

Literature

Occupied City

Paul van Ostaijen on the Map of Modernism

There are some literary works written in Dutch without which the narrative of literature in Europe is incomplete. *Occupied City* by the Flemish poet Paul van Ostaijen (1896-1928) is one of them. None of the standard textbooks on modernism in European literature that I consulted¹ even mention Van Ostaijen despite the existence of anthologies of both his poetry, *The First Book of Schmoll*, and his prose, *Patriotism, Inc. and Other Tales*, in English translation. It is to be hoped that *Occupied City* in David Colmer's lively and engrossing translation will be the work to change this.

First published in 1921, *Occupied City* is a collection of poems tracking and evoking the German occupation of Antwerp during the First World War. The titles of these poems – such as 'Threatened City', 'Hollow Harbour', 'Dead Sunday', 'City of Grief', 'Music Hall', 'The Withdrawal' – give a sense of the evolving situation and shifting mood in Antwerp as seen through the poet's eyes, but not a hint as to the avant-garde character of the poems. Experimental in form, *Occupied City* is described on the back cover of the translation as 'one of the key works of the Dadaist movement' and as 'a work of "rhythmical typology"'. At the same time, many commentators see *Occupied City* as representing the loss of Van Ostaijen's earlier humanitarian ideals. It certainly depicts the many modes of human suffering involved in life under occupation.

As a twenty-first-century reader, I am struck by the distinctive multiplicity of Van Ostaijen's poetic voice. Take, for instance, its seemingly natural multilingualism or the fact that the word 'nihil' occurs thirteen times in almost as many typefaces and different layouts. He has dispensed with recognizable poetic form and diction, exchanging it for an extreme dynamic which is as visual as it is textual. The opening section sets the scene with its emphasis on film – 'Much shall be forgiven you / for / you've seen a lot of movies'. God the Father as impresario and Archangel Michael as director have



reached the end of their dominion: 'all cathedrals / all prophets / all pulpits / struck dumb'.² The poet wants to take over, staging a burlesque performance. And in a way, the all-singing, all-dancing presentation of words on the page in the poems does just that.

Although the poems that follow the dedicatory section 'To Mr Soandso' narrate destruction, fear, looting, 'corpses strewn around the city', and 'Fleeing tykes / fleeing people / Fleeing army / the 3 ages flee', and the port of Antwerp is at a standstill, this introductory poem sounds a note of hope: 'perhaps / there will be room / for a beauty that speaks for itself'. In this way, *Occupied City* reveals a different dynamic from Dadaism, one where there is a way back from nihilism. And in the context of Van Ostaijen's work, it prefigures his last phase of 'pure' poetry.

It will be clear from this description of the poems that David Colmer's translation of *Occupied City* involved a great deal more than transferring words and metre from Dutch to English. The typographical features – words forming arcs, slopes, steps and slogans; so many different fonts or typefaces; discontinuous elements and words with multiple collocators, not to mention the use of different languages – all these call for an adaptive approach, as Colmer explains in his note on the translation. Colmer and Van Ostaijen have been wonderfully served by Smokestack Books who clearly believe that if a book is worth translating, it is worth doing the job properly. The typographer Katy Mawhood brings her expertise to bear on the visual aspect of the translation, while David Colmer exercises

his creativity in producing a work of modernist literature that is exciting to read, giving this reader a taste and feel of occupied Antwerp that no historical narrative can provide.

The mood of disillusionment is brilliantly evoked in 'Sous les Ponts de Paris', a more conventional-looking poem of couplets which addresses a 'You' whose corpse and wounds have been put on display:

Our faith is so small and so weak
like the flame that dances at your feet

You are displayed on every corner HARLEQUIN
with your beaten attitude and Your suffering

Among us again in all Your statues You are one
with the occupied city (...)

We cannot see God but as a Harlequin
our times are so full of pain and suffering

In the second poem of 'Sous les Ponts de Paris', God and Harlequin become a deserter heading into the dance hall. This is where forgetfulness is found, in the music hall, the cinema, the bar, the dance hall, and in desire, passion or love.

Occupied City ends with the withdrawal of the German occupiers and a frenzy of celebration. The line 'everything is meaningless / now' leads not to despair but to a sense of energy and surging life, though we are left wondering where this will lead: 'maybe some day / the need will grow so great / all the dykes will break'.

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Paul van Ostaijen, *Occupied City*, translated from the Dutch by David Colmer, Smokestack Books, Ripon, 2016.

- 1 For instance, M. Bradbury & J. McFarlane, *Modernism: A Guide to European Literature 1890-1930*, Harmondsworth, 1991 or P. Lewis (Ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to European Modernism*, Cambridge, 2011.
- 2 The spaces are part of the printed poem. Note that the absence of page references is due to the lack of pagination of *Occupied City*, a choice which is in keeping with the typographical experimentation of the text.

Start Early and Keep Going

Flanders and the Netherlands at the Frankfurt Book Fair

It sounds simple. Every year some 150,000 people in the book business travel from all over the world to the Frankfurt Book Fair. Suddenly the country or language area that can promote its literature as *Ehregast* is on the map. But in fact it's not so simple. All these book people are in Frankfurt to work. Day in day out they run from one appointment to the next. They know there is a country that is Guest of Honour, but which is it? By no means can every regular fair visitor still remember that a few months after the *Buchmesse*.

When the Netherlands and Flanders were Guests of Honour in October 2016, the organisers had a hard job to stand out. Just sending a trainload of the new generation of writers – from Joost de Vries and Niña Weijers to Bregje Hofstede and Charlotte Van den Broek – to the capital of the book world is not enough to get them translated into the most important world languages. Let alone sticking posters on all the buses and trams in Frankfurt for a few days, as previous Guest of Honour countries had been known to do.

So Team Frankfurt, the joint project committee of the Dutch Foundation for Literature and the Flemish Literature Fund, chose not to peak just for a few days during the fair. Their Guest of Honour preparations began a long time in advance, primarily by allowing the German publishers from various disciplines to become acquainted with the Dutch publishing sector on the spot, but also by ensuring Dutch-language authors were on the programme at German festivals for an entire year. In addition, from July 2016 there was a whole bookselling campaign with author appearances and a brochure. Everyone in the *Buchmesse* homeland was already warmed up when the fair opened.

A masterstroke was the appointment of Bart Moeyaert as artistic director. This internationally renowned author, whose almost entire output has been translated into German, meant that being Guest of Honour was not just a matter of carrying out policy objectives, but that there was also a coherent vision underlying these. This was expressed in the choice (dazzling in its simplicity) of the North Sea – the sea shared by the Netherlands,