‘Paul van Ostaijens modernism: a pain that encompasses all of man's consciousness’

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Paul van Ostaijen's modernism: a pain that encompasses all of man's consciousness

Literary periods most often seem to become defined retrospectively and by comparison to the views and self-perceptions of subsequent periods. The currently raging debate on Postmodernism e.g. has thus rephrased the question 'what was modernism.'¹ In one of the most commonly quoted statements on Postmodernism the French philosopher Jean François Lyotard posits that 'en simplifiant à l'extrême, on tient pour "postmoderne" l'incrédulité à l'égard des métarécits.'² Precisely as to when this Postmodern attitude came about, and whether we are to see it as the triumph of a new Foucaultian episteme or not, opinion differs.³ The important thing is that in Lyotard's opinion it is this disbelief in or distrust of all metanarratives (a translation provided by Hassan & Hassan)⁴, all external legitimations, all external explanations that differentiates Postmodernism from its predecessor, Modernism. As such, Lyotard's definition of Postmodernism re-orientates the by now critical commonplace that Modernism, at least in its literary and Anglo-American variant, characterises itself by a quest for 'unity'.⁵ In this view, Modernism heavily relies on the authority of meta-narratives to find solace from the chaos of nihilism which, owing to political, social, ethical, and economic circumstances, it saw yawning. These circumstances have been sufficiently detailed elsewhere to spare me the trouble of going into them here.⁶ Suffice it to say that most Modernists rely on the authority of some metanarrative to give their works the wholeness and unity they see as lost in their own world but which they continue to strive after, often nostalgically, often provisionally, often hypothetically, in their works.⁷ If all this has been elaborately discussed and traced with regard to Anglo-American literature, such is not the case for a number of other Western literatures. My aim in this article is to show how the Modernist quest for 'unity', and the ultimate failure of that quest, inscribe themselves in the work of the Flemish (i.e. living in the northern part of Belgium and writing in Dutch) poet Paul van Ostaijen (1896-1928).

Paul van Ostaijen wrote poetry, prose pieces (mostly grotesques), and both art and literary criticism. In all these fields he showed himself a keen observer of contemporary developments in European literature. Already in 1925 he translated some of Kafka's stories into Dutch. His critical essays advocated the most modern concepts of poetry - and art in general - and introduced his Dutch and Flemish audience to some of the most important German and French avant-garde poets and theoreticians. Over the past few years, the work of Van Ostaijen has received increasing international attention.⁸ In 1976 New Directions published *Feasts of Fear and Agony*, Hidde van Ameyden van Duyn's translation of *Feesten van Angst en Pijn*, a collection which, although only published in 1928, after Van Ostaijen's death, occupies, as far as composition goes, an intermediate

position between *Music-Hall* (1916) en *Het Sienjaal* [The Signal] (1918) on the one hand, and *Bezette Stad* [Occupied City] (1921) and *Nagelaten Gedichten* [Posthumous Poems] (1928) on the other hand.⁹

We can sketch Van Ostaijen's poetical development by contrasting his use of two 'internal landscapes' referring to the image of a pond. The first excerpt is from the poem 'Herinnering' [Remembrance] from Van Ostaijen's earliest collection *Music-Hall*. The second is from 'Landschap' [Landscape] from his *Nagelaten Gedichten* [Posthumous Poems].

Toen minde ik de blanke zwaan
En de vijver wist ik ongeschonden reinheid
Dat hoorde zo bij mijn jonge dichterswaan
(I, 65)

[Then I loved the white swan/And the pond I knew to be untouched
purity/That was part of my young poet's fancy]

Begerend alle klaarte
verlangend alle maanstraalstraten
is de vijver
glad en eenzaam
heldere drager van het veelvoudig éne
van het éne veelvoudige
licht
(II, 91)

[Desiring all clarity/yearning for all moon ray lanes/the pond is/smooth
and lonesome/the limpid carrier of the multiple one/the one multiple/light]

There is quite a difference between the first pond, in its 'untouched purity,' and the second one, 'smooth and lonesome/the limpid carrier of the multiple one/the one multiple/light'. The former stands at the beginning, the latter at the end of a long evolution leading from innocence to experience and serenity. The use of the past tense, and the very title 'Herinnering' [Remembrance], in the poem from *Music-Hall*, show that even in his first collection of poems Van Ostaijen was well aware of the inevitable loss of 'untouched purity' which each act of writing presupposes. Indeed, writing, being an act of consciousness, presupposes a rupture between the individual and the transcendental. It implies renouncing the transcendental as immanent. The consciousness of this loss leads the poet to be a prophet, a perennial seeker for restored wholeness and unity.

Maurice Gilliams, in 'Een bezoek aan het prinsengraf' [A visit to the prince's grave]¹⁰, writes that

Paul van Ostaijen is de dichter van een pijn die het bewustzijn van de gehele mens omvat, die hem loutert en gedurig aan met de vernieling van zijn dierbaarste en fijnste zintuigen bedreigt. Zijn gehele oeuvre door treft men sporen aan van een blanke verschriktheid, die niet in geweeeklaag en gekreun tot uiting komt, doch achter een wilskrachtig intellectuele bedwongenheid te raden is. Het laat geen twijfel dat deze actieve en

waakzame jongeman een tragicus van den bloede, een innerlijk gefolterde was.

[Paul van Ostaijen is the poet of a pain that encompasses all of man's consciousness, that

chastens him and that continuously threatens to destroy his most precious and refined senses. Throughout his work we encounter the traces of an abject fear, which does not utter itself through wailing and moaning, but which we can guess at behind an energetic intellectual restraint. There can be no doubt that this active and alert young man was, in his inner self, a tragic personality, a tormented human being.]

