COMMENTARY

In this commentary, we use a wide range of sources, but there are four in particular, all in Dutch, of which we make frequent use throughout, and to the authors of which we owe a debt of gratitude. Where reference is made to these works in the commentary, the author's surname together with the relevant page reference is given. The four works are: Mathieu Rutten, *De Lyriek van Karel van de Woestijne* (Paris: E. Droz, 1934), henceforth 'Rutten'; François van Elmbt, *Godsbeeld en Godservaring in de Lyriek van Karel van de Woestijne* (Brugge: Orion, 1973), henceforth 'Van Elmbt'; *Karel van de Woestijne: Wiekslag om de kim, Historisch-kritische uitgave, ed. Leo Jansen, 2 Delen, Deel 2 / Commentaar en apparaat* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1996), henceforth 'Jansen', and Hans Vandevoorde, *De Spiegel van Achilleus: Karel van de Woestijne en de allegorie* (Nijmegen/Gent: Vantilt, 2006), henceforth 'Vandevoorde'. We should also note that here as elsewhere in this work, for the sake of brevity, the poet's name is shortened to VdW.

For titles of collections of poetry, sections within these collections, journals and other works whose original title is in Dutch, where the title appears for the first time in the commentary, I give the title in Dutch, followed by an English translation in brackets. Thereafter, I give the title in English. These translations and all other translations into English in this commentary are those of the present author.

DOOP VAN DEN BEDELAAR (BAPTISM OF THE BEGGAR)

GZ1

This poem and the final poem in this collection, 'Exit of the Beggar' (*Uitvaart van den Bedelaar*) (GZ45) provide the outer wings of what one might call a triptych of the poet's life.[1] They both consist of sixteen stanzas of five lines each and refer in turn to the birth and death of the poet, with the poems in between alluding to the rest of his life.

The word 'beggar' (*bedelaar*) refers to the poet in particular and humankind in general. For VdW man is born a beggar and dies a beggar, always searching for spiritual bread (Rutten p. 187), like a pilgrim seeking God, but never ultimately finding him. This eternal state of being a beggar is and remains the tragedy of man.

Though apt, we may ask whether this trope is one of VdW's own invention. Though he configures it well to his own purpose, it seems the trope is one we find in the work of the great Flemish medieval mystic, Jan Ruusbroec, (1293-1381). In fact, Ruusbroec ends arguably his most famous work *Die Gheestelike Brulocht* (The Spiritual Wedding) with this trope. As we enquire further, we see that this should not surprise us for Ruusbroec is one of the two great mystical teachers of VdW, the other being the famous Spanish mystic, St. John of the Cross (1542-1591) (Van Elmbt p. 259). However, the inspiration for this specific use of the trope may also have come from closer to home for VdW, for when he first revised and then developed the poem on 6th December 1922, he wrote in his journal, 'following the death of my beggar, whom I saw every day in church'[2] (Jansen p. 373).

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[1] Both Jansen (p. 150) and Vandevoorde (p. 309) provide detailed accounts of the main features of both of these poems. Vandevoorde suggests that both poems are allegorical. Jansen (p. 122) goes one step further and suggests that these two poems stand in the same relationship to the intermediate forty-three poems as *Het menschelijk brood* (The Human Bread) does to the poems in *De modderen man* (The Mud Man), which form the first part of the trilogy, *Wiekslag om de kim*, (Wingbeat on the Horizon): i.e. they are both intended to represent in an objectified form the developments in the lyrical poetry that they frame.

[2] Dutch: *naar aanleiding van den dood van mijn bedelaar, die ik dagelijks zag in de kerk.*

In Baptism of the Beggar, VdW has his earthly father talking to God, his heavenly father about the child, VdW, who has been born and is now being baptized. There is a sense in which this acts as a microcosm for the collection God by Sea as a whole, for as the central panel itself of the triptych, *Wiekslag om de kim*, (Wingbeat on the Horizon), it marks the poet's attempt to move away from his earthly sinful self, born of human parents under original sin, towards the higher goal of coming into the presence of his heavenly father, God. At the start of the poem, VdW's earthly father dedicates his son to God in baptism in order to seek to cleanse him of the original sin that he has inherited from his father. The father admits that the child was not born out of pure love, but out of impure, earthly desire. Towards the end of the poem, he goes so far as to say that the child is a punishment (*straf*) to him and his wife, but concludes on a note of hope that the son will seek God. Here, VdW provides us with a wonderful trope in which he likens the child to 'light chaff, which, golden, dances out of the winnowing basket towards the sun,' i.e. towards God (ll. 79-80).

In addressing God, the father uses several different names, two of which merit comment here. First, in line 51, he refers to God as *Veger der woestijnen* (Sweeper of the deserts), a name he uses again in Exit of the Beggar (l. 66). As the reader will note, the Dutch word for desert is part of the poet's surname, so in one sense this is a play on words. The idea of God as a sweeper of the deserts seems to some extent to point to the Old Testament image of God as a god of anger and might who sweeps away all that stands in his way and lays it waste. But reference to deserts here may not only point to external deserts but to the inner person. Jan Ruusbroec writes, 'but our created being can be seen as a desert (*wustine*), completely laid waste, in which God, who governs us, dwells,'[3] and there may be a sense here in which God as sweeper is seen to cleanse us of our

[3] Middle Dutch: *Maer onse ghescapene wesen es ane te siene alse eene welde wueste wustine, daer God in leeft die ons regeert.* Jan van Ruusbroec, *Werken Naar het Standaardhandschrift van Groenendaal uitgegeven door het Ruusbroec-Genootschap te Antwerpen, 2de druk, eds. J. van Mierlo and L. Reypens, 4 delen, deel 3* (Tielt: Lannoo, 1947), 217, ll. 21-22.

sins, as a whirlwind sweeps through the desert clearing aside all that stands in its way.

In this regard, we should also note that in line 40, VdW refers to the cleansing of the sea (*[de] zuivering der zee*), and this reminds us that the sea is one of the central metaphors for God in this collection[4] and that one of the qualities of the sea that makes this appropriate is its cleansing quality.

The other name for God in this poem that I briefly want to consider comes in line 49, where the father refers to God as the Marksman (*Schutter*). Perhaps surprisingly, VdW says that the marksman 'took aim and shot the world' (line 50), i.e. he, God, has brought harm to the world. Whether this is objectively true or not is another matter, but it reminds us that the God that VdW portrays in this collection is not only the loving father he seeks, but also, to his mind, a vengeful God who causes him anguish.

