PAUL VAN OSTAIJEN
Intermission

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Introduction

This play belongs to the experimental poetry and prose grotesques which Paul van Ostaijen (1896-1928) contributed to the budding modernist strain in Belgian literature in Dutch immediately after World War I. These prose pieces amount to intensely cerebral-satirical interpretations of the social consciousness of the era.[1] Van Ostaijen spent the war years as a civil servant in Antwerp, which was occupied by the German armed forces. In 1916 he published *Music Hall*, a collection of poems inspired by the nightlife in the cosmopolitan port. This volume proved an important step in the evolution of Flemish poetry from impressionistic and sensualistic fin-de-siècle individualism to 20th-century experimental expressionism. *Het sienjaal* (The Signal, 1918), a purely expressionistic collection, contains some strong humanistic city poetry and generally glorifies the brotherhood of man. Towards the end of that same year, van Ostaijen thought it wiser for political reasons to move to Berlin. That city, torn by the war but still very much alive and active, sheltered him from the possible consequences of his pro-Flemish "activism" during the war, which could have been wrongly interpreted by Belgian officials as pro-German. During his stay in Berlin, one of the most vital centres of European modernism, van Ostaijen's humanitarian idealism gradually collapsed for varied but interconnected reasons: personal problems, the murder of the socialist politician Karl Liebknecht, and the general postwar crisis in Germany.

Disillusioned with humanitarianism, he became more preoccupied with form. *Bezette stad* (Occupied City, 1921) was written under the influence of Dadaism, a furious rejection of all accepted beliefs (and literary conventions) in reaction against the slaughter of the First World War.[2] In theoretical essays and prose grotesques, van Ostaijen carried formal experimentation to an extreme by progressively reducing content to scraps and fragments structured by absurd, mock-logical systems. On his return to Antwerp in 1921, he was immediately drafted into the Belgian Army and, ironically enough, sent back to Germany as a member of the army of occupation. From 1923 onwards he held various jobs in Antwerp and Brussels, mainly as an art dealer, bookseller and editor, but his chief concern was to develop a personal poetics. In spite of rapidly declining health he never ceased experimenting with the form, sound and

colour of language. He died of tuberculosis in 1928, in a secluded sanatorium, at the height of his creative powers yet feeling that he had not yet been recognized.

With merciless argumentative dexterity, van Ostaijen's prose grotesques attack all staleness in society and the arts, as well as in his own work. The narrative conventions of plot and characterization hardly matter in these tales. What does matter is the development of a purposely twisted absurd logic. While he is unique, van Ostaijen is in the stream which runs through Kafka (whose first translator he was) and Bulgakov to Beckett.

The intermission of the title refers to a long break in the course of the supposedly allegorical performance by wax puppets of "yet another horrible play, a sadistic comedy of errors," written, directed and left unexplained by a Semitic manager to whom Rome has issued an identity card in the name of God the Father. The multifarious audience, which speaks various languages, becomes impatient and some members revolt, but God the Father, with pitiless logic, refutes their futile arguments against the production and the theater itself. Life is a combination of the wax museum and the uncomfortable panoptic theater of the world.[3]

Van Ostaijen's satire refrains from offering the cheap comforts of a moral alternative while rejecting fatalism as well. The literary and moral critics are skewered as guilty of affectation, vain or hypocritical, for offering such illusions. Where can we go, then? There is no exit except suicide, and even suicide means extra profits for the box office of God the Father's theater. The elevated is swamped by the grotesque and trivial, and the frustrated expectation of having a good time at the theater (read: a decent existence on earth), finally results only in a sad and uncouth leer. Van Ostaijen's 20th-century God is still the provider of entertainment, but he is also unmasked as "contraband goods with an identity card," as a charlatan who uses humour instead of opium to lure even the innocent "little ones." Even intuition ("everybody can use some intuition") is discovered to be not an inherent and powerful constituent or weapon of Man, but merely an artificially administered drug similar to cocaine. Then what can the critic do but either shoot himself or (like the majority) write rave reviews?