Van Ostaijen may have been such a tormented human being, but he was also a poet who tried to overcome the cause of this 'abject fear', of this 'pain that encompasses all of man's consciousness'. In all his collections of poems Van Ostaijen admits that it is impossible to reach the transcendental but at the same time he always emphasizes the supreme value of trying for it. In his article 'Blue Skiff of the Soul. The Significance of the Colour Blue in Paul van Ostaijen's Poetry', E.M. Beekman argues that

while on the surface Van Ostaijen's use of blue symbolizes peace, profundity and contemplation, it also means for him an unyielding passivity, an endlessness which never discloses a goal, and, consequently, a metaphysical sadness for the insufficiency of human endeavours.¹¹

Consequently, this study of one aspect of Van Ostaijen's poetry reaches a conclusion very similar to Gilliam's evaluation of all of Van Ostaijen's work. Somewhat further along in his article Beekman remarks that

the desire to capture the impossible, to be once again truly innocent, to know nature once more in its primordial beauty - these desires are unrealistic but they can be dreamt - ultimately one has only oneiric knowledge.¹²

Van Ostaijen's poetry becomes the embodiment of this desire. The road leading from the pond 'that I knew to be untouched purity' from 'Herinnering' [Remembrance], to the pond, 'smooth and lonesome' from 'Landschap' [Landscape], is one long search for the transcendental, for the identification of the individual with a higher unity.

In *Music-Hall* Van Ostaijen longs for a 'unanimistic' unity.¹³ All people are alone and insecure,

Onzeker gaan de mensen
Ter Music-Hall;
Onzeker staan de mensen
In de zwarte zaal.
(I, 8)

[Insecure people go/To the Music-Hall;/Insecure, people stand/in the dark hall]

But very soon, when the show starts,

elk mens wordt 'n ander mens

en al de anderen zijn weer dees één mens
(I, 16)

[every man becomes a different man/and all the others again are this one
man]

The poet and his fellow spectators are all ‘brothers’, ‘oh, brothers of mine’ (I, 12/13) and rapidly there is

In de Music-Hall slechts één hart,
En één ziel. Eén kloppend hart,
Eén levende ziel.
(I, 16)

[In the Music-Hall only one heart,/And one soul. One beating heart,/One living soul.]

The poet, the spectators, the show: all the world has become one:

Maar niet enkel de mensen
Vormen dit éne wezen,
Wel alles wat in de Music-Hall
Aan bonte wemeling is herrezen.
(I, 16)

[But not only the people/Make up this one single being,/But everything which, in the Music-Hall/from multicolored multitude has again come into being.]

In the poem ‘Nieuwe Weg’ [New Road] the people passing by an open window listen to someone playing the piano inside and

Zo in d'innerlijke vreugd van één mens delen
Zij, die ver van hem staan, daar buiten.
(I, 41)

[Thus share in the inner joy of one single man/Those that are far away from him, outside.]

The poet, in his youthful joy,

zou willen lopen en elk mens
Die voorbijkomt, door de lens
Van zijn geluk doen kijken.
(I, 49)

[would like to walk and let each man/That passes, look through the lens/of his happiness.]

Notwithstanding these optimistic sounds, we also encounter more somber tones in *Music-Hall*. The ‘one heart, one soul’ are very easily rent apart when the show is over:

De ziel is aan flarden gescheurd
En heeft haar éénheid verbeurd.
Toen de ziel even buiten de zaal was,
Is zij stukgevallen als zeer broos glas.
(I, 20)

[The soul has been torn to shreds/And has forfeited its unity./When the
soul was just barely outside the hall,/It fell to pieces like very brittle glass.]

and

Mijn vriend en ik, wij hebben beiden
Een weg genomen, gans verscheiden.
(I, 41)

[My friend and I, we both/Have taken a road, so very different.]

All in all, the Music-Hall, just like the two Jewish girls from the poem 'Jonge Lente'
[Early Spring], only had the poet's

hart verleid
En tot 'n kort geluk herleid.
(I, 75)

[heart seduced/And to brief joy reduced.]

The music-hall is only make-believe, far removed from reality:

O, M'n Music-Hall wieg m'op uw geluiden,
Dat ik weer eens de ware wereld buiten
Treed; dat ik weer eens wone
In illuzie's hogere regionen.
(I, 18)

[Oh, My Music-Hall, rock me with your sounds,/That once again I leave
the real world/Behind; that once again I live/In the higher regions of
illusion.]

and

En jij, kino, sterkt me voor 'n korte stonde
In die hoop, zachte illusiestonde.
(I, 19)

[And you, movie theater, maintains, for a little while/My hopes, sweet
moment of illusion.]

Happiness is only to be found in brief moments of artificially created joy, or via
someone else's heart. In the poem 'Herfst' [Autumn], when

enkel van dit droef getij
Blijft onzekerheid in (hem)
(I, 35)

[of this sad season/Only insecurity remains in (him)]

the poet cannot complete his sad poem, because

(hij) nu leef(t) buiten de grijze mistplooien
Van Herfst en onzekerheid.
Door de Herfst is Grete
Getreden, zonnige tred,
En, weer,
Een tweede keer,
Dragen de bomen bloesems.

(I, 37)

[(he) now live(s) outside the grey misty folds/Of Autumn and
insecurity./Through the Autumn Grete/Has come, her steps all sun,/And
once again/A second time/The trees are flowering.]

However, in 'Twist met Grete' [Quarrel with Grete], the poet proclaims that,

Wie zich een hart weet, hij heeft een tent,
Waar rust is, door niemand buiten hem gekend.
(I, 47)

[He who is sure of someone's heart, has a tent/Where there is peace, known
to no one but him].