Jansen (pp. 373 ff.) notes that the poem was composed at several points from 7th October, 1922 to shortly after 7th December 1922. It was first published in the journal *Elsevier's Geïllustreerd Maandschrift* (Elsevier's Illustrated Monthly) in June 1923.[5] Before being published in God by Sea in 1926, VdW also produced a French prose translation, differing slightly in meaning at certain points from the Dutch, which appeared in the journal *La Flandre littéraire 3*, February-March 1925. This reminds us that although, unlike several of his contemporaries in Gent, such as Maurice Maeterlinck, VdW chose to write his poetry in Dutch, he was also equally at home in French, the language used by Maeterlinck, Emile Verhaeren and others.[6]

[4] In the commentary below, see the introduction to the fifth section of this collection, God by Sea.
[5] See Jansen (pp. 9-10) for a discussion of the periodicals in which VdW first published many of these poems.
[6] See the introductory essay, note 13, in this volume for a further discussion of VdW's choice of language.

DE HEETE ASCH (THE HOT ASH)

Rutten (p. 190) sees this first section of the central core of the collection as the externalization of a calmer period in the emotional life of the poet after the painful inner journey of *De modderen man* (The Mud Man), which was published six years before God by Sea, in 1920, and which forms the first part of the trilogy, Wingbeat on the Horizon. There, his passions have been burnt off and so the hot ash is what remains after the fire in his soul. For Jansen (p. 141), the hot ash represents the remains from the fire of his life, and he comments that some of the poems in the section express the poet's inability to live amongst those closest to him, whilst others express the idea that the poet is ready to be 'emptied' so that he can undertake the journey towards God.[7]

GZ2

VdW writes in a range of poetic forms. This first poem in the section 'The Hot Ash' is a sonnet, a form which enjoyed a revival under Charles Baudelaire and subsequently Paul Verlaine, Stéphane Mallarmé, Arthur Rimbaud and others, who are often considered Symbolist poets. The rhyme scheme a b b a b a a b c c d e e d that VdW uses here is, however, quite unusual, in particular in the second quatrain, where a b b a is more common. It is one of three sonnets in the collection God by Sea, the others being GZ17 and GZ28. Here, too, VdW uses this unexpected rhyme scheme in the second quatrain: b a a b. He also opens the preceding collection in this trilogy, The Mud Man, with another sonnet, *Vervarelijk festijn voor onverzaedlijk dorsten*, and here again uses the rhyme scheme b a a b in the second quatrain. He writes the poem in alexandrine metre, which is found commonly in Dutch poetry,[8] no more so than in the work of the great Golden Age poets Joost van den Vondel, P. C. Hooft and Constantijn

[7] Jansen (pp. 140-2) also gives an account of how this section gradually took its form. See also Vandevoorde (pp. 311-312).

[8] Alex Preminger et al., 'Alexandrine,' in: *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics, eds. Preminger and T.V.F. Brogan* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 30-31.

Huygens.[9] However, VdW is clearly moving away from the traditional rigidity of the alexandrine towards the *vers libéré* of Verlaine, Mallarmé and Rimbaud. Two features of this shift are a move to multiple caesuras and de-emphasized rhyme. We see this well in lines one and nine of GZ2. In line one, there are two caesuras: *'k Heb mijne nachten / meer doorbeden / dan doorweend* (5+4+3) and the repetition of *door* as an unstressed inseparable verbal prefix provides the de-emphasised rhyme. In line nine, we again see a 5+4+3 pattern: *ik wacht op tranen / in de dorheid / van een lach*.

In this poem, the overarching sense is one of the poet's lack of self-worth. In line four he talks of his own bitterness, in line twelve refers to himself as a coward (*lafaard*) and in the final line says 'I only feel beautiful when I tremble with self-reproach.' But despite this focus on the self, there are already signs of the poet relating to God in line one through prayer and in line eleven, a theme which develops through the course of the collection.

To give the reader a flavour of VdW's use of language and his poetic skill, I shall consider the first stanza in particular detail. In line one, he starts with *'k* (I) although this is the unstressed form of the personal pronoun. In the ten poems which form the section The Hot Ash, four of them start with the first person singular pronoun (see also GZ7 (*Ik*), GZ8 (*Ik*) and GZ10 (*Ik*)). In 1924, VdW published another collection, *Substrata*, consisting of many very short poems, often couplets, which deal with themes similar to those we find in *God aan zee*, as demonstrated in the titles of the five subsections of the collection: Town (s*tad*), Sea (*zee*), Woman (*vrouw*), I (*Ik*) and *God.*[10] The central relationship of the present collection is between the poet and God and already in line one we see

[9] For a recent example of translations of poems by Huygens into English, many of which are written in alexandrines, see my *Poems on the Lord's Supper by the Dutch Calvinist Constantijn Huygens (1596-1687): A Facing Dutch-English Translation with Annotations and an Introduction by Christopher Joby* (Lampeter: Edwin Mellen Press, 2008).

[10] Karel van de Woestijne, *Verzameld Dichtwerk, eds. Anne Marie Musschoot et al., 2 delen, deel 1, Lyrische Poëzie* (Tielt: Lannoo, 2007), 291 ff., and Karel van de Woestijne, *Verzameld Werk, Eerste Deel: Lyrische Poëzie, eds. P. N. van Eyck et al.* (Brussels: A. Manteau, 1948), (henceforth *VWI*), 437 ff. Part of this latter collection were also published under licence by C.A.J. van Dishoeck of Bussum.

reference to this relationship as VdW talks of praying through the night. Mention of the night is of course not unexpected for this is a common trope in the tradition of mystical poetry, such as that of the Flemish mystic Jan Ruusbroeck and the Spanish mystic John of the Cross,[11] on which VdW draws. The following poem, GZ3, begins 'The night, the sultry night', it is at night that VdW comes to the sea in the first poem of the next section of this collection, The Scabby Dancer, and VdW addresses the night directly in GZ27, line twelve. Finally, it is worth noting that VdW is able to contrast prayer and crying more dramatically in the Dutch by using the inseparable verbal suffix *door* in each case, which gives a sense of duration, c.f. German *durch*.

