

Some observations on Paul van Ostaijen

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Paul van Ostaijen was born in Antwerp in 1896.¹ During the First World War he worked in the city hall there and got into trouble with the law: he yelled “*Weg met Mercier!*” (‘Away with Mercier!’) in a demonstration against that gentleman, a visiting Catholic cardinal who was very much pro-French and anti-Flemish. For this misdemeanour he was condemned to three months in prison, but the occupying authorities (i.e. the Germans) suspended the sentence. After the war he was pardoned, but preferred to live in Berlin because of his admiration for the communist political leader Karl Liebknecht. However, Liebknecht lost his bid for power and was arrested and murdered, and Van Ostaijen came home disillusioned. He was then drafted into the Belgian army to serve in, ironically, the occupation forces in Germany. Afterwards he lived modestly, by his pen, with his health steadily failing. He died in 1928 in a sanatorium, of tuberculosis.

My source for this paper is the anthology of Van Ostaijen's poems and theoretical statements about poetry published in 1955, edited by Gerrit Borgers and published under the title *Music-Hall* (Van Ostaijen 1955; all translations in this paper are my own).

From his first published collection, *Music-Hall*, the anthology offers us *Avond* (‘Evening’), which reveals a not unusual sensitive young soul, dabbling in synesthesia:

AVOND

Ach, m'n ziel is louter klanken
In dit uur van louter kleuren;
Klanken, die omhoge ranken
In een dolle tuin van geuren.

(Van Ostaijen 1955, 28)

¹This is the text of a presentation delivered to the annual meeting of the Canadian Association for the Advancement of Netherlandic Studies / Association canadienne pur l'avancement des études néerlandaises (CAANS-ACAEN) held at the University of Regina, in Regina, Saskatchewan, on May 26-27, 2018.

EVENING

*Alas, my soul is pure sounds
In this hour of pure colours;
Sounds that climb up
Into a crazy garden of scents.*

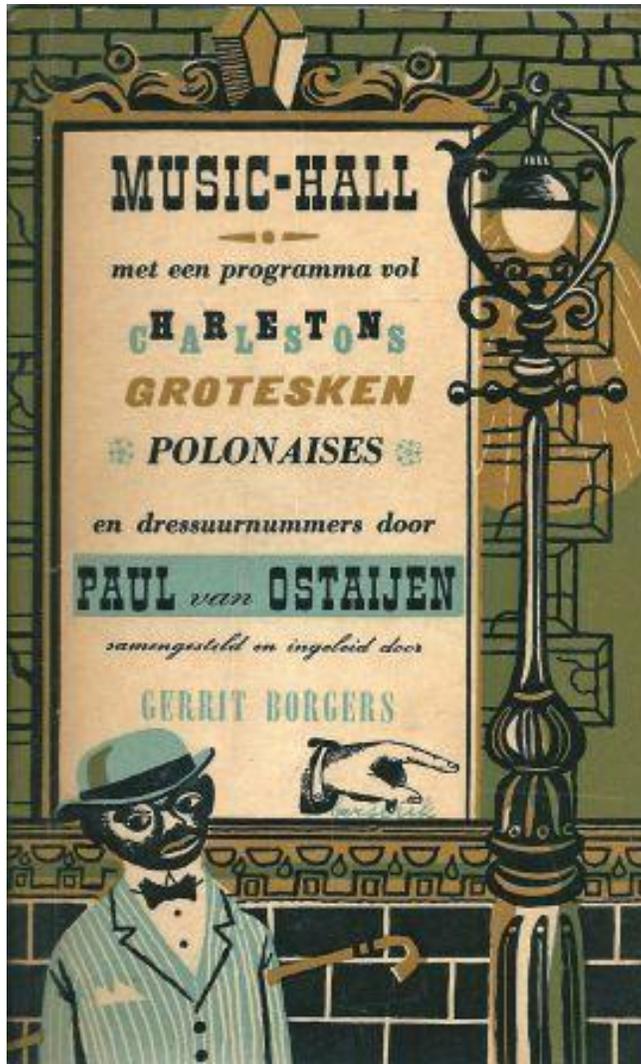


Figure 1. Cover of the 1955 Ooievaar edition of Music-Hall, edited by Gerrit Borgers.

More typical of Van Ostaijen's long-term development is the poem *Babel*, from his second collection *Het Sienjaal* ('The Signal'). Here we see his religious character, his concern with sin and temptation represented by the bright lights of the big city, but also the unorthodox nature of those beliefs:

BABEL (fragment)

Mijn zonden zijn gewijd,
bedreven in het bloedig Godsverlangen.
Zoeken naar het Godswezen: bang overspel
van mijn arm lichaam pijn.