A tent, a music-hall: both are merely temporary refuges from the 'real world', both
only protect the poet for a 'sweet moment of illusion.' Very soon the poet has to
admit that

Ach, alle dingen
Zinken
Ter eeuwigheid.
(I, 79)

[Alas, all things/Sink/Into eternity]

Brittle as glass is the 'unanime,' a mere short-lived common vibration of hopelessly
lonely souls, and the poet knows himself to be

een triestig sinjeur,
Een pijnlik, armzalig poseur,-
(I, 71)

[a poor fellow,/A sad and pityful poseur,-]

Whereas *Music-Hall* voices a desire for identification with a 'unanime', one single
soul common to a host of people bound together at one place and time by a common
experience, Van Ostaijen's second collection of poems, *Het Sienjaal* [The Signal]
(1918) voices a desire for identification with larger entities. Although the first poems
of this collection still treat the same subjects as the poems from *Music-Hall* - the
poet's love for a girl, the ties of friendship, the influence of a landscape on the poet's
mood - very soon we find the poet leaving this purely personal problematic behind:

Ik wacht en voel 't immense van mijn leed
wijl ik slechts vaag weet mijn leven incompleet.
(I, 114)

[I wait and feel the immensity of my sorrow/as I only vaguely feel my life
to be incomplete.]

The later poems from this collection have one predominant theme: the

love toward humanity as a whole, and to the universe in all its manifestations. As such, this collection is an illustration of so-called 'humanitarian expressionism.' Throughout the collection the poet celebrates a cosmic fusion of the individual, the community, and the universe. This fusion is portrayed as an identification with natural phenomena and has mystical overtones. In 'Zomerregenlied' [Song of the rain in summer], the rain is addressed as 'Regen, reiniging buiten mij,' [Rain, purification outside of me] (I, 88). The rain is personified to symbolize an irresistible force, sweeping along the individual:

Ritmus van de fijne regen.
stappen van een pygmeeën-leger, dat draaft naar zege;
stortregen, marsj van het heir der schone nederlagen,
opflakkerend leven. Losbrekend pathos
(I, 89)

[Rhythm of the fine rain,/steps of an army of pygmees, rushing toward victory;/downpour, march of the troops of sweet defeats,/life rallying. Pathos bursting forth.]

Nieuwe werkelijkheid: zachte regen die mij omvat;
stortvlaag, die mij opneemt, verder draagt in zich;
(I, 90)

[New reality: soft rain that encompasses me;/downpour, that sweeps me up, and carries me along within itself.]

A feeling of cosmic fusion and identification with the universe dominates: 'Ritmus van mijn Ik, opgelost in het alomvattende ritmus van de elementen, [Rhythm of Myself, fused with the all-encompassing rhythm of the elements] (I, 89). This desire for fusion also takes the form of poems celebrating the throbbing life of the big city:

Tentaculaire stad. Het overaardse. Geheim en wezen samen.
Waarom kunnen wij niet aan de roep van deze stad weerstaan?
Waarom willen wij niet?
(I, 116)

[Tentacular city. The superreal. Mystery and reality fused into one./Why can't we resist the call of this city?/Why don't we want to?]

In some poems this desire for identification with larger forces expresses itself in the form of Flemish nationalism, as in 'Gulden sporen negentienhonderd zestien' [The Battle of the Golden Spurs 1916] (I, 115), 'Golgotha' (I, 135), and 'Zaaitijd' [Sowing season] (I, 136). The poet also addresses the international 'brotherhood of peoples', e.g. in the poem 'Februarie' [February]:

Broedergroet aan het volk van over onze grenzen.
De wind van onze haven die al de volkeren verfrist.
De muziek van de wind: de bassen onderlijnen door een Internationale.
(I, 119)

[A brotherly salute to the people beyond our borders./The wind of our harbor which refreshingly blows on all peoples./The music of the wind: to emphasize the bass tones with the International.]

In his book *De kringen naar Binnen* [The Circles Inward] Paul Hadermann labels *Het Sienjaal* [The Signal] 'Van Ostaijen's most joyful book.'¹⁴ On the whole, the tone of this collection is optimistic, as can be seen from the following lines:

Het geluk is tussen de lippen van dit kind en de gepletterde kers,
gelijk het is tussen de kerselippen van mijn lief
en van uw lief, o jonge man die ginds gaat, o broeder, mijn gelijke.
Het geluk is een dwaze maagd die zich laat zoenen door elk sterke, jonge man.
(I, 117)

[Happiness is between the lips of this child and the crushed cherry,/as it is between the lips of cherry of my love/and of your love, oh young man walking over there, oh brother, fellow of mine./Happiness is a carefree maiden that lets herself be kissed/by every strong young, man.]

The poem 'Het Sienjaal' [The Signal] voices a similar elation, a similar joy in rejuvenation and renewal. In this context, Van Ostaijen's mention of Whitman will not come as a surprise:

Wat niet mee wil, wordt meegerukt door de stroom, de machtige, de hernieuwende;
zang van mijn vader Whitman, zang van de Mississippi,
zang uit een engelse matrozeslop, psalm van heimwee en verlangen.
(I, 140)

[What refuses to go along, is swept away by the current,/the powerful, the renewing one;/song of my father Whitman, song of the Mississippi,/song from an English sailor's slum, psalm of nostalgia and desire.]

Everything seems 'Bevrucht/door dit ontastbaar coitus in de lucht' [Impregnated/by this impalpable coitus in the air] (I, 121). Nevertheless, in this collection too, some dissonants are to be heard. Although it is true that these 'liederen van het werkelijke leven' [songs of real life] (subtitle of part of the collection *Het Sienjaal* [The Signal] function as an antidote to the 'schijnen en kwijnen van veel rode en groene lichten' [twinkle and glare of numerous red and green lights] (I, 7) from *Music-Hall*, reality also presents less pleasant facets. In a universe ruled by natural forces, or in a political order where the collective preponderates upon the individual, the individual loses a lot of his importance. Van Ostaijen apparently realizes as much, when he writes, in 'Avondlied', [Evening Song]:

Rachitisme, kinderen die spoedig zullen sterven,
een dood als hun geboorte. Hun leven ook had geen belang.
(I, 97)

[Rachitis, children that soon will die,/a death similar to their birth. Their life too was of no importance.]