In line two, we meet a common trope in this collection, eyes and sight.[12] Compare GZ22, line one, where VdW talks of not yet being cured of his eyes, i.e. to be able to free himself from the snares of this world, he needs to be able to move beyond or 'be cured of' the temptations that he sees with his eyes. The focus on the eyes in this line is emphasized by the repetition of the long 'o' sound in *opalen* ('opals') and *oogen* ('eyes'), in which in both cases is stressed.

Although line three follows a different rhyme scheme to line one, and has a feminine ending as opposed to a male one, it has several parallels to line one. Both lines are *trimètres*. Line one has a masculine rhyme and follows the pattern 5+4+3, whilst line three has a feminine rhyme and follows the pattern 5+4+4. However, the first measure in line three *'k heb in mijn leven* echoes that of line one: *'k heb mijne nachten*, and in both lines the poet uses rhyme in the second and third measures to intensify contrast. In line one, VdW uses the prefix *door*, which we discuss above, but in line three the two words used to make the contrast, *geloochend* (denied) and *gelogen* (lied), are almost homophones. The reader unfamiliar with the history of Dutch orthography will need to know that the 'o' in

[11] For references to the night in the work of both Ruusbroec and John of the Cross, see Van Elmbt pp. 246 ff.

[12] Often in fact it is in references to the eye of God where we see this trope at work in this collection. By contrast, a lack of sight, or blindness, is a quality the poet seeks for himself, for then he can gain a closer knowledge of God without the distractions of worldly pleasure. See also the commentary on GZ27 below.

gelogen has the same value as the 'oo' in *geloochend,* a long 'o' similar to the vowel in the English 'boat'. Such discrepancies were reduced in spelling reforms enacted after World War II (VdW died in 1929).[13]

After three lines in which the focus is on the poet himself, in line four VdW addresses unnamed readers or listeners directly and catches their attention with the imperative, *ziet* ('look') for the second person pronoun *Gij*, a form little used now in the Dutch of the Netherlands, but still used in Flanders.[14] In this line we again see the sensuous, almost visceral nature of VdW's poetry, which was a common feature of his earlier poetry, but we also see a sadness, which continues into the next stanza, as those whom VdW addresses do not understand his plight.

The sensuousness of line four is picked up again later in line eleven, where VdW refers to his tooth. Here, though, he expresses a fear that it will bite the lip of God. This anthropomorphic allusion to God may surprise some readers at first, though as they will see it is not uncommon in this collection. As we note again later, in the commentary to GZ22, a reference such as this marks a continuation by VdW of the erotic-sensualistic imagery of his earlier poetry now being used in a religious context.[15] Finally, in this regard, here as elsewhere in the section The Hot Ash, when God is mentioned, he is more often than not being harmed, e.g. GZ7 ll. 23-4, where God's face is violated 'with the knife of scorn' (Vandevoorde p. 312).

Jansen (p. 158 and p. 264) notes that this poem was also the opening poem in a group of poems entitled *Tenebrae* (Shadows), published in Elsevier's Illustrated Monthly (May 1922), which may be seen as one of the earlier stages in the development of this collection.

GZ3

[13] In Belgium, these spelling reforms came into force in 1946 in the *Spellingbesluit* and in the Netherlands in 1947 in the *Spellingwet*.

[14] For a broader discussion of the use of *gij* and the unstressed form *ge* in Dutch, see W. Haeseryn et al. eds., *Algemene Nederlandse Spraakkunst, 2 Banden, Band 1, tweede druk* (Groningen: Martinus Nijhoff Uitgevers, 1997), 241.

[15] Cf. Vandevoorde p. 318.

In the first printed edition of God by Sea, published by A. A. M. Stols in 1926, VdW does not give titles to the poems in the collection. In later editions, the practice varies. In the 1942 A. Manteau edition of the trilogy Wingbeat on the Horizon, which included the poems of God by Sea, no titles are given, whilst in the 1948 collected edition of VdW's lyrical poetry (*Verzameld werk, deel 1*),[16] the poems do have titles, usually taken from the first line of the poem. For ease of reference, I follow Leo Jansen's numbering system of GZx, where x is the consecutive number of the poem. When this poem was first published, in the journal *Dietsche warande & Belfort* (January 1926), VdW gave it the title *Nacht* (night), and this succinctly sums up the theme of the poem. VdW is surrounded by night, the metaphysical night of mystical literature.[17] This night, or darkness, is a staging post on the way towards God, but as yet there is no sign of God, who as is often the case in this collection, is referred to as light, or here dawn (*dageraad*) in line three. All that VdW can do for the moment is to sit in a 'hollow void of suffering,' (line seven),[18] and wait, like a mother's womb.[19] This may be any mother's womb, waiting to be filled with a baby, or it may be an allusion to that of the Virgin Mary, waiting to be filled with Jesus Christ, the Son of God, as VdW is waiting to be filled with God.

An interesting point occurs in line five, where in the first half of the line we possibly have more than one reading. In all the early drafts of the poem, including the first publication of it mentioned above, VdW uses the verb 'to be', whilst in the first proof for the publication of the collection, and in the 1926 Stols publication itself, he uses the verb 'to have', which Jansen (p. 392) lists as a misprint (*zetfout*). At least one edition of the printed version uses 'to have,'[20] but

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[16] See note 10 above for bibliographic details.

[17] Vandevoorde (p. 318 and n. 770) notes that from the outset in this collection, we see the symbolization of the state of VdW's soul. In GZ3, we see an analogy between the dark sultry night and the solitary, susceptible 'I' that is no beacon.

[18] Vandevoorde (p. 312) points out that this sentiment is repeated in the next poem, where VdW talks of impotence (*onmacht*) (l. 10), and in the following two poems.

[19] Van Elmbt (p. 56) notes that the womb (*moeder-schoot*) belongs to the *waterbeelden* ('water imagery') that VdW uses here and elsewhere.

[20] Karel van de Woestijne, *Wiekslag om de Kim* (Brussels: A. Manteau, N.V., 1942), 74.

in his definitive text, Jansen uses 'to be'. In fact, both variants work. If we read 'I have no beacon' (*ik heb geen bake*), then we could understand this as pointing to the fact that there is no light to guide VdW out of the darkness in which he currently finds himself. If we read it as 'I am no beacon,' (*ik ben geen bake*) then this may at first sight seem strange, until we discover that elsewhere he also refers to himself as a beacon. In the collection *De gulden schaduw* ('The Golden Shadow'), he writes:

> And look: where I stand, of all ways,
> Of every longing end and goal,
> And I feel like a beacon,
> Towards the distance, mid-point of the distance…[21]

Van Elmbt (p. 148) suggests that here the poet sees himself as an important part of creation. But in GZ3, he is of course saying that now he is not a beacon, for he is surrounded by total darkness.