Critics, artists, pacifists, freethinkers, communists, militarists, politicians, a mystical quack, fake intellectuals, an anti-Semite, nationalistic students, a war profiteer, not to mention an aging cardinal: all contribute with impotent slogan logic to the chaotic hymn of revolt against God the Father's sublime magniloquence, the inhuman common sense of his arguments, and his demonstrations of power (the whip). Metaphorical bits of stage business break up the argument. An usherette denies J.K. Huysmans permission to smoke "because that's the way I want it." An aged cardinal corners a decadent representative of the intellectual elite. God offers the ever-caged poet a drink of water while himself sipping scotch and soda. This grotesque world is not a laughing matter. The clash of the audience's logic with that of God the Father can be considered in the light of the modern disbelief in the possibility of empirical objectivity and absolute values, following loss of belief in the Cartesian-humanist dualism of the self and the world and a similar loss of confidence in the possibility of an objective neutral referent of meaning in

a fixed frame of cultural reference.[4]

Ironically, van Ostaijen's God the Father/Manager is precisely the modernist who erases the fixed principle of reference in the theater of the universe. Earlier centuries had assumed this divine principle gave meaning and order to things and imposed its criteria of organization, whereas here, each member of the audience wants to reshape the play according to his individual preferences—preferences that he thinks represent absolute and universally valid truth. Thus the cubist insists on more cubist scenery, the piano teacher wants Schumann added to the play, the clergyman's wife insists on fifty per cent more metaphysics—only the supposed lunatic is perfectly happy with the play as it is and with the uncomfortable theater. God the Father does not acknowledge that personal interpretations have universal truth. Consequently, he never states his own idea of truth and gleefully admits that he just has to let the play continue the way it started. What could *he* do about it? Even he has become a shabby manager who sees crisis follow crisis and who is reduced to hiring a clown in a funny suit to make his presence known in a universe beyond good and evil.

God's final monologue anticipates Foucault: order cannot exist in itself, the members of the audience are all trying to impose their own order, and each one is very different from everyone else's. The charge that the play lacks structure or architecture is thus not valid in this theater, for it presupposes that the universe is controlled by an architect with a diploma and an authorized blueprint. God the Father is not a Deist!

God's play is also said to present too much material in an unrealistic fashion. But if the play is life, then the accusation seems rather unfair, considering the postwar chaos that forms the theater's backdrop. But beyond that, the audience is asking for a realism that is no longer on offer. A dualistic system considers possible the mimetic representation of a given reality, like the representation of the human body by Renaissance painters or of industrialized misery in naturalist fiction. But it follows from the above considerations that God the Father's theater operates on different assumptions. His play shows more affinity with something by Alban Berg than by Chekhov. Either way, we cannot expect coherence from art today.

The audience always wants "history," whereas van Ostaijen's God/Manager is only willing to give it a fiction denuded of the mock-mimetic pretence of historical validity. The scenes represented have no intrinsic value, and the intelligent reader-spectator is asked to supply the meaning himself/herself. Like Virginia Woolf's Miss La Trobe in *Between the Acts*, God wants each individual member of the audience to be "playwrighterly," to generate meanings and structures from scraps and fragments. It is indeed easier to beg for the author's interpretation, or to expect that the clown who stands outside speaks the truth when he promises an attractive and altogether impossible mélange of optimistic amusement, glittering artistry and faithful "realism," but it is lazy of us to do so, lazy and out of date. And the fact that critics and doctors of theology howl with the wolves and really only add to the confusion suggests their worthlessness in this absurd universe.

I would like to thank my wife, Muriel Aercke, for her painstaking research on the notes.

With regards to this introduction, I will always be happy to acknowledge my former graduate professor at the University of Georgia, Betty Jean Craige. And I am also indebted to Rene F. Lissens' *De Vlaamse letterkunde van1780 tot heden* (Brussels and Amsterdam: Elsevier, reprinted 1976),. pp.159-167.

The text used for this translation was published by the Bibliophiles Society of Oude God, Antwerp (series 1928-29, 75 numbered copies). This very rare edition has illustrations by the renowned Belgian artist Joris Minne, which we reproduce here.