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'The downtrodden Christ in each and every one of us'

Modernity, Modernism & Metaphysical Aspirations: Paul van Ostaijen's poetry

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The French poet Guillaume Apollinaire once wrote in a letter to a friend that the clothes of the women in Paris could do to their body's what until then only the Romantic poets could achieve with words.

This statement draws our attention to aspects of the shift between Romantic and post-Romantic poetry. On the one hand, Apollinaire refers to Romantic achievements with appreciation, but on the other hand he seems to ironize them. It appears that he ironically applies the very serious metaphysical pattern of Romantic criticism to things that certainly do not belong to the higher spheres of the mind. Lower elements such as sensual pleasure and eroticism seem to have taken the place of what the Romantics saw as an elevated matter of enormous importance: an almost religious, but sterile, glorification of the word.

To a certain extent, I believe that Apollinaire's somewhat provocative attitude reflects post Romantic tendencies in literature of the beginning of our century. In 1920, the Flemish poet Paul van Ostaijen wrote a poem about the Danish movie-star Asta Nielsen, in which we can distinguish a similar attitude. The speaker in the poem especially seems to be interested in Asta's looks. The poem is about the swaying of her hips, about the way in which she erotically puts a flower in her mouth, about her gorgeous balance, her legs, etcetera. Furthermore, Asta has characteristics of a prostitute: the men who enter the cinema have to pay only little and in exchange for that, Asta adjusts herself to their particular dreams and sneaky desires.

The scenery of the poem is that of a metropolis by night; a world in which only the movies present true and honest love stories. The speaker seems to use this evocation of sensual city-life in order to provoke his Roman Catholic readers. In itself, the setting is provocative enough. But, to make matters worse, he shamelessly recites a litany in which this amoral Asta takes the place of the Virgin Mary.

At first sight, all this seems to confirm the assumption that elevated notions of religiosity and spirituality in Van Ostaijen's Modernist poetry are being placed in a modern metropolitan

scenery with no other intention than to ironize these very notions. Like Apollinaire, Van Oostaijen indeed seems to have surpassed the Romantic effort. Mass-cultural and 'lower' elements in 'Asta Nielsen' tarnish the almost religious atmosphere in which Romantic poetry felt so comfortable.

I could give evidence to this reading of 'Asta Nielsen' with reference to Van Oostaijen's polemics. In marking his position within the literary tradition, Van Oostaijen turned away from Romantic features such as the glorification of the poet. Repeatedly he declares his aversion for that kind of seriousness in poetry which he saw as a Romantic inheritance. Through the course of the years he was less inclined to present himself as a socially or metaphysically inspired prophet. For him, the archetype of the truly modern poet is the clown. A clown who, in 'Asta Nielsen', mocks serious Romantic patterns.

I could also justify an anti-Romantic reading of 'Asta Nielsen' with reference to the condition of the 20th century poet facing Modernity. The modern world had defeated paralyzing traditions and purposeless rituals. Forms of elusive magic and occultism were replaced by straightforward, instrumental rationalism. Metaphors like mechanization and *Entzauberung* are well known (and, in the beginning of this century, even popular) notions to describe these developments. When we relate these notions to the subject of this session, literature and metaphysics, initially a few often discussed features of literary Modernism catch our attention. In accordance with many poets, scholars have mentioned that they were occupied with the question in which way one can find a hand-hold in a world that offers no given ideological or religious guideline. Since literary Modernism is marked by disorientation and detachment, the answering of this question seems to be a mission impossible. That is to say: it appears to be impossible to answer it in a Modernist way.

Indeed, we can think of many Modernist poets who stopped writing poetry, after which they withdrew into an apparently safe, pre-modern atmosphere. Some of them converted to a certain church; and others grasped at the straw of an ideological guideline. When we equal Modernity with liberation, the artistic and intellectual fiasco becomes a constitutive element of the biographical standard of the Modernist poet. Maybe, the only identity that is convenient for the persistent Modernist poet like Van Oostaijen, is the identity of the clown.

Nevertheless, I think that a reading of 'Asta Nielsen' as a provocative, iconoclastic and clownish poem is insufficient. Although it's my conviction that Van Oostaijen's poetry and poetics reflect crucial Modernist features, in poems like 'Asta Nielsen' we can distinguish something like a hidden correspondence with Romantic ideas and aims. I think that his Modernist scepticism and caution in the end does not outbalance high-flown metaphysical ambitions.