It is also worth noting that three of the four lines in the second stanza start with *Ik* ('I'). I discuss the place of 'I' in VdW's poetry again in the commentary on GZ15 below, but suffice to say here that there is a sense of negation of the 'I': 'I am no beacon', 'I am alone', 'I am no more than…' and an important part of VdW's journey in this collection towards God is to move away from the self, although here VdW is at the very start of that journey.

Finally, the poem was composed between September-October 1923 and December 1925 and was first published in the journal, *Dietsche warende & Belfort* in January, 1926 (Jansen p. 390).

GZ4

[21] Dutch: *En zie: waar 'k sta, van alle wegen, // van elk verlangen einde en doel, // en 'k als een baak, de verten tegen, // der verten midden-punt me voel*. See Karel van de Woestijne (2007), *op. cit.*, 282. Van Elmbt (p. 147) is wrong to give a reference of *Zegen der Zee* for this poem, as it is in another section of the collection *De gulden schaduw*, namely *Het Huis in de Stad*.

In this place of solitude, VdW is tempted to recall a past in which he took delight in sensuous pleasure, but he quickly recognizes the futility of such recollection and that he is wrong to think that he enjoyed such times. The memory can play tricks on us. In the final quatrain, he recognizes the futility of desire and rejects (earthly) love.

As elsewhere in VdW's oeuvre, sounds play an important part in this poem, and not merely by means of the rhyme scheme. In line one, attention is drawn to the image of the dog strolling around its own mess[22] by the repetition of 'd' and 'dr', perhaps suggestive of the dog growling, and in line six *pluim te plukken* ('by plucking [its own] feathers') is almost onomatopoeic, echoed by *peerlen* ('pearls') earlier in the line. In line eight we have alliteration and assonance. At the end of the line, *vereeuwigend Verrukken* ('immortalizing Delight') plays on a repeat of the first syllable and in the first half of the line we have *leem* and *leed*. *Leem,* cognate with the English 'loam,' can mean 'clay' or 'mud' and according to the van Dale Dutch monolingual dictionary[23] this is the word used for the material from which mankind was created (c.f. Adam 'dust'). So here, VdW is asking God, the immortalizing Delight, why he carved his image out of this *leem*, which after Adam's fall was to become full of pain, a point underlined by the rhyming of *leem* and *leed*. *Leem* is to be contrasted with *modder*, a more pejorative term for mud, which is used in the title of the first part of this trilogy, *De modderen man*, and which is more suggestive of man's sinfulness. It is this mud that for VdW must be washed away in order for the person to be able to find God and we should remember that the present collection, God by Sea, represents the middle phase of

[22] Vandevoorde (p. 318) notes that the line begins with a simile (like a dog) and suggests that there are less similes in this collection than there were in the previous collection, The Mud Man, whilst at the same time there is an increase in God by Sea of metaphors, suggesting a closer correspondence in the mind of the poet between the elements in the trope. We should also mention, as the reader is no doubt aware, that, to use I. A. Richards' terminology, the tenor is often absent, and we are left to imagine it through the reference to the vehicle. With reference to line one again, in his review of this collection Urbain van de Voorde suggests that the poet is being cynical (*cynisch*) in the unmediated sense of the word, i.e. like a dog, as the word cynical derives ultimately from the Greek word for dog (*kuôn*). See Urbain van de Voorde, 'Nederlandsche Litteratuur: Karel van de Woestijne's "God aan Zee"', in: *De Stem 1927, 7de jg., deel 1*, 488-96, at 490.

VdW's struggle away from the Mud Man of the first section towards the Mountain Lake (*Het berg-meer*) of the third section where his journey culminates. Another way of considering VdW's goal comes in line nine, where he says 'depth cries and void is the highest ridge.' Void (*ijlte*) or emptiness is an allusion to the divine in much of VdW's work - we meet it again for example in GZ12 - and there is a sense in which this has to do with receptivity. As such, this trope has something in common with the use of the sea to allude to the divine, which gives the collection its title, in that the sea is a vast entity, something like a void, which is expectant, waiting to receive the poet.

Jansen (pp. 392 ff.) tells us that the poem was composed in three stages from 19th January to 4th February, 1922. It was first published in the journal, Elsevier's Illustrated Monthly, in May 1922 in the section entitled Shadows, cf. GZ2.

GZ5

VdW is now completely isolated and cannot even find solace in his desire for sensual pleasure.[24] The lines in this poem are much shorter[25] than those in the previous three and the sense of VdW's isolation is heightened in the final verse, where the final words of lines fifteen (*ziet*) and sixteen (*verliet*) build a crescendo which reaches its climax in line seventeen with a third rhyme, *Niet* (Nothingness).

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[23] The thirteenth edition, published in 1999.

[24] One of the shifts that Vandevoorde (p. 312) notes in this and subsequent poems, is from the subjective 'I' at the beginning of the poem (l. 4) to a more objective 'you' towards the end of the (ll. 15 ff). This is true, but I wonder if this move towards the objective 'you' also marks a shift of attention towards the divine, or a least the divine with himself, which, if I am right, would re-inforce the contrast between the human and divine that I suggest is at the centre of this poem. This may also explain the reference to 'your Nothingness' (*uw Niet*) in line 17, for it may be that this is a reference to the poet's soul that seeks out the *Niet* that is God (see the introductory essay, p. 36, and Jansen, p. 146, where he refers to the poet seeking a metaphor for the process of his nothingness (*nietigheid*) being subsumed by the divine unendingness).

[25] Taking his lead from the critic Martinus Nijhoff ('Karel van de Woestijne: "God aan Zee"' in: *Nieuwe Rotterdamsche Courant, 12 februari 1927*, reprinted in: Martinus Nijhoff, *De veelkantige criticus, intro. Jan Engelman* (Hasselt: Heideland, 1965), 65-8, 67), Vandevoorde (p. 317) notes that VdW achieves a faster rhythm in this collection than in previous collections, and he does so with shorter sentences, some of which lack a (main) verb, and through asyndeton, all of which we see in this poem.

