he was knighted.

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WILLIAM PLOMER

Turbott Wolfe



INTRODUCED BY
LAURENS VAN DER POST



Oxford New York
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS
1985

Oxford University Press, Walton Street, Oxford OX2 6DP

London New York Toronto

Delhi Bombay Calcutta Madras Karachi

Kuala Lumpur Singapore Hong Kong Tokyo

Nairobi Dar es Salaam Cape Town

Melbourne Auckland

and associated companies in

Beirut Berlin Ibadan Mexico City Nicosia

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Introduction © Laurens van der Post 1965

First published 1925 by The Hogarth Press

First issued as an Oxford University Press paperback 1985

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Plomer, William

Turbott Wolfe.—(Twentieth-century classics)

I. Title II. Series

823 [F] PR6031.L7

ISBN 0-19-281890-2

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Plomer, William, 1903-1973.

Turbott Wolfe.

(Twentieth-century classics)

I. Title II. Series

PR9369.3.P65T8 1985 823'.912 84-27266

ISBN 0-19-281890-2 (pbk.)

Printed in Great Britain by

Richard Clay (the Chaucer Press) Ltd.

Bungay, Suffolk

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As for the native, he reads his overlord with a single penetrating glance; he sees in him the illusion of civilization and humanity and he knows that they are non-existent. While he gives him the title of lord and the homage due to the master, he is profoundly conscious of his democratic, commercial nature and despises him for it in silence and judges him with a smile which his brother understands; and he too smiles. Never does he offend against the form of slavish servility; and, with his salaam, he acts as though he were the inferior, but he is silently aware that he is the superior.

LOUIS COUPERUS

translated by A.T. de Mattos

When the unconscious of a whole continent and age has made of itself poetry in the nightmare of a single, prophetic dreamer, when it has issued in his awful, bloodcurdling scream, one can of course consider this scream from the standpoint of a singing-teacher.

HERMANN HESSE

translated by Stephen Hudson

THE "TURBOTT WOLFE" AFFAIR

LAURENS VAN DER POST

WILLIAM PLOMER himself needs no introduction here. He has been writing now for close on forty years and long since has established a reputation that is unique in the literature of our time. I myself know of no sensibility engaged to-day in this exacting traffic with the meaningful word which is writing, that is at once so naturally committed to it, so sustained, and so independent of fashion and faction as is his. The list of his published works alone conveys this; five novels and four volumes of short stories; two biographies and two autobiographical books; a *Collected Poems*, and the librettos for two of Benjamin Britten's operas; the editing of various books, among them three diaries, one, the famous Kilver's Diary, running to three volumes, as well as the papers left behind by our friend, the rare and gifted Anthony Butts. His editing of diaries of men no longer living constitutes in itself a considerable act of re-creation. Indeed the way in which he has diverted an urgent imagination from its proper task in order to deliver the untimely dead from their silence and give them once again a voice in the minds of living men, is for me among the most moving of his achievements. On such a record an octogenarian might well look back with a feeling of fulfilment. In a man of barely sixty years whose writing was impeded by nearly six years of service at the Admiralty in the War, it is remarkable. But what does, I fear, need re-introduction is this book *Turbott Wolfe* on which his reputation was founded. It has long been out of

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print and has vanished from the shelves of libraries, except possibly a South African library—one where, as a by-product of the violent disapproval which kept it under lock and key, it is ironically preserved from wear and tear. Considering the impact this book made and the consequences that flowed from it, the only surprising thing is that it has not been re-published before.

Turbott Wolfe, published when William Plomer was twenty-two, was his first novel as well as his first book. He finished writing it at Entumeni in Zululand when he was twenty-one and sent the manuscript to Leonard and Virginia Woolf at The Hogarth Press. Considering that it was written “with a hard pencil on thin paper, they must have had a strong curiosity to read it at all”, as Plomer himself remarked many years later. But they did more than read it. They decided at once to publish it. A printers’ strike delayed its appearance until the spring of 1926—a year which was to be full of fate for Plomer, two of his friends and his native South Africa.

In Britain and America the unusual quality of the book was recognized immediately. Plomer himself, in fact, found the American reviewers too generous to be convincing and wrote that he was already too well aware of his own limitations to have his head turned by finding great names in the same sentence as his own.¹ There was, however, at least one American comment which is well worth preserving: “Look elsewhere for your bedtime story”, the *New York World* warned its readers.