This is the unpleasant aspect of life in the big city, the ‘abbatoir van al de illuzies: tentaculaire grootstraat,’ [slaughterhouse of all illusions: oversized tentacular street] (I, 95). In the midst of all this the poet stands:

Deemoedig zult gij zijn, dichter die ik denk,
klein gij zelf en rond u alles groot van leven.
(I, 91)

Humble you will be, poet whom I am thinking of,/small you yourself and
everything around you big and alive.]

The poet's art is ‘volledig liefde zijn’ [to be love complete] (I, 98) and he carries ‘in zijn flank de vruchtbaarheid/ van honderdduizend zielen’, [in his side the fertility/of one hundred thousand souls] (I, 101). He feels himself to be the center of all life:

Ik sta midden van het plein
Zó als het plein te midden van der straten kruising ademt,
en ben dit alles nu. Rust.
(I, 90)

[I am standing in the middle of the square,/Just as the square is breathing
at the crossroads of all streets,/and now I am all this. Peace.]

The poet is a creator, who ‘een warme golf over de stad laat varen’, [releases a warm wave upon the city] (I, 131):

Alles stroomt naar mij toe, - gelijk het maanlicht
schept een zee: haar eigen leven, -
(I, 131)

[Everything converges in me, - as the moonlight creates a sea: its own life,
-]

Not a pond, as in ‘the pond/smooth and lonesome’, from ‘Landschap’ [Landscape], but a sea; and in ‘Lied voor Mezelf’ [Song for Myself] the poet writes:

Met mijn boot moet ik op zee.
Of ik de rijke haven vinden zal weet geen; de sterren niet.
Doch steeds zingen de baren: Kom met ons mee, kom met ons mee.
Is het de lokstem van de Loreley?
(I, 109)

[With my boat I have to go out to sea./Whether I will find the wealthy
harbor no one can tell; not the stars./But always the waves are singing:
Come along, come along./Is this the Siren's voice?

The peace which the poet thought to have reached is merely an illusion. Just as the ‘unanime’ in *Music-Hall* was merely make-believe, the cosmic feeling of fusion with all of humanity, with the entire universe, is only a temporary palliative:

Ik weet; er is iets meer dan dit hopeloze leven,
 het reële misterie boven het onbegrijpelijke van dit zinloos zijn.
 Ik zoek nu naar het onbewust geweten, dat zich niet bieden wil.
 Slechts de straten zonder betekenis, de huizenweedom van het zelfvoldaan bestaan.
 (I, 122)

[I know: there is something beyond this hopeless life./the real mystery
 beyond the incomprehensibility of this purposeless existence./Now I am
 looking for that unconscious conscience, that refuses to be
 approached./Only streets without meaning, the unfathomable woe of a
 smug existence.]

The poet can never find peace of mind because his destiny is

Ahasver te zijn. Nooit rustende geest.
 Elke rustplaats is leugen.
 Zelfs over de baren gaat zoekend Kristus
 en zijn handen vallen in de witte mist.
 (I, 127)

[To be Ahasuerus. Never resting spirit./Every refuge is a lie./Even walking
 the waves Christ wanders seeking/and his hands drop down in the white
 fog.]

Het Sienjaal [The Signal] - as opposed to *Music-Hall*, where Van Ostaijen tries to express a momentary, and spatially extremely limited, unity with his surroundings - embodies a desire for identification with all of humanity and with the universe. Neither of these collections satisfied Van Ostaijen in the long run: there always remained the desire for a more profound, a more encompassing unity. As the poet now has exhausted all 'earthly' possibilities, only one road remains open to him: the road to the transcendental. *De Feesten van Angst en Pijn* [Feasts of Fear and Agony] and *Bezette Stad* [Occupied City] are steps in this direction. However, in order to understand the aesthetic principles underlying these two collections, and also the *Nagelaten Gedichten* [Posthumous Poems], we first have to pay some attention to Van Ostaijen's critical-theoretical tenets.

In his paper 'Expressionisme in Vlaanderen', [Expressionism in Flanders] (1918) Van Ostaijen posits that modern art has to strive for 'verinnerlijking en vereenvoudiging' [has to be directed inward and has to aim at simplification] (IV, 52). Similar ideas are behind all his collections published after *Het Sienjaal* [The Signal]. The aim of 'to be directed inward' and 'simplification' is what Van Ostaijen, in 'Voorwoord bij zes lino's van Floris Jaspers', [Foreword to six lino-cuts by Floris Jaspers] (November 1919) calls 'ideoplastiek' and which he himself defines as follows:

voor de ideoplastiek ligt de esthetiek in het uitbeelden volgens het
 onwankelbare begrip schoonheid, begrip dat het oorspronkelijk gebied
 der ziel is. (IV, 67)

[*ideoplastiek* sees aesthetics as the representation according to the immutable idea of beauty, an idea which is the original domain of the soul.]

This immutable idea of beauty can only be reached via 'ontindividualiser-

ing', [disindividualisation]: to abandon all personal mannerisms to express the idea. Van Ostaijen himself defines disindividualisation as follows:

Het wichtigste is niet of wij volledig of betrekkelijk met de objecten van de buitenwereld breken. Het wichtigste is dat de maatstaf voor het betrachten van de buitenwereld niet meer in het wisselvallige van deze buitenwereld ligt, maar in het subject, daar dit de drager is van het ene, onwankelbare begrip. (IV, 66)

[The most important thing is not whether we break completely or only relatively with the objects of the outer world. The most important thing is that the norm for approaching the outer world is no longer to be situated in the accidentalness of this outer world, but in the subject (i.e. the artist) as this is the carrier of this one, immutable idea.]¹⁵

In *Het Sienjaal* [The Signal] Van Ostaijen had already written that 'het razend bewuste een kerkersel is', [extreme consciousness is a dungeon] (I, 122). Consequently, the road to disindividualisation goes by way of the subconscious or the unconscious:

het gaat erom een vorm te vinden, dewelke de kwaliteit van het subconsciente affect van het gesproken woord in het bewust geschrevene *enigermate* redt. (IV, 108)