Another motive is a contrast between the human nature of the poet and the divine which he has a slight inkling of. We see this in line one, 'Hard mud, inclement crystal.' We discuss the poet's use of the motive of mud (*modder*) to refer to his fleshy, sinful self in the commentary on GZ4. Here we see it is a 'hard' mud, and in an earlier version of this line it was stony (*steen'ge*) mud (Jansen, p. 395). In this earlier version, the crystal was described as *klaar* (clear). Crystal is one of several tropes alluding to the divine in VdW's work and it has something in common with the trope of 'jewels', which in mystical literature can be seen as 'petrified light' (Van Elmbt p. 250), light of course having a long history of being used to allude to the divine. Clear crystal would seem to make sense as an allusion to the divine, having the added bonus of providing alliteration, so it may surprise us at first that VdW altered this to inclement (*guur*) crystal. But I wonder if this has something to do with the state of the divine within the poet at this point. If this is so, then it is interesting to note that when he reaches the final poem of the central core of the collection, GZ44, he identifies the state of the divine within himself as a rough diamond (*onbehouwen diamant*), which seems to have something in common with the inclement crystal of GZ5. In any case, there is a clear contrast between mud and crystal and we find other contrasts elsewhere as we progress through the poem. In line three, the poet describes himself as 'rich and poor in nothing and all' and in line four he describes himself as 'most sick and most beautiful,' which he repeats in line thirteen.

Rutten (p. 192) says that VdW's self-description as 'the most beautiful' is proof that here we are dealing with a pure and completely individualist outlook on life. I am not sure what he means by this, but I wonder if this contrast between being sick and being beautiful echoes that of line one in that the poet knows he is a sinful, fallen human but also has an inkling that inside him there lurks divine beauty[26] which he must at some point recover.

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[26] In her translation of this poem, Tanis Guest (*Poets from Flanders, Karel van de Woestijne* (Flemish Literature Fund), p. 23) translates *schoon* as 'lovely.' This is certainly one meaning of the word, but I suggest that 'beautiful' is more appropriate in this context.

Another trope that recurs in this poem is that of the poet as a house. In line two he talks of being 'in [his] naked dwelling' and in line five of a 'house that isolates and that looks.' It is interesting that in an earlier draft of the poem, he talks in line two of a *veil'ge* (secure) house (Jansen p. 395). In the final section of this trilogy, The Mountain Lake, he again uses the trope of house, but here he seems to equate it with being a temple of God (Van Elmbt p. 285). In God by Sea, he has not yet reached this point, so perhaps felt the need to get away from the idea of feeling like a secure house at this stage.

Jansen (p. 395) tells us that the poem was composed between 17th and 20th March, 1924, thus somewhat later than the poems on either side of it in God by Sea, and it was first published in the journal *Derde winterboek van de Wereldbibliotheek* (Third Annual of the World Library).

GZ6

This poem receives little attention from Rutten nor Van Elmbt, neither of whom discuss it directly, and this may be because there is a sense in which it seems out of place in this section and seems to look forward to themes addressed at greater length later in the collection.[27] The central motive of the poem is fruit (*vrucht*). Reference to fruit in the context of allusions to sin in the previous poems may at first make us think of the fruit in the Garden of Eden. But this is a fruit that falls and what we probably have here is a reference to autumn. He returns to the theme again later in this collection, e.g. in GZ31 and GZ32, and it is without doubt VdW's favourite season.[28] In autumn, of course, fruit is at its ripest, but it also falls if not harvested and then dies. At first, we do not know what precisely this

[27] In this regard it is interesting to note that it may well have been written several years before other poems in 'The Hot Ash', with Jansen (p. 397) adducing a date of around July 1917, though he places a question mark against this.

[28] See also the poem *Herfst* (Autumn) in: Karel van de Woestijne, *VWI, op. cit.,* 832, a well-known poem of VdW's, *Beeld-Liedeken* (Little Image-song), the first line of which is 'It is sad, that it rains in autumn' (*'t Is triestig, dat het regent op den herfst*), *ibid*., 820, and another poem which contains the lines 'in the autumn, the apples and pears become ripe; come, let us go through the land of autumns (*in de herfst worden de appels en peren rijp; kom, laat ons gaan door 't land der herfsten*).

fruit alludes to, if anything at all, and it is only in penultimate line of the poem that VdW reveals that his 'heart [is] like a fruit that falls…' So VdW, we may assume, hopes that his heart, like the fruit, will ripen, filled with the love of God (Van Elmbt p. 77), but he knows that the only way in which he will be able fully to approach God is through death (see also the commentary for GZ32, GZ33, GZ36 and GZ40 below). Rita van Droogenbroeck notes that these ideas are echoed and supported by the background mood that VdW sets for the poem.[29] He talks of sacred silence (l. 2), emphasized by the use of three dots at the end of lines one and thirteen (cf. GZ29). There is no time here, it is dead (l. 4) and the night that the poet contemplates has no stars, no light. Here, we are in the metaphysical night, which for mystical writers, such as the Spanish mystic, John of the Cross, is the place where the soul can seek out the divine. P. Minderaa compares the poem to one on a similar theme by the German poet Rainer Maria Rilke, which begins 'Die Blätter fallen, fallen wie von weit,' but suggests that VdW's poem has a darker tone to it and a heavier solemnity in comparison to which Rilke's poem seems almost light-hearted.[30] But although there is a solemnity to the poem, I suggest it is not 'over-solemn' and within a few lines, the poet gives the soul wonderful food on which to nourish itself. Van Droogenbroeck calls the poem a little jewel and describes it as one of the most beautiful and most typical poems that she knows by VdW.[31] The imagery which makes it such an effective poem is supported by VdW's masterful language, and to give but one example here, in line twelve, the heaviness of the fruit seems to be echoed by the repeat of the long 'o' sound, and our attention is further drawn to the line by the repeated use of 'l'. We see such alliteration of course in the central motive of the poem, 'A fruit that falls' (*Een vrucht die valt*) and there is sense in

[29] R. van Droogenbroeck, 'Een vrucht, die valt…' in: *Yang: Tijdschrift voor literatuur en kommunikatie, nr. 82 (maart 1978)*, 56-58.
[30] P. Minderaa, 'Poëzie in den herfst' in: *Het Kouter, Onafhankelijk Tijdschrift voor Religie en Cultuur, jg. 2 (1937)*, 343-6, at 345.
[31] Van Droogenbroeck, *op. cit.*, 56.

which this almost becomes a mantra, with the final three words appearing four times in this short poem.