In the first place, I have to recall the assumption that mass-cultural tendencies contribute to the provocative character of the poem. I don't have time to elaborate on this, but let me just mention that poets and painters of the avant-garde praised Asta, as they praised Chaplin, because of her insistence on traditional, elevated values in art, rather than because of her contribution to mass-cultural emancipation.

A comparable argument can be made regarding the iconoclastic aspects of the poem. In at least three ways, Van Oostaijen makes clear that he agrees with a religious, metaphysical attitude toward life, rather than that he denounces such an attitude. It is significant that Asta is called 'Astra' several times. This modification of her first name, which means 'star', can of course be related to the notion of a movie-star, but the Dutch word 'astraal' is another valid connotation.

And that connotation leads us to the heavenly, the elevated. It appears that there is a relation between the everyday scenery of the metropolis and the transcendental.

Another observation is that it's possible to understand the litany-form as a means of placing the horniness of the speaker on a higher level. The same goes for the quotation of Psalm 129 in the poem. Things which are smutty and vulgar within the context of excessive drinking, prostitution and nightlife-enjoyment, become traditional religious connotations such as liveliness and fertility when they are reshaped in canonical forms.

A third way in which the poem opens this interpretive possibility can be found in its final lines. There Van Ostaijen gives an association with far-reaching intertextual consequences. The word 'Sébasto', that refers to the red light-district in Paris, calls up by association the German word 'Weib' (woman), after which in the next line we can find the name of the Hungarian composer Liszt. It must have been Liszt's Faust-symphony that brought Van Ostaijen to this association. The final chorus of this (monstrous) symphony, derived from Goethe's Faust, is about 'das Ewig-Weibliche', the ever-womanly (or: eternal womanhood). The quoted lines, in Faust, mark a moment of mystic elevation, that is the final stage of a ritual, a ceremony. Insufficiency becomes fulfillment, and the indescribable is accomplished. The singers feel that they are being elevated by what they call the ever-womanly: 'Das Ewig-Weibliche / Zieht uns hinan'. Connected to the poem about Asta Nielsen, this Romantic intertext is another way in which Van Ostaijen blows up the described entourage to metaphysical proportions. Asta's body and her gestures are part of the ever-womanly that draws us heavenward.

What happens in this poem is that it tries to restore the once natural correspondence between love, sex and spirituality. Eroticism, something that under the influence of a modern, hypocritical religious morality has become purposeless and even sinful, is now linked again to the myths and rituals that have disappeared out of the city-scenery with its vulgar entertainment. Looking at the poem in this way, we can add an important dimension to the interpretation of its iconoclastic aspects. The poet offers resistance to the mechanized christianity of the modern religious institutions. But paradoxically, this resistance is modelled after religious, biblical registers.

My brief reconsideration of the provocative and iconoclastic aspects of 'Asta Nielsen', invites us to suppose that beneath the surface of Van Ostaijen's post-Romantic literary theory there is to be distinguished a set of ideas that has a lot in common with the metaphysical pattern of Romantic criticism. After all, the Romantics as well conquered the Entzauberung of the world by restoring pre-modern modes of thought. Could we perhaps even say that the poetic debate of the beginning of our century has some kind of deep structure on the level of which Romanticism and Modernism are not strictly divided? I think that there is such a deep structure, and for the moment I think that it is formed by the debate about the understanding of Modernity. The problems deriving from developments such as rationalisation were as disturbing for the Modernists as they were for the Romantics.

In the remaining time I will discuss a few aspects of Van Ostaijen's poetics, looking at them from this deeper point of view. A first observation can be that crucial features of his poetics can be related to new insights of social theory. In analysing the 20th century stage of Modernity,

sociologists now work with concepts like reflexivity, opportunity and risk. The runaway world of Modernity, they say, increasingly provokes individuals to constantly examine and reform social practices in the light of incoming information about those very practices. This reflexive attitude characterizes the way in which the modern individual colonizes his own personal future.

For the individual, practicing this strategy, the modern independence from compelling ideological or religious systems, implies an increased freedom in the creation of future possibilities. At the same time, Modernity institutionalizes the principle of radical doubt. Under the given conditions, all knowledge takes the form of hypotheses: claims that may very well be true, but which are in principle always open to revision. The basis of each anticipation of the future is a hypothesis that might have to be abandoned. That means that the individual, in arranging his own biography, has to take risks. The enormous amount of possibilities generated by a strategy based on risks is counterbalanced by an unremitting uncertainty: the individual has to take the risk of sticking to a false hypothesis for too long.