[We have to find a form, which *to a degree*, retains the quality of the subconscious affect of the spoken word in the consciously written.]¹⁶

The poem, the work of art, has to be independent:

losgerukt de objectieve vormen van hun empirische samenhang; en de subjectieve visie losgerukt van de schepper doordat haar lokalisering een zelfstandige microcosmos is, door de subjectieve visie zo te exterioriseren dat het wil zeggen van zich, de kunstenaar, vervreemden ... een kunstwerk is *abstract*, maar niet *substract*, (IV, 85)

[The objective forms (have to be) independent from their empirical relations; and the subjective vision independent from its creator because it has to be embodied in an independent microcosm, by exteriorizing the subjective vision in such a way as to alienate it from himself, from the artist ... a work of art is *abstract*, but not *substract*.]¹⁷

In his own subconscious the poet encounters those 'vibrations' he has to cause himself, via his work of art, in the subconscious of his reader. Disindividualisation enables the artist to reach his fellow men by way of the 'aseiteit' [aseity] of the work of art.

De Feesten van Angst en Pijn [Feasts of Fear and Agony] and *Bezette Stad* [Occupied City] are examples of Van Ostaijen's aesthetics of disindividualisation. In both collections everything aims at rendering the 'idea': grammar is distorted, connectives frequently are left out, ready-made formulae from advertisements, popular

songs, and news headlines, are used. The lay-out too tries to express the 'idea', as Van Ostaijen argues in his article 'Over de typografie van *Bezette Stad*' [On the lay-out of Occupied City]. In this respect Van Ostaijen followed the examples of Mallarmé and Apollinaire, although Van Ostaijen's use of lay-out is much more radical than Apollinaire's, especially in *De Feesten van Angst en Pijn* [Feasts of

Fear and Agony].¹⁸ Action writing and free association of thoughts replace the linear-causal logic and *a priori* content of *Music-Hall* and *Het Sienjaal* [The Signal].

In as far as disindividualisation expresses the desire for 'ideoplastiek', and for the 'immutable idea of beauty, an idea which is the original domain of the soul,' (IV, 67) it is also 'de maatstaf naar dewelke te meten is het goddelijke in de kunst, [the criterion with which (we can) measure the divine in art] (IV, 79). When I said before that *De Feesten van Angst en Pijn* [Feasts of Fear and Agony] and *Bezette Stad* [Occupied City] were steps on Van Ostaijen's road toward the transcendental, I should now specify this by saying that, more than anything else, these collections are a squaring of accounts with the outer world, with 'real life'. Instead of the humanitarian creed of *Het Sienjaal* [The Signal], we now find utter despair:

De ene valt
 een opgejaagd dier dom ben gevallen
 hebben me gehad Honden
 maar zo is het Zo hoort het ook
 dat is de wereldorde
 (F, 'De Moordenaars' [The Murderers])

[One man falls/a hunted animal stupid fell/got me Dogs/but that's the way
 it is That's the way it should be too/that's the way of the world]

Meaninglessness is all-pervasive:

stampers stampen alleen
 doelloze rijpheid
 oorzaakloos schokkend
 (F, 'marsj van de hete zomer' [hot summer march])

[pistils pitch alone/aimless fertility/causelessly twitching]

In *Het Sienjaal* [The Signal] a hermit in the desert can make his way to 'het heiligmakende water van de Jordaan', [the sanctifying waters of the river Jordan] (I, 47) and 'na veertig dagen van ontbering, van verzoeking en van moedeloosheid/deze beek die zuiver zingt in zich vindt', [after forty days of suffering, temptation and despondency/finds this brook singing pure within himself] (I, 148). In *De Feesten van Angst en Pijn* [Feasts of Fear and Agony],

Stort een arme man zijn stem die verschroeit
 in de brand van Zon en Zomer
 zijn stem
 oasis verdort in Sahara
 (F, 'marsj van de hete zomer' [hot summer march])

[Pours a poor man his searing voice/in the fire of Sun and Summer/his
 voice/oasis withers in Sahara]¹⁹

In *Het Sienjaal* [The Signal], the poet asks:

Kan een boot, mijn Heer, vergaan
die niets draagt dan het licht gewicht van mijn

blauwe ziel?
(I, 109)

[Can a boat, my Lord, founder/which carries but the sheer weightless
weight of my blue soul?]

Now we read, in *De Feesten van Angst en Pijn* [Feasts of Fear and Agony]:

uitgemergeld land
uitgemergelde mensen
wij zwalpen
op zee
wrak
drijvend wrak
is er dan geen aziel voor wrakke mensen?
(F, 'Fatalisties Liedje' [Fatalistic Little Song])

[waste land/wasted people/we are drifting/at sea/wreck/driftng wreck/is
there no refuge for wrecked people?]

The imagery of *De Feesten van Angst en Pijn* (Feasts of Fear and Agony) and *Bezette Stad* [Occupied City] constantly refers to the human body, dwelling at length upon its weakness, its ugliness, and its transientness:

alles in mij
aan stukken rijten
tot het
lijf in
lompen hangt
(F, 'Vers 3' [Poem 3])

[to tear everything inside of me/to pieces/until this/body is/mere dangling
shreds]

and

hun lijf
vervalt
een rotte regen van het vlees
(F, 'Prière Impromptue 2')

[their body/decays/a putrid rain of the flesh]

In *Bezette Stad* [Occupied City] we find more examples of such an almost nihilistic despair:

De Laatste der Mohikanen
 is de meest passende roman
 alles beproefd
 wij zijn aan't einde van alle ismen isthmen
 van alle kathedralen
 van alle profeten
 van alle kateders
 (BS/OC, 'Opdracht' [Dedication])