Finally, the poem was first published in the journal *Dietsche warande & Belfort* in March 1924, along with GZ43.

GZ7

The theme of this poem is summed up well in the first two lines: 'I have filled my spotless house // With all the signs of my guilt.' As elsewhere, (e.g. GZ9) the poet uses the metaphor of a house to refer to his current plight, and this points to a turning inwards on his part.[32] In line three, VdW shifts the attention to his wife and notes that although she can point him to 'sweet homely things,' she also carries within herself a fear of what she cannot know of her husband.[33] He then turns to his children, who are growing up and becoming adults. They are, he says, like 'tablets of penance', for the sin of their parents. In the final verse, VdW makes an admonition that is suggestive of those of the Old Testament prophets. He says 'Woe to those (parents)' who isolate themselves as their offspring attain to adulthood and who deny them their love, perhaps out of fear for what they have become.

Jansen (pp. 401 ff.) discusses in detail several phrases which VdW wrote in his notebook on the page opposite that on which he wrote the first draft of this poem and an analysis of these phrases will give us something of an insight into the sources of inspiration for this poem and also into the poet's working method.

The first of these phrases is *Et statuit super petram pedes meos*. This is taken from Psalm 39:3 of the Latin Vulgate. In the NRSV this is Psalm 40:2 and is translated 'and [he] set my feet upon a rock.'

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[32] Cf. Vandevoorde p. 317. Here we writes, *Het feit dat het huis…voortdurend de ruimte is waar het gedicht gelokaliseerd is, duidt op de groeiende inkeer van de dichter.* Van Elmbt (p. 57) places the image of the house in the context of mystical literature and sees it as symbolic of the *hortus conclusus*, the image of the closed garden, common in medieval art and literature.

[33] Vandevoorde (p. 312) suggests that here VdW picks up the antithesis between man and wife to be found in his previous collection, The Mud Man, although here it is less 'offensive' (*offensief*).

Underneath this, VdW writes *III Plant uwen mei daarbuiten* ('Plant your May outside'). It is unclear what the Roman numerals refer to but the rest of the words are a line from the folk song *Schoon lief, hoe ligt gy hier en slaapt* ('Dear love, how do you lie here and sleep'). The second verse, which concludes with the line VdW quotes, runs

> I would not get up for any May,
> Nor open my little window:
> Plant your May where you can,
> Plant your May outside![34]

The third line in VdW's notebook is a quote from the Dutch artist, art historian and poet, Carel van Mander (1548-1606). The line is *O eeuwigh licht wiens huys is self het licht* ('O eternal light whose house is itself light') and is a quote from Van Mander's *Olijf-bergh ofte Poëma van den laetsten dagh* ('Mount of Olives or Poem of the Last Day')[35] and begins a passage beside which is printed *Hy roept de grootheyt Gods aen om hulpe* ('He calls to the greatness of God for help'). The whole passage runs:

> O eternal light whose house is itself light /
> O light of the light by which light was created
> And by which all the world came from nothing /
> O you who alone are pure in being /
> For whom dark night is as clear as noon /
> Who sees through all and is himself out of sight.[36]

The final line on this page of VdW's notebook is *Et ego ridebo* ('and I shall laugh'). These words are not to be found in this precise form in the Vulgate,

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[34] Dutch: *-'k En zou voor geenen mei opstaen, // mijn vensterken niet ontsluiten: // plant uwen mei waer 't u gerei, // plant uwen mei daer buiten!* This text is taken from: ed. F. Van Duyse, *Het oude Nederlandsche lied, Wereldlijke en geestelijke liederen uit vroegeren tijd. 3 delen en register, deel 1* (The Hague: 1903-8), 353.

[35] Jansen indicates that this collection was published in Haarlem in 1609, three years after van Mander's death.

[36] Dutch: *O eeuwich licht wiens huys is self het licht / O licht des licht daer t' licht door is gesticht / En swerelts al van niet is uyt gheresen / O die alleen zijt heylich reyn int wesen / Wien doncker*

though Jansen suggests that VdW may have taken them from Proverbs 1:26, *Ego quoque in interitu vestro ridebo*, which the NRSV gives as 'I also will laugh at your calamity.'

Finally, at the top of the page in the notebook on which Van de Woestijne wrote the first draft of GZ7, he wrote the Latin *Vae nutrientibus*. Again this is not a direct quote from the Vulgate, but probably refers to the line *Vae autem praegnatibus et nutrientibus in illis diebus*, which is found in Matthew (24:19), Mark (13:17) and Luke (21:23) and is translated in the NRSV as 'Woe to those who are pregnant and to those who are nursing infants in those days!' which has a clear resonance for the present poem.

The poem itself was composed over a period between December 1920 and February 1922 and was first published in Elsevier's Illustrated Monthly in May 1922.

GZ8

Here, VdW continues to focus on his relationships with those close to him; in this case reflecting solely on that which he has with his wife. He knows that although they are in some sense separated from one another, by space and time, and by 'feelings of vengeance or fear' (l. 3), he and his wife are still deeply bound to each other. They must suffer each other's pain, including that which they inflict on the other. It is interesting that in the last stanza, VdW evokes the image of the sea, which, as the collection develops, he uses to allude to the divine. Here, though, he notes that he and his wife are as far apart as the sea is from the sky and concludes by again pointing to the pain they can cause one another by saying that the salt of his wife will corrode him, and she will live in fear of him.

VdW began the poem at some point during 1923 and completed it shortly after 4th August 1925 (Jansen p. 406). It was first published in the journal *De gids* (The Guide) in December 1925. It appeared along with poems GZ9, GZ11 and GZ44 and two other poems that eventually formed the longer poem *Het menschelijk*

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nacht is als den middach claer / Diet al doorsiet en self zijt onsichtbaer.

brood (The human bread).[37] Leo Jansen (pp. 121 and 269) suggests therefore that 'The human bread' may, under another title, have formed part of the poet's plans for the middle part of the trilogy that he had been shaping over a number of years, and which finally found public expression as a trilogy in Wingbeat on the Horizon, published after his death in 1942.