Modernist authors like Van Ostaijen are very susceptible to this double-edged situation of opportunity and risk. Their work is a painstaking evocation of the fundamental uncertainty that comes with the risk culture of Modernity, and their poetics can be seen as a reflection of the modern strategies I discussed briefly.

Talking about the means and ends of poetry, Van Ostaijen laid stress on the complicated strategies preceding the finished poem. In the genetic process, as he conceives it, the intuitive initial impetus of the poet is followed by an elaboration that answers to almost scientifically defined regulations and laws. These laws, he says, are the autonomous and, by assumption, universal laws of language. Unplanned and unpredictable association of sound and meaning takes the place of preconceived intellectual deliberation.

One of the consequences of this understanding of the process is that the finished poem must be conceived as a realisation of the artist's intuitive vision within a domain that is assumed to be universal and in a sense: very real. This observation clears the way for a very serious ontological implication of Van Ostaijen's Modernist poetics. The poem in the end tries to come to a new, specific reconsideration of empirical phenomena. It is a personal reconsideration that breaks away from established, paralysing patterns of behavior and thought. In that way, Modernist poetry is a means of colonizing the future.

Apparently Van Ostaijen's poetic practice does not only include the dark side of Modernity's risk culture (which is: uncertainty), but also the opportunity-side. Maybe we can say that his sense of the dark-side is reflected in Modernist features of his poetics, and that Romantic patterns, such as a certain recklessness in matters of ontology, are to be linked with the opportunity-side.

With regard to the question of literature and metaphysics, the quintessence of Van Ostaijen's poetic strategy is that he proclaims that the restrictive rules of the poetic procedure are independent and universal. With reference to those metaphysical categories Van Ostaijen justifies the claim that his practice can create fulfilling alternative strategies of colonizing the future. It seems to me that he is trying to find some kind of system that could justify the opportunities he

intuitively distinguishes. And the universal domain in which he looks for something to hold on to, certainly has a transcendental dimension, in which reflection on the magic of the creative process counterbalances the loss of certainties in everyday life.

So my remarks on 'Asta Nielsen' seem to be confirmed by Van Ostaijen's poetics. Although his poetry evidently has poet-Romantic characteristics, it restores age-old modes of thought at the same time. The genetic process is a magical procedure which in fact has a lot in common with pre-rational, metaphysical rituals as described by antropologists.

Van Ostaijen's poetic strategy reflects one of the great paradoxes of Modernism. On the one hand he refuses to look for new, paralysing certainties, such as the moral and ethical security of a religious denomination. Indeed, Van Ostaijen takes part in the risk-culture of Modernity with its rational and reflexive strategies. Taking the risk of sticking to a false hypothesis for too long, he keeps on manipulating the creative process in order to grasp new opportunities, although he is very well aware that one can never overcome uncertainty and that no attempt to colonize the future can claim predicates such as 'true' or 'superior'.

But on the other hand, as we have also seen in 'Asta Nielsen', his practice is regressively dependent of age-old, pre-rational and magic strategies. Poetry, for him, comes very close to a kind of religion that is not yet institutionalized. His emphasis on the genetic process of the poem can be interpreted as an attempt to restore an attitude in which rituals, ceremonies of initiation, and rites de passage are being taken seriously.

Yet, a Modernist poet like Van Ostaijen concentrates on the shifts, the modifications, and the threshold-experiences that come with the act of writing. For that matter, it is not surprising that his poetics, like the Western religions and like Romantic criticism, is on all levels punctuated by metaphysically loaded notions and metaphors such as liveliness, fertility, sexual potency and creative productivity.

His poetry aims to find, or create, a spring of life. As a consequence, the poet has to identify with devine qualities. Martinus Nijhoff, that other great Modernist in Dutch poetry, who was one of the most understanding contemporary critics of Van Ostaijen's work, once said that a poetic strategy like Van Ostaijen's 'is the only way that leads to the downtrodden Christ in each and every one of us'.

The downtrodden Christ in every one of us – that is what Nijhoff sharply distinguishes as the mainspring in Van Ostaijens poetry. For him, the spring of life, the starting point of creation is a metaphysical and, to a certain extent, even religious idea, an idea that is downtrodden and suppressed, not only by Modernity and its rationalisation, but especially by the poet himself. This paradox, which is closely related to the paradoxes of Modernity, is the key to Van Ostaijen's poetics.