Comment in Britain was more measured but perhaps all the more significant for that. Desmond MacCarthy, then at his best as a critic and reviewer, was the first to notice the

¹ *Double Lives*, an autobiography by William Plomer (Jonathan Cape.)

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book in England. It had, he observed in the *New Statesman*, prevented him from looking out of a train window for at least three hours. The *Nation* called it "volcanic" and "although not what is usually called a great book, an important one". Another reputable writer said he was tempted to call it a work of genius though "he did not quite yield to the temptation", as Plomer again remarked with characteristic humour. Yet another reviewer called it "a book with a temperature" and one of Plomer's uncles wrote: "You have managed to catch an effect where tedious people only catch malaria", thereby demonstrating deftly in passing how natural and easy in the family were the wit and spirit of which his nephew had just delivered such startling proof.

How different the welcome in South Africa! Only three of the many newspapers and periodicals which hastened to review the book praised it and then mainly, perhaps, because the reviewers in question came from England and had had their values formed in the great mould of the European spirit to which Plomer himself ultimately belongs. Since the explosion which greeted *Turbott Wolfe* in South Africa was not a solitary and accidental event but really the first blast in a campaign which is yet far from over, these three reviewers merit a mention in this retarded despatch. One, Ruth Alexander, was the daughter of a Cambridge professor, the wife of a South African barrister and Liberal Member of Parliament, and a contributor to the *Cape Times*. She called it the most vital book about South Africa since *The Story of an African Farm*. Desmond Young, too, took up the cause in the *Natal Witness*, of which he had just become editor. His father, Commodore Sir Frederick Young, was the world's foremost salvage expert and as a young lad Desmond had been taken to the most remote and perilous foreshores of the world in

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the salvage steamer, *Ranger*. The trenches of Flanders had followed, and after that his whole life has been dedicated to adventure in the true meaning of the word: his flair in other dimensions of life told him immediately that *Turbott Wolfe* was authentic adventure of a kind South Africa had not experienced before. He committed his paper to an intelligent statement of his own intuitive perceptions; and characteristically, once committed, he never wavered. Finally there was Leonard Barnes, ex-Colonial Office and Rifle Regiment. Like Desmond Young, he had been decorated too for gallant conduct in the First World War and like many ex-officers he had been lured by the promises of politicians to invest all he had in a cotton scheme in Zululand where Plomer had written his novel. As the venture declined, he had fallen back more and more on writing, for which he had a considerable bent. He wrote a long, sensitive appreciation of *Turbott Wolfe* and largely as a result of writing it, joined Desmond Young in journalism, abandoned cotton planting for good, and quickly became a highly articulate power for enlightenment in the newspaper world of Southern Africa.

It is perhaps as true of books as of men that one can judge them by their enemies as well as by their friends. However vast their superiority in numbers, the people who attacked *Turbott Wolfe* in Africa never matched the quality of defenders like these. I myself have never forgotten the uproar which greeted the appearance of the book in South Africa and particularly in Natal where I was working. Apart from these three exceptions, all the English and Afrikaans newspapers and critics condemned the book in leading articles and bitter reviews. Supporting the angry editorials, the correspondence columns of the daily papers carried letters from "Mothers of Five", "Pro Bono Publicos" and so on and

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"Bookworm" moaned that *Turbott Wolfe* was "not cricket".

I remember the excitement and impassioned argument provoked at various times by *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, *The Well of Loneliness*, the publication in France of Claudel's correspondence with Gide over Gide's homosexuality; later, over the American nymphet *Lolita*, and recently over *Fanny Hill*. But none equalled the pitch and hysteria of this African occasion. I imagine one may well have to reach back to some aspects of the Dreyfus affair and Emile Zola for parallels, since the appearance of *Turbott Wolfe* had a marked sociological and political as well as a literary import. In fact, looking back on it all now, I find it something of a mystery that Plomer escaped the public tarring and feathering inflicted on a lecturer at a South African University some years later for far less said. However exaggerated the language may appear to a generation removed from the heat and dust of that day, Roy Campbell was not exaggerating the effect when he wrote in *The Wayzgoose* his satire on the people and events of that period.

*Plomer, 'twas you who, though a boy in age,
Awoke a sleepy continent to rage,
Who dared alone to thrash a craven race
And hold a mirror to its dirty face.*

One could have added also to this the observation of the master satirist, Dean Swift, "When a true genius appears in the World, you may know him by this sign, that the Dunces are all in confederacy against him."