GZ9

VdW's relationship to his wife does not only bring pain, but also joy, and it is this that we see in GZ9. There is a sensuousness here, which VdW seems to delight in, although we shall be reminded later that it is this sensuousness that he seeks to escape in order to draw closer to God. The poem has an almost mystical quality and it is almost as if his wife might replace God, in for example line 15, as *klaarte*, which I translate as 'light' but which can also mean 'clarity', is a word that VdW uses elsewhere to refer to the divine (see for example GZ35). He wants the experience to go on forever (l. 13) and there is a sense in which the timelessness evoked here contrasts with the limits of time and space referred to in the previous poem.

I leave further discussion of the role of woman in VdW's poetry in general to the commentary on the following poem, GZ10. It is also briefly worth mentioning that we get something of the sense in which VdW relates to the rose, referred to here in lines nine and eleven, in a fragment he wrote in 1917: *Ik weet dat niets mij dieper stemt dan rozen* ('I know that nothing touches me more deeply than roses').[38]

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[37] This was first published in 1926 by A. A. M. Stols and was later published as a prelude to the trilogy, Wingbeat on the Horizon, in 1942 by A. Manteau of Brussels and a year later in 1943 by A. A. M. Stols in The Hague.

[38] Karel van de Woestijne, *Verzameld werk, 8 delen, deel 2: Epische Poëzie, Fragmenten, Ilias-Vertaling* (Brussels: A. Manteau, 1949), 421 (henceforth *VWII*). As with other tropes in this collection, though, VdW's use of the rose is complex. Later, in GZ38, the rose alludes to God. Here, that is not the case, but I wonder, and I must admit to having no firm evidence to support this suggestion, whether the rose in GZ9 points in some sense to VdW's soul, aroused by God, in some sense alluded to by his wife. If I am right, it points to a fine example of the manner in which VdW presses erotic-sensualitics imagery into the service of allusions to the divine in his later poetry. See also Hans Vandevoorde, 'On Yeats' Footstool: The Poet Karel van de Woestijne,' in:

This poem seems to have been one which took VdW much effort and several attempts to complete, as witnessed by the extensive analysis of the poem by Leo Jansen (pp. 408 ff.). Jansen dates it to shortly before 3rd August, 1925, thus it is a relatively late composition in relation to other poems in this collection, and he notes that it was first published in The Guide in December of the same year, along with GZ8, GZ11 and GZ44.

GZ10

Here, we return to the pain that VdW's relationship with his wife has caused, and in this case he focuses in particular on the pain that she has suffered as a result of it. Yet despite this she still 'clings' to him (l. 13). But he knows that they have long since departed from one another and that 'her body never dances through [his] dream,' (l. 18), which contrasts with the first line of GZ8: 'I dream your dream; you dream my dream….' Nevertheless, he knows that their fates are inextricably linked and concludes with the hope that when he dies, it is she that will close his eyes.

In his commentary on this poem, Rutten (p. 194, n. 3) takes issue with Urbain van de Voorde when the latter suggests that for VdW woman is 'no more and [] no less than the "venus natura"'. Rutten argues that this conception is too narrow and does not take account of the fact that, in his opinion, VdW is not only attracted by his wife's physicality, but also by her soul, or inner being. He suggests that is precisely because his, i.e. VdW's, soul was intrinsic to his love life and his love found 'something eternal' in his wife, that his relationship to his wife has become the drama that we see here. In response, I would say that much of the emphasis in VdW's description of his wife is on her physicality and sensuousness, but as I suggest in my commentary on GZ9, there is a sense in which VdW identifies something mystical in his wife and in which he finds

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The Low Countries: Arts and Society in Flanders and the Netherlands (Rekkem: Stichting Ons Erfdeel, 2002), 214-224, at 218, where Vandevoorde points to the association of the rose with Christ, for instance in the writings of Jan Ruusbroec, and also to the dangers posed to us by the rose's thorns. However, here at least, Vandevoorde does not discuss the meaning of the rose referred to in GZ9.

something akin to the divine in her. Ultimately, as we shall see, he knows that he needs to move away from his wife in order to approach God himself, and perhaps this task is made more difficult by the fact that he not only finds his wife's physical allure attractive, but also her spiritual allure.[39]

The figure of the woman is often seen in negative terms in the poetry of VdW, something which we find elsewhere in Symbolist art, such as that of the Belgian artist, and contemporary of VdW, Fernand Khnopff (1858-1921).[40] In his discussion of the symbolism in VdW's work, Van Elmbt at one point (p. 154) equates her with *temptatio* and at another (p. 160) describes her as a synonym for *caro*, flesh, i.e. what results from original sin. Woman (*vrouw*) is also one of the five subjects of VdW's collection *Substrata* and this aspect of his view of woman finds a voice in the following couplet:

> You bestial bliss of youthful love:
> I leer with a harsh brightness, like Lucifer.[41]

Jansen (p. 416) notes that two lines very similar to lines 13-14 constitute the oldest fragment of this poem.[42] These lines were written sometime in April or May 1922 and the poem was completed on 1st June of the same year. It was first published in Elsevier's Illustrated Monthly in May 1923.

GZ11

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[39] For Jan Ruusbroec, all creatures are in God and God is in all creatures. Later, in GZ21, VdW writes that he longs to be a shadow in the shadow of God, and I wonder whether the mutual indwelling of the human and divine in that poem, which may point back to Ruusbroec, finds an echo in the previous poem, GZ8, in which VdW and his wife share one another's dreams. Of course, this would mean that VdW's wife replaces God, but there is a sense that his initial search for God in this collection focuses on his wife, in whom he may find spiritual as well as physical attraction, though he comes to realize that he must turn from her in order to find God himself. Cf. Rutten's response to Urbain van de Voorde above.

[40] See for example his work 'Caresses' (*Liefkozingen*) (1896, Magritte Museum, Brussels), in which, according to one commentator, the artist 'portrays the mysterious beauty of woman, but also sells her to Satan.'

[41] Dutch: *Gij bestiale zaligheid van jonglings-liefde: // Ik loer met harde helderheid, als Lucifer*. Van de Woestijne, *VWI, op. cit.*, 451.