Zalig zal zijn de derde dag.
De klanken van bazuinen
in de wind een vlag,
die mij welkom heet
om zoveel hellelichte zonden,
die enkel beproeving waren.

O mijn broos lijf
ik heb u vaak geofferd
mijn zielewelzijn.

Mijn lijf beproeven de lampen,
want één dag zal het moeten ontbloot zijn
van het naakt verlangen,
van de zonde en van het vlees.

Pijnig mij honds-blik-zachte lampen, schrille bloemen,
wellust: zomerfestoenen, witte waanzin van het winterwoud,
liedjes, gigolo's. De zonde is de straat
die leidt naar een wit, maar ongedacht gelaat. (Van Ostaijen 1955, 50-51)

BABEL (fragment)

*My sins are holy,
Committed in the bloody desire for God,
seeking the God-being: anguished adultery
pain of my poor body.*

*Blessed shall be the third day,
The sound of trumpets
a flag in the wind,
which welcomes me
for so many hell-bright sins
which were but a trial.*

*O my fragile body
I have often sacrificed to you
The well-being of my soul.*

*The street lights test my body,
for one day it will be stripped bare
Of naked desire,
Of sin and the flesh.*

*Torture me, lamps soft as a dog's gaze, shrill flowers,
Lust: summer festoons, white madness of the winter forest,
Songs, gigolos. Sin is the street
That leads to a white, but unthought-of face.*

Clearly Van Ostaijen was not going to be a docile member of the Church. It was still less likely given his reaction to the slaughter of the First World War – and of the years after. This is obvious from one of his grotesque prose stories called *Intermezzo*. A facing-column translation of it, with the title “Intermission,” excellently done by Kristiaan Aercke, appeared in this journal in the fall of 2003 (Aercke 2003a, b). It presents the world as a live theatre cum puppet theatre cum waxworks, which performs a play consisting of an endless mass slaughter. The audience rebels and demands their money back. Indeed, they riot, to the point where the disorder in the audience spills over onto the stage and is no different from the murderous play itself:

Some gangsters have already butchered fifty people. It is, however, on the stage that the fighting is most intense. Knives flash. Blood drenches white silk and cashmere waistcoats. The women stand howling. Nude or in evening rags. An orgiastic dance. Teeth sink into calves. Into necks. Sever the carotid artery. Forward. Chairs smashed to pieces. (Aercke 2003b, 19)

However, the theatre’s playwright cum director cum manager happens to be (or so he says) God the Father, and he quells his audience’s revolt. Firstly, he does this by asking them how they want him to improve the play, but they cannot agree among themselves; instead, they shout every known political and literary slogan (Van Ostaijen makes fun of all manners of such beliefs). Social and intellectual snobbery cause this divisiveness, and God plays on it skilfully. When that fails, he resorts to a pseudo-logical argument of relentless sophistry:

I know as well as you that the heroes I’ve presented on stage so far don’t fully embody the heroic idea. But why should my heroes be heroes? Is the fusion of hero and clown not much more interesting? Perhaps you also think that my heroes are all cast from the same wretched mould. If that’s

your opinion, then I must interpret that as evidence of your uncultivated sensuality. In that case you can't comprehend the nuances, the differences perceived so sharply by a razor-sharp intelligence. Or do you call my heroes unnatural? In my wax museum theater nothing is unnatural, ladies and gentlemen, not even hypothetically. Against nature, at the most.

(Aercke 2003b, 17)

This argument sounds rather like Van Ostaijen's own sarcastic dismissal of his own critics, in his theoretical statements, but its substance is also uncomfortably like the reply of the Church, when we complain that life is unpleasant and unfair: God is all-powerful, we are told, and it is not for us to argue with Him. This approach does not work very well for the theatre manager, however, so he resorts to sheer bullying and cracking his ringmaster's whip, until the audience are cowed – as in life, they have to stay until the end of the show, unless they want to commit suicide – and give worldwide acclaim to his production. As I remarked in my editorial to that issue (Kingstone 2003, n.p.), one thinks of the end of the Book of Job. Of course, that dealt with the undeserved suffering of one man, not of the whole world.