Yet if one were to leave to the satirists alone the interpretation of the hullabaloo over *Turbott Wolfe* in Africa, one would miss much of its significance. For as I see it the trouble with satire is that it over-simplifies reality. I know that the

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armoury of the human spirit is not complete without it, and used as it is in Shakespeare, as one in a great and complex number of elements for capturing our imagination, I can relish it. But where it becomes the one and only weapon I have reservations. The satirist seems to me to have a tendency to abstract both himself and his theme from their human context. He presumes himself to be immune to the ailments of his time, ignores both his participation in the human condition and his own contribution to its inadequacy. He tends to set himself higher than the gods on Olympus who were continually and forever, despite their own immortal existence, involved in the mortal lot. From somewhere above heart and mind, preferring summary judgment and rough justice to slow understanding and compassion, the satirist is inclined to release on the societies and persons who have dismayed and hurt him such cold avalanches of retribution and correction that they chill me. In the purely satirical role he is incapable of melting the frost and ice within himself as Othello did by realizing, "The pity of it, Oh! Iago, the pity of it." The pity the satirist knows best is, perhaps, a pity for his own hurt self, even where it is most widely projected and disguised as a universal and objective concern over man's inhumanity to man.

In all the many issues and considerations brought to light in my native country by the publication of *Turbott Wolfe*, it was precisely "the pity of it all", and the incapacity of human beings to perceive it before rather than after the event, which seemed to me the most significant. If, as Campbell implied, the race had been more craven and its face dirtier than the fallible human norm, or had there been only dunces arrayed against Plomer, that could have been accepted by me. But unfortunately the villains of our daily round are neither Gullivers' giants nor even his pygmies. Our greatest enemies

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are too humanly normal and no more subtle than ourselves. We are all condemned to be the flies in our own ointment. On this occasion the "craven race" involved was all of us, working no less hard at keeping our face and hands clean and being neither less intelligent nor more stupid than the rest. Knowing the African story as I did in the bone and blood of a family which, on my mother's side, had been there since the European beginning nearly three hundred years before, there was enough of the good in it for me to believe salvation both possible and worth while. But the irony of the processes of abstraction, magnification and over-simplification of what I call the satirical fallacy in a curious way aided and abetted the ills they ostensibly set out to cure. They inclined to strengthen the chain of action and reaction which bound life to one inadequate expression of itself instead of freeing it for renewal.

In the same way I believe the world to-day is an accessory after the fact of the crime it condemns in South Africa, because of the lack of fullness in the pre-suppositions on which it bases its policies. Then, as now, the disconcerting heart of the matter was how my countrymen, so manifestly human and anxious to be decent, could not only tolerate but create conditions in their world which belied all these qualities, and round so savagely on a work like *Turbott Wolfe* which could only enlarge the values of the civilization of which they claimed, with passion, to be the only defenders in Africa. What perturbed me then, as now, was the spectacle of so much decency mobilized so easily overnight in a spirit so alien to itself, and consequently neither for the first nor the last time I found myself deeply involved in a kind of civil war. Plomer says he was told of a case where two men came to blows over his novel in a South African street. I came to

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blows over it in other ways with numbers of people, some of whom were my close friends, and soon found myself embroiled in a serious quarrel which reveals clearly the nature of the resistances to be faced by anyone who confronts an established order with the implication of his own increased awareness of reality. This quarrel was with Wodson, the editor of the newspaper on which I was working (the *Natal Advertiser*, which was to grow into the highly successful *Daily News* of to-day); he was one of the principal targets of Roy Campbell's scorn in *The Wayzgoose* and is referred to there as "Wod's Godson".

I owed Wodson much, for he was the only person in South Africa who had been prepared to employ me. On leaving school at the age of seventeen, and believing that the sooner I started writing the better, I had thought immediately, like many others before me, of newspaper work as the best preparation for such a career. Accordingly I had applied first to the up-and-coming Afrikaans newspapers of South Africa. Without exception they turned me down, the editor of the most illustrious of them all, *Die Burger*, informing me that he could not even consider employing a person who had not taken a university degree. I had turned then to the editor of the *Natal Advertiser* without much hope of success.

White Natal was almost entirely English-speaking. Durban prided itself on being the most English town in Africa. Both city and province were profoundly anti-Afrikaans and particularly resentful of the first Nationalist Afrikaner government which Hertzog had just led to power against their idol Smuts. Very few people in Durban spoke Afrikaans, although it was, with English, an official language of the land. It was scornfully dismissed as "kitchen dialect", a decadent form of Dutch, and one of the many inferior things that