[The Last of the Mohicans/is the most appropriate novel/everything has
 been attempted/we're at the end of all isms isthmuses/of all cathedrals/of
 all phrophets/of all pulpits]

and

ML4,3Nihil in alle richtingen
 ihil in alle geslachten
 ihil in alle talen en
 alle dialekten
 Nihil in alle lettertekens
 (BS/OC, 'Opdracht' [Dedication])

[Nihil in all directions/ihil in all genders/ihil in all languages and/all
 dialects/Nihil in all characters]

The sequence of poems entitled 'De Kringen naar Binnen' [The Circles Inward] from
Bezette Stad [Occupied City] emphasizes once more how the outer world, in all its
 manifestations, is merely make-believe and illusion. Within this sequence, the poem
 'Music-Hall' evokes this feeling, when, after a brief moment of illusion, the show

wegzinkt rond je
 en enkel
 het razend ratelen van je kino
 je dinamo
 je hart

[fades around you/and nothing but/the raving rattle of your projector/your
 dynamo/your heart]

and finally

Jeanne
 ik
 de anderen
 (zijn) schamele
 schooiers

[Jeanne/I/the others/(are) poor/beggars]

In the poem 'Asta Nielsen', a parody of the movie star craze, Asta Nielsen, a famous
 starlet of the twenties, symbolizes the movie itself. The film, just like the music-hall,
 merely offers the spectators a brief moment of distraction:

Zo zitten wij zat geschouwd
 in het
 goddelik spel van je wiegende golf
 en gaan over ons de oorlogsberichten
 Berlijn Parijs Londen Petrograd

Thus, having gazed our fill, we are basking/in the/divine play of your
 heaving waves/and the news from the war rolls over us/Berlin Paris London
 Petrograd]

All other poems from 'De Kringen naar Binnen' [The Circles Inward] have, as central setting, a bar. Whether it be a Music-Hall, a movie theater, or a bar, all these are places where man is merely fed upon illusions instead of real hope. If all reality is only illusion, nothing is left to the poet but to turn his gaze inward and to draw 'the circles inward'. *Bezette Stad* [Occupied City] closes with a paragraph clearly expressing Van Ostaijen's realization that negating the outer world is not enough: it does not make any sense to ask

 waarom waarom waarom
 lig nou niet te klessen
 het leven oh oh
 alles is zonder zin
 nu
 kattedrek
 Vive Max/Leve de gekrepeerden

[why why why/quit bullshitting/life oh oh/everything is
 meaningless/now/bullshit/Vive Max/ Long live all corpses]

but

misschien wordt eens
 de nood zo groot
 alle dijken breken.

[maybe once/the need will be so pressing/all dikes give way]

Finally, even nihilism and despair, even the negation of the outer world, still point to a preoccupation with worldly things. The poet still has not succeeded in healing the initial rupture between the individual and the transcendental. The 'Prières Impromptues' from *De Feesten van Angst en Pijn* [Feasts of Fear and Agony] voice the poet's consciousness of this gulf separating him from the transcendental. The poet has now renounced all worldly things:

Ik leg
 al het dragen van valse juwelen af

[I cast aside/and will not wear again any fake jewels]

but

Nog schittert geen licht dat hechter is
 Ik leg de schone kleren af
 besef het valse sieraad
 maar
 naakt heb ik kou
 het licht van God
 omhult mij
 nog niet
 (F, 'Prière Impromptue 2')

[Still there shines no firmer light/I discard pretty clothes/am aware of
 trinkets/but/naked I feel cold/the light of God/does not yet/encompass me]

In *De Feesten van Angst en Pijn* [Feasts of Fear and Agony] he wanted

Bidden God te geven de kelk die niet te weigeren is

[To pray to God to hand (him) the chalice which cannot be refused]

but

hij valt nog uit mijn handen
 angstig ben ik en vreemd mij dit ongekend gebeuren
 Nog is het leed niet zo dat ik het begrijp begrippeloos
 in't onverstaan van leed en vreugde
 Nog vlucht ik van de eenheid naar de tweeheid
 (F, 'Prière Impromptue' 1)

[it still falls from my hands/afraid am I and strange to me this unknown
 phenomenon/Still my sorrow is not such that I grasp it
 unconsciously/unaware of sorrow and joy/still I flee unity toward duality]

The poet still has not reached unity and wholeness, the immanence of the transcendental. Free association of thoughts can lead to disindividualisation on a general human level, but not on a transcendental level. From now on Van Ostaijen will abandon all concern with 'content' and concentrate upon 'form'.²⁰ As such, he arrives at a doctrine of 'pure poetry' several years before Bremond's *Poésie pure*. Instead of a 'geestescommunie' [community of the soul]²¹ with his fellow men, Van Ostaijen henceforth strives after a veritable communion with the transcendental:

Ik wil niet weten
 ik wil niet vragen
 Ik wil bloot zijn
 en beginnen
 (F, 'Vers 6' [Poem 6])

[I do not want to know/I do not want to ask/I want to be naked/and to
 begin]

To Van Ostaijen, art now is 'een wanhopig streven de leegte te vullen, de reinheid te herwinnen. De onderbewuste vooruitzetting van elke kunstenaar is het weten om het - zonder hoop op completisering - ontbrekende',

[a desperate attempt to fill the void, to recapture purity. To be an artist means to strive - without any hope to ever obtain it - after the knowledge of what one has lost] (IV, 107)

De Feesten van Angst en Pijn [Feasts of Fear and Agony] and *Bezette Stad* [Occupied City] are set to the jerky rhythm of jazz music, and this music is often explicitly alluded to throughout these collections. The syncopated rhythms and 'barbaric character' of this music underline the iconoclastic implications of these collections: the music of 'nihil' violently evoking Van Ostaijen's disindividualised disgust with reality. The jazzy rhythm also suits the technique of free association of thoughts: the apparently arbitrary linking of ideas resembling jazz improvisations.