Intermezzo leaves us feeling that Van Ostaijen was trying to laugh at the state of the world, rather than cry. And the usual source of explanation and consolation, the Church, has clearly failed as far as he was concerned. Typical of his *Feesten van angst en pijn* ('Feasts of fear and pain') (1919-1921), of which *Bezette stad* ('Occupied City') forms a part, perhaps, is the ironically titled *Sous les ponts de Paris* ('Under Paris' bridges'). The title is that of a popular song written in 1913, very Parisian, about the poor who sleep under bridges because they can't afford a room. Van Ostaijen goes further: his religious feelings identify not with the hierarchy of the Church, but with human wrecks in the dockside slums; he sees Jesus in "the least of these My brothers", to whom indeed Jesus tells us to do good if we wish to be saved (Matthew 25:40). I will leave a few couplets out of the middle of the citation below. Here is the opening:

SOUS LES PONTS DE PARIS

Van alle plaatsen waar Gij uitgestald zijt
over de bezette stad schreit Uw triestigheid

men heeft U aan alle hoeken opgehangen
om in een offerblok senten te vangen

Nog hebt Gij de kommunie met het volk gevonden
het steekt zijn armen in uw warme wonden

Wij steken ons handen in Uw wonden doof
en blind zijn wij in ongelooft

Priesters en papen hebben Uw Kadaver geschonden
geleerd te geloven ons tastende handen Uw wonden

Men heeft U kerken gebouwd
van de wanden zoekt het zilver en goud

Ons geloof is zo klein en zo mat
als voor uw beelden de dansende vlam (Van Ostaijen 1955, 110)

UNDER PARIS' BRIDGES

*From all the places where You are displayed
Over the occupied city Your sadness cries out*

*They have hung You up at every corner
to catch pennies in a collection box*

*Still You have found communion with Your people
who stick their arms in Your warm wounds*

*We stick our hands in Your warm wounds
deaf we are and blind in our unbelief*

*Priests and papists have violated Your corpse
taught to believe our groping hands Your wounds*

*They have built churches to You
from the walls silver and gold glitter*

*Our belief is as small and dull
as the flame dancing before Your images.*

And here is the last part, where he identifies Jesus with a deserter:

Ik heb U gezien in mijn bezette stad
in een danszaal de muziek zweeg toen Gij binnentrad

haar trage wals het ritme van Uw gezicht was sterker ZO
in triestigheid dan een gebroken cello

en de gigolo's en de hoeren dansten hun trage WALS licht
enkel op het triestige ritme van Uw GEZICHT

Ik heb U gezien in een stinkende slop
Gij waart met Landsturmman samen

Gij stond onder de opgeëiste werklozen
naar Duitsland gingen lange treinen van havelozen

Boven op de dijk houdt Gij mee de wacht
met kille hoeren in de regenende nacht

Nu zijt Gij moe en afgetobd
de triestigheid in U weer volgepropt

de regen druipt van Uw vuile kletsnatte hennepbaarden
over de stad

Droppelt samen met de regen over
alle drek van de stad Uw schokkend ritme mee (Van Ostaijen 1955, 111)

*I have seen You in my occupied city
in a dance hall the music stopped when You came in*

*their dragging waltz the rhythm of Your face was stronger LIKE THAT
in sadness than a broken cello*

*And the gigolos and the whores danced their dragging WALTZ
only to the sad rhythm of Your FACE
I have seen You in a stinking alley
You were together with a Home Guard soldier*

*You stood among the requisitioned unemployed
long trains of shabby people leaving for Germany*

*Up on the dyke You keep watch
along with chilly whores in the rainy night*

*Now You are weary and worn out from struggle
stuffed full of sadness again*

*Rain drips from Your soaking wet hemp beard
over the city*

*Drips along with the rain over
all the filth of the city with Your shaking rhythm.*



Figure 2. Paul van Ostaïjen. Undated photo (public domain).
Photographer unknown. Source:
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:VanOstaijen3.jpg>.

Clearly Van Ostaïjen needed an escape from a moral-philosophical dead-end, and his theoretical articles give us a clue as to what he found. The most revealing one is a lecture he gave in Brussels and Antwerp in 1925-1926, with the highly ironic title of *Gebruiksaanwijzing der Lyrik* ('Lyricism, instructions for use') – as if lyricism were a gadget where you pressed a button to achieve an emotional state. He states:

Can. J. of Netherlandic Studies/Rev. can. d'études néerlandaises 38 (2017-2018): 77-90

Most people just can't bring themselves to declare that lyricism doesn't interest them in the slightest. A certain wickedness of civilisation forces people who prefer to play billiards or *zevenzot* – and who play very well, mind you – [sarcasm: it is a game of chance played with dice] – to spend an evening being bored by Russian music. (Van Ostaijen 1955, 164)

They look for a magic password, but they would be disappointed if they had it, for behind the door is only a blind man uttering meaningless words.

