

POETRY

Word play anchored in metaphysics

Occupied City

PAUL VAN OSTAIJEN

Paul van Ostaijen (1896-1928) is the most influential poet Flanders has ever produced. Almost 80 years after his death, his work still seems to be a yardstick against which poetry from Flanders and the Netherlands is measured. Every avant-garde movement since the interwar years has drawn inspiration from his work, and yet at the same time he has developed into the most enduringly popular modern Flemish poet. His poetry is to be found on t-shirts and posters as well as in every school anthology.

Today 'Occupied City' is regarded as an important contribution to Europe's modernist literature. Embedded in a fragmentary atmospheric sketch of life in the port of Antwerp during World War I, 'Occupied City' is first and foremost a settling of accounts with the bourgeois culture and politics of Ostaijen's period. The Dadaist influence from his time in Berlin can be found in its inventive rhythmical typography, its use of the collage technique, and the radicalism of its unparalleled cynical evocation of wartime suffering.

A milestone of modernist poetry

Although the visual effects are striking, the poet's main concern was auditory. Through the sound of the words he hoped to strike a transcendental chord in the reader or listener's subconscious. That at any rate was what poetry meant to him: 'wordplay that is anchored in metaphysics'. The famous and widely read works included in the 'Collected Poems' under the title 'Posthumous Poems' are perfect illustrations of this point of view.



AUTHOR



Paul van Ostaijen (1896-1928) wrote poetry, grotesques, a screenplay and essays. At the end of World War I, he went into exile to Berlin for political reasons. There he fell under the spell of German expressionism, Dadaism and the Spartacist Revolution and suffered from an existential crisis. At the age of 32, he died from tuberculosis in the sanatorium of Miavoye-Anthee.

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