In his *Nagelaten Gedichten* [Posthumous Poems] (1928) Van Ostaijen predominantly applies techniques borrowed from folk songs and nursery rhymes, based upon spontaneous word and sound association. This last development - from thought association to sound association as the basis for his poems - constitutes Van Ostaijen's most extreme attempt at disindividualisation and implies the most absolute autonomy of the poem. As such, this last step in Van Ostaijen's poetic development also implies the closest possible approximation of 'the immutable idea of beauty, an idea which is the original domain of the soul' (IV, 67). It is almost a paradox that these short poems, direct opposites of all traditional 'confessional' poetry, take the poet closest to the transcendental. In 'Proeve van Parallellen tussen moderne beeldende kunst en moderne dichtkunst' [A Demonstration of Parallel Developments in the modern plastic arts and modern poetry] Van Ostaijen quotes Däubler's contention that 'art is to make the transcendental visible', and then argues that

het organisch expressionisme zich van de isolering der vormen - lichamen of woorden - bedient om met het trillen van deze isoleringen tegenover elkaar dit fantasma zichtbaar of hoorbaar te maken. (IV, 241)

[organical expressionism sets apart isolated forms - objects or words - and via the vibration of these isolated forms over against one another and at the same time in unison, makes visible or audible the mystery]²¹

Consequently, the most perfect examples of this 'organic expressionism', of such 'setting apart of isolated forms', - as e.g. Van Ostaijen's poems 'melopee', 'berceuse presque nègre', 'marc groet's morgens de dingen' [marc greeting things in the morning], 'zeer kleine speeldoos' [very small musical box], 'Polonaise', and 'berceuse nr. 2' - are approximations of a restored immanence, a recaptured unity of the individual and the transcendental. It is paradoxical that this recaptured wholeness and unity originate from the perfect 'isolation' of both the poet and the transcendental, with the poem as cause, proof, and result of a 'Unio Mystica'. Here we can also see why Van Ostaijen himself considered Guido Gezelle, a nineteenth-century Flemish poet who had arrived at a somewhat similar vision and who also wrote 'pure poetry' based upon sound and word association, as his 'great precursor'.

There is a clear development from the 'untouched purity' from *Music-Hall* to 'the pond/smooth and lonesome/carrier of the multiple one/the one multiple/light' from *Nagelaten Gedichten* [Posthumous Poems]: we notice a concentric expansion in terms of time and space. In *Music-Hall* the poet strives after an 'unanime', a temporally and spatially narrowly limited unity. In *Het Sienjaal* [The Signal] he advocates a cosmic identification with the universe and a 'community of the soul'. In *De Feesten van Angst en Pijn* [Feasts of Fear and Agony] and *Bezette Stad* [Occupied City] Van Ostaijen despairs of achieving such a community, and posits the doctrine of thought association and disindividualisation. Finally, in the *Nagelaten Gedichten* [Posthumous Poems] we witness a mystical union with the transcendental, embodied in the poem. This development is only possible by a constant process of 'being directed inward' and 'simplification' of the poet's vision and of the poem. It can hardly be a coincidence that poems like

Slaap als een reus
 slaap als een roos
 slaap als een reus van een roos
 reuzeke
 rozeke
 zoetekoeksdozeke
 doe de deur dicht van de doos
 Ik slaap
 (II, 236 'berceuse nr. 2')

[Doze like a giant/doze like a rose/doze like a giant of a rose/little
 giant/little roze/little box of gingerbread/close the door of the box/I'm
 asleep]²²²³

are so close to nonsense verse or nursery rhymes. Early childhood is the time of untouched purity, the period of innocence, of original vision, unspoiled by habits and traditions. The very best of Van Ostaijen's *Nagelaten Gedichten* [Posthumous Poems] try to capture this original vision, via their musical quality, perfect autonomy and self-sufficient form: 'Het wonder van het eerste zien dringt naar aseiteit' [the miracle of original vision posits aseity] (IV, 241). For the child this first vision and innocence are immanent: they have not yet been lost by growing up. For the poet the rendering of this first vision is always an act of consciousness, and therefore non-immanent:

De geschreven gedichten moet men lezen afhankelijk van een gansheid,
 die nooit zichtbaar of op enig andere wijze toegankelijk werd ... wanneer
 de dichter spreekt is het niet uit zijn volheid - in de ogenblikken van
 volmaakte volheid dicht hij niet - doch wel uit zijn verlangen naar deze
 volheid. (IV, 315)

[One should read these (written) poems as being dependent upon a
 wholeness which never became visible or accessible in any other way ...
 when the poet speaks it is not from a sense of wholeness - in his moments
 of wholeness he does not write poetry - but from his desire for this
 wholeness].

Therefore every poem is but a 'pis-aller' (IV, 316). Even when the poet is closest to the transcendental he is still the carrier of that 'pain that encompasses all of man's consciousness'. Even in his most perfect works he is, in last instance, unable to ever heal that pain.

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THEO D'HAEN

Eindnoten:

- 1 Harry Levin, in his very perceptive 'What Was Modernism' (most conveniently available, with a preface considerably adding to the article's interest, in *Refractions*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1966, pp. 271-95), already tentatively and by implication raises some of the questions that will become central to the discussion of Postmodernism.
- 2 Jean François Lyotard, *La condition postmoderne: Rapport sur le savoir*, Paris: Minuit, 1979, p. 7.
- 3 Ihab Hassan, in his various publications on Postmodernism, e.g. *The Dismemberment of Orpheus: Toward a Postmodern Literature* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1982), *Paracriticisms: Seven Speculations of the Times* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1975), and *The Right Promethean Fire: Imagination, Science, and Cultural Change* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1980), sees Postmodernism as beginning with Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake*. Christopher Butler, in *After the Wake: An Essay on the Contemporary Avant Garde* (London: Oxford University Press, 1980) considers Abstract Expressionism, already well in existence in the nineteen forties, to be part of Postmodernism. Other critics see it as starting in the nineteen fifties with the early work of John Hawkes, William Gaddis, etc. Brian McHale, in 'Change of Dominant from Modernist to Postmodernist Writing' (Douwe Fokkema & Hans Bertens, eds. *Approaching Postmodernism*, Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 1986, pp. 53-79) posits a gradual shading of Modernism, via what he calls 'Limit-Modernism', into Postmodernism during the nineteen fifties. Some critics argue for continuity between Modernism and Postmodernism, and their respective world views, other critics argue for a radical break.
- 4 Ihab & Sally Hassan, eds., *Innovation/Renovation: New Perspectives on the Humanities* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1983).
- 5 It is certainly no coincidence that this term looms so large in the vocabulary of the critical movement I see as most closely associated with Anglo-American Modernism, viz. New Criticism.
- 6 See e.g. Malcolm Bradbury, *The Social Context of English Literature* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1971), Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane, eds., *Modernism 1890-1930* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976), C.B. Cox and A.E. Dyson, eds., *The Twentieth-Century Mind: History, Ideas, and Literature in Britain* (London: Oxford University Press, 1972), Richard Ellmann and Charles Feidelson, eds., *The Modern Tradition: Backgrounds of Modern Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), Peter Faulkner, *Modernism* (London: Methuen, 1977), Hugh Kenner, *The Pound Era* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971) and *A Homemade World* (London: Marion Boyars, 1977), John McCormick, *American Literature 1919-1932: A Comparative History* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971), and David Perkins, *A History of Modern Poetry: From the 1890's to the High Modernist Mode* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1976).
- 7 See Douwe Fokkema and Elrud Ibsch, *Het Modernisme in de Europese Letterkunde* (Amsterdam: De Arbeiderspers, 1984, p. 11ff); this work will shortly appear in an English version as *Modernist Conjectures: A Main stream in European Literature 1910-1940* (London: C. Hurst, 1987).
- 8 In English, two works should be mentioned in particular: E.M. Beekman's *Homeopathy of the Absurd: The Grotesque in Paul van Ostayen's Creative Prose* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff,

- 1970) and Kristiaan Versluys's *The Poet in the City: Chapters in the Development of Urban Poetry in Europe and the United States (1800-1930)* (Tübingen: Günter Narr Verlag, 1987).
- 9 For passages from Van Ostaijen's criticism the standard edition was used: Van Ostaijen, P. *Verzameld Werk*, Vols I-IV, Antwerp, The Hague, Amsterdam, 1952-56. Vol. IV: *Proza II: Kritieken en Essays* [Prose: Criticism and Essays]. The other volumes in this edition contain: Vol. I: *Poezie I: Music-Hall, Het Sienjaal* [The Signal] and *De Feesten van Angst en Pijn* [Feasts of Fear and Agony]; Vol. II: *Poezie II: Bezette Stad* [Occupied City] and *Nagelaten Gedichten* [Posthumous Poems]; Vol. III: *Proza I: Grotesken en ander proza* [Grotesques and other prose]. For lines of verse the third revised edition of the standard edition was used. Subsequent references are given in the text: volume and page are given, except for quotations from *De Feesten van Angst en Pijn* [Feasts of Fear and Agony] and *Bezette Stad* [Occupied City], the pages of which are not numbered in the Standard edition. Excerpts from these collections are indicated by the abbreviated title of the collection referred to (i.e. F = *De Feesten van Angst en Pijn* [Feasts of Fear and Agony] and BS/OC = *Bezette Stad* [Occupied City] and by the title of the poem. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from the original Dutch versions of the quotations are mine.
 - 10 Gilliams, M., *De Kunst van de Fuga*, Lier, Colibrant, 1953, p. 90.
 - 11 Beekman, E.M., 'Blue Skiff of the Soul. The Significance of the Color Blue in Paul van Ostaijen's Poetry', in *Dutch Studies*, vol. I, The Hague, Martinus Nijhoff, p. 110.
 - 12 Id. p. 116.
 - 13 In the sense of Jules Romains *La vie unanime*. See Paul Hadermann's book *De Kringen naar Binnen. De dichterlijke wereld van Paul van Ostaijen*, Antwerpen, Ontwikkeling, 1965.
 - 14 Hadermann, p. 63.
 - 15 Van Ostaijen's pleas for 'ideoplastiek' and 'ontindividualiserend' [disindividualisation] can be interpreted as pleas for 'abstract' art. In his essays on modern painting Van Ostaijen defends cubism, and, on the whole, the more abstract forms of modern art.
 - 16 Unless otherwise indicated, all italics are Van Ostaijen's.
 - 17 Objective here refers to the object, i.e. the work of art; subjective to the subject, i.e. the artist.
 - 18 The New Directions edition of this collection does not fully reproduce the original lay-out.
 - 19 I am indebted to E.M. Beekman for this translation, which is taken from his previously mentioned article 'The Blue Skiff of the Soul' (see supra).
 - 20 Our attitude toward 'form' and 'content' is very accurately described by Van Ostaijen himself:

Noemen wij vorm en inhoud als gescheiden elementen, dan gebeurt dit enkel als een hulpkonstructie van de kritiek. In de realiteit zijn vorm en inhoud in het kunstwerk niet te scheiden.
(IV, 84)

[If we mention form and content as separate elements, we do so only as an aid to criticism. In reality form and content in a work of art cannot be separated.]

- 21 See Paul Hadermann's book *Het Vuur in de Verte. Paul van Ostaijens kunstopvattingen in het licht van de Europese Avant-Garde*, Antwerpen, Ontwikkeling, 1970.
- 22 In Van Ostaijen's terminology the word *fantasma* has a very special meaning, which I can only render with the English word 'mystery', i.e. the mystery of the moment of unity through disindividualisation, the moment that both the poet's and the reader's soul subconsciously vibrate in unison with the transcendental, via the poem.
- 23 Much of the charm of these little poems is lost in translation. I am giving a literal translation to demonstrate the nonsensical character of these poems. Ideally a translation should also give the reader an idea of the musical, almost hypnotic, charm of them.