Only Ali Baba, who knows the magic word [...] knows that in that man's song [...] there echoes the memory of and nostalgia for a pure law that, in the bowels of this earth, also forms crystals. (Van Ostaijen 1955, 165)

Which is something we cannot recover: "the daemonic [a power greater than oneself – inspiration, if you will] in the end is no match for hopelessness" (Van Ostaijen 1955, 168).

All that is certain is the power of the word, and the poet doesn't create that:

no poem on the subject of fish could ever be more powerful than the word 'fish' itself. [...] From nostalgia for a fatherland of the perfect and from the realisation of the uselessness of any human attempt to get there, from that double cause of longing and helplessness which is the awakener of prayer, poetry sprouts. (Van Ostaijen 1955, 168)

So, poetry is the form Van Ostaijen resorts to, it would seem, in order to remain somehow in touch with God. Indeed, he connects it with ecstasy, an extremely happy state associated with mysticism:

Just as the expression of ecstasy is the negation of the passive emptying into God, so the lyrical emotion is a negation of the pessimistic representation of the world which, it seems to me, alone makes it possible in the deepest depths. (Van Ostaijen 1955, 169)

Poetic creation thus seems to be the escape Van Ostaijen needed, but without having to accept the God of the Church, a corrupt organization with a dogma he had no time for.

This point in my account of the lecture seems the moment to look at the 'pure poem' which he gives to illustrate it. Its title is eloquent: *Spleen pour rire* ('joke melancholy'), the clown trying not to weep. I have done what I can to render the alliterations and the rhythm:

SPLEEN POUR RIRE

Het meisje dat te Pampelune geboren tans te Honoloeloe woont
 en in een rode lakkooi gevangen houdt
 een kobaltblauwe papegaai
 – zij schilderde hem met Ripolinkoeleuren
 zoals gezeid de veren blauw
 de snavel en de poten geel –
 het meisje van Pampelune te Honoloeloe
 dat om haar hoge hals heeft een krans van purperen anemonen
 op haar opalen borst kleine barokkorallen
 en om haar dijen niets
 (Vogelveren dorsten haar dijen niet te dragen
 zo zeer zijn dun haar dunne dijen)
 dit pampeluner meisje dat te Honoloeloe woont
 ken ik niet (Van Ostaijen 1955, 160)

SPLEEN POUR RIRE

*The girl who was born in Pampeluna but now she lives in Honolulu
 and keeps in a scarlet cage
 a parrot of a cobalt blue
 – she painted him with Ripolin paint
 as I said his feathers blue
 his beak and his legs yellow –
 the girl from Pampeluna in Honolulu
 who around her high neck has a wreath of purple anemones
 over her opal breast has little baroque corals
 and around her thighs nothing
 (Her thighs don't dare to wear bird feathers
 so thin are her thin thighs)
 this girl from Pampeluna lives in Honolulu
 and I don't know her*

Then the poem, hitherto colourful and lighthearted, comes to a disconcerting conclusion:

Priez toujours pour le pauvre Gaspard
 Il n'est pas encore mort ce soir (Van Ostaijen 1955, 160)

*Keep praying for poor Gaspard
 He hasn't died this evening yet*

This last couplet quotes Verlaine, and the title echoes his near-contemporary, Baudelaire; both of them ‘cursed poets’. It hints at a great depth of sadness – but one which Van Ostaijen is, I feel, trying to overcome. And indeed, in the rest of the lecture and in subsequent statements, he argues for the different kind of poem which most of *Spleen pour rire* offers us: “A poem of pure lyricism, as the expression of ecstasy, contains the cause of its development in itself and solely in itself [...] This ecstasy alone is the exclusive subject of pure lyricism” (Van Ostaijen 1955, 173-174). It follows that “I am striving for a poem with no subject, the subject of the poem is the poem itself” (Van Ostaijen 1973, 174). Outside experiences merge and change in the poet’s subconscious, then re-emerge as what we can perhaps call inspiration: “If I write a poem, it is because I have nothing whatever left to say [...] The poem has no subject: it *is* the subject [...] The I remains the highest good, but not the poet’s I, the poem’s I” (Van Ostaijen 1955, 175). Likewise for the prosody, Van Ostaijen says that the poem dictates its own prosody: “The result is neither ‘academic prosody’ nor free verse; the prosody is inherent in the poem itself” (Van Ostaijen 1955, 176). Or to quote an article in which he explained the difference between the straightforward lyricism of his friend Wies Moens and his own:

My ideal is for the outlook on life (a pessimistic one in my case) to vibrate in the poem without being expressed outright, and my favourite poems are those which contain my pessimistic resignation in the air of an *allegretto*.

(Van Ostaijen 1955, 147)

Various critics of the time speculated about where Van Ostaijen got his prosodic ideas from. One critic especially annoyed him by claiming he got them from German poets (the Expressionists, presumably), “who did all that ten years ago.” He gave various answers, but the definitive one seems to come in an interview he gave to the French-language review *Le XXe siècle*. The tradition he follows, he says, is not the one “which is artificially proposed by *kapelletjes* (‘coteries’) and academics”, but “the tradition born of spontaneity [to be found] in the work of Guido Gezelle”:

He is the poet of pure lyricism, who expresses almost all the mysteries of sensibility in a dynamic, instinctive, spontaneous poetry, And every truly modern poet accepts this tradition because it has a spontaneous origin [...] the basis of [Gezelle’s] poetry is the word, which carries the sound. For, for us, instrumentation is the technique of poetry; every separate word contributes to the harmonisation, to the sonority of the whole, although every word has its own accent. And we Flemings can easily proceed with the word-accent, the word-rhythm, the word-sound, the word-melody.

Any feeling in the poet, and any outside object, or “a complex of words, e.g. ‘a Flemish cow in a field’”, can be enough “to set the mechanism of our sensibility in motion; the object is transformed in our subconscious, and through the [rhythm inherent in the] word – i.e. the dynamics – the process of our sensibility freely arises and continues. From that comes the plastic form, the so-called deformation of reality.” This statement can be taken, I think, as (among other things) a secular version of Gezelle’s own assertion that all things in nature speak a language, if our soul will listen to them. One thing the two poets certainly have in common is pride in the Flemish language; Gezelle wrote in his dialect, reinforced by words from an older state of it.

Here is a poem by Van Ostaijen in praise of Gezelle:²

Guido Gezelle

Plant
fontein
scheut die schiet
straal die spat
tempeest over alle diepten
storm over alle vlakten
wilde rozelaars waaien
stemmen van elzekoningen bloot
Diepste verte
verste diepte
bloemekelk die schokt in de kelk van bei’ mijn palmen
en lief als de madelief
Als de klaproos rood
o wilde papaver mijn

(Van Ostaijen 1955, 190)

Guido Gezelle

*Plant
fountain
shoot that sprouts
stream that sprays
tempest over all depths
storm over all surfaces
wild rose bushes wave*

² Two notes on this poem: the King of the Alders, in the German ballad, is Death; and I assume *rozelaar* means a rosebush – it is undoubtedly an allusion to Roeselare, where Gezelle taught in the junior seminary for many years.

*voices of alder kings bare
Deepest distance
furthest depth
flower calyx that shakes in the cup of my two hands
and dear as the daisy
Like the red poppy
o my wild papaver*

In his reply to the critic who thought he had copied German poets, Van Ostaijen claims that Gezelle “sometimes took the first line of a folksong and began to embroider on it, in a purely formal manner.” As he himself did, he says, with the line “*Onder de maan schuift de lange rivier*”. The result, *Melopee*, has the same repetition of words and rhythm that we saw in *Spleen pour rire*, and it is haunting (a *mélopée* is a monotonous chant):

MELOPEE

Onder de maan schuift de lange rivier
Over de lange rivier schuift moede de maan
Onder de maan op de lange rivier schuift de kano naar zee

Langs het hoogriet
langs de laagwei
schuift de kano naar zee
schuift met de schuivende maan de kano naar zee
Zo zijn ze gezellen naar zee de kano de maan en de man
Waarom schuiven de maan en de man getweeën gedwee naar de zee
(Van Ostaijen 1955, 159)

MELOPEE

*Under the moon the long river moves
Over the long river the moon moves wearily
Under the moon on the long river the canoe moves to the sea*

*Past the high reeds
Past the low grass
the canoe moves to the sea
the canoe moves with the moving moon to the sea
So they are companions to the sea the canoe the moon and the man
Why do the moon and the man move meekly together to the sea*

I will conclude with two remarks. Firstly, one may feel that Van Ostaijen's explanation of what he is doing is overly elaborate, but we may see in his critical articles a wrestling match with himself, as he seeks a way out of his impasse. Secondly, we may also feel that to rely on the sound and rhythm of words as a solution to one's problem is asking a lot of them, but given the quality of the poetry that results, clearly his efforts met with success.

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