[42] The lines in question run: *Gij hangt aan mij als zware trossen // beladen van den warmsten wijn*

In this poem, the final one of the first section of the collection, we see VdW finding himself caught between the attractions of the world and the pain that they cause him. Both Jansen (p. 142) and Vandevoorde (pp. 312-3) see this poem as a 'bridge' (*brug*) to the second section of this collection, though Jansen notes that it is not a typical final poem (*slotgedicht*). Vandevoorde suggests that it is the feeling of being orphaned expressed in this poem which provides this bridge as this comes to be a central motive in the second section of the collection, and in the final stanza we do indeed see VdW suggesting that it is the lot of humanity to be orphans in this world. His only hope is that as an orphan, he can belong to God, although tellingly, he recognizes that this can only be an illusion, which he is nevertheless happy for God to perpetuate.[43] VdW also describes himself as an orphan in the first poem of this collection, GZ1, but whereas there he spoke of his mother and father being his earthly mother and father, now at least, he is beginning to recognize that his true father may be his heavenly one, God.

The poem had a long gestation period between 16th March, 1921 and the beginning of 1925 and was published for the first time in The Guide in December 1925 (Jansen, pp. 419-20).

DE SCHURFTIGE DANSER (THE SCABBY DANCER)

This is the second section of five in the collection, God by Sea.[44] The section itself is further divided into three smaller parts, the only one of the five sections in this collection to be so divided.[45] The title of the section may seem strange, but on

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(You hang onto me like heavy bunches of grapes // Full of the warmest wine).

[43] For Vandevoorde (p. 312), this is the only poem in the first section where hope in God is expressed by the poet, but from the language VdW uses it does seem that he understands that this hope may be an illusion (l. 11).

[44] In his review of this collection, Urbain van de Voorde argues that this section in particular consists of a re-working of older motives used by the poet, and that it does not mark a progression in the quality of VdW's poetry. Urbain van de Voorde, *op. cit.*, 495.

[45] Eight of the poems in the section along with GZ5 appeared in the Third Annual of the World Library (Amsterdam, 1924) under the title *De zieke danser* (The Sick Dancer) (see Jansen pp. 142-5 and 268).

closer inspection seems to fit in with VdW's symbolic scheme.[46] Van Elmbt (p. 109) notes that dancing can be seen in VdW's work as pointing to measure and number, which provide the framework for his poetry, but which also seem to emanate from 'higher spheres.' Indeed in one of his short poems from the collection, *Substrata*, VdW refers to image as the 'breathless dancer between God and me' (*beeld: hijgend danser tusschen God en mij*),[47] and so perhaps there is a sense in which poetry and poetic imagery act for VdW as an intermediary between himself and God. As for the dancer being scabby (*schurftig*), this may point us to the sinful nature from which the poet is still trying to break free.

In the first section of this collection, The Hot Ash, much of the poet's attention was on his relationship with his family, in particular his wife, and his recognition that he would have to leave them behind in order to move closer to God. In the second section, the focus is quite different and the reader is alerted to this straight away by the first line of GZ12 'I come alone, at night, to this city by the sea,' and as I discuss elsewhere for VdW the wide open plain of the sea is suggestive of the receptivity of God (cf. Van Elmbt p. 262).

GZ12

Jansen (p. 143) notes a thematic link between this poem and the following two: the poet has come to the sea for a new orientation in his life.[48] I also suggest mention of the sea reminds us of the title of this collection, God by Sea, and that it is God whom VdW has come to the coast to find. However, if we do take the poet's description of the sea as an allusion to the divine, then the picture VdW paints is not merely one of a passive, receptive God. In line three, he talks of a

[46] Vandevoorde (p. 318) suggests that there is an increasing use of metaphor by VdW in this second section of the collection.
[47] Karel van de Woestijne, *VWI, op. cit.*, 439.
[48] In a sense this mirrors VdW's re-location to the coastal resort of Oostende, where he lived between 1921 and 1926. The sea (*Zee*) is also one of the five sub-headings in his earlier collection, *Substrata* (Van de Woestijne, *VWI, op. cit.*, 445 ff).

whirwind (*wervel-hoos*) and in line seven of the 'full wind wielding its scythe.' Rutten puts it well when he suggests that the sea is 'this eternal symbol of the capriciousness and discipline, of the eternity and boundlessness of God.' (Rutten p.197). In line nine, VdW asks if he is an exile who had previously always sought *life*. He goes onto reflect on how he has abandoned his loved ones to seek God, but in the final stanza is already aware that he feels alone as the sea recedes from him. He is tired of looking into the void (*ijlte*), a frequent allusion to the divine (Van Elmbt p. 298) in VdW's work, and despite God's invisibility, the poet still experiences his grumbles and bites.[49]

VdW composed the poem in two of his note books first on 18th December 1922 and then on 10th March 1924. It was published for the first time in the journal Third Annual of the World Library and along with GZ2 was included in the prospectus for the collection, produced by the publisher A.A.M. Stols to generate interest in its publication.

GZ13

Here, VdW continues to try and fathom the unfathomable sea. He is alone, but knows there are thousands like him who are suffering. The meaning of the poem is somewhat mysterious, but one clue comes from the author's own pen. He wrote the poem in a form close to the final version in his 1924 notebook on 1st January, and directly over it he wrote '*hominem sapit* (Martialis).' This points to a line from Martial's Epigrams, Book X, Epigram 4 (line 10), the full version of which runs *hominem pagina nostra sapit*, which, as it happens VdW had written out in full under the date 6th January in his notebook for 1923. The translation of this line is 'our page concerns man,' i.e. it does not concern any other being or matters (Jansen p. 426). This poem was not published along with most of the others in this section in the Third Annual of the World Library in 1924. Rather it

[49] Vandevoorde (p. 313) takes this final comment in line 20 to indicate that VdW has not found the consolation he was seeking. He has not found the 'Life' (l. 9) that he was looking for. Rather he has only found isolation.

was first published in the journal *Dietsche warande & Belfort* in March of the same year.

GZ14

The language that VdW uses in his poetry ranges from the straightforward to the obscure, with definitive meaning sometimes being difficult to discern. Here, though, in line one, he begins with the extremely simple yet effective 'the sea waits'. This reminds us of the receptivity of the divine which, for VdW, the sea suggests. The poet tries to 'close [his] door'[50] to the forces of the sea and to deny its effect on him, but ultimately in vain. Although he tries to deny the power of the sea on him when he speaks (l. 10), he admits that it is in the sea that his 'yearning breathes' (l. 9), and again with deceptive simplicity he tells the sea (l. 11) 'I have enjoyed you.' The sense of being attracted to the sea is again suggested in line 18, where the poet talks of being 'a peaceful rider, to the rhythm of the tides.' Yet despite this, he still suffers, and in the last stanza, he seems to suggest that it is in suffering that he knows he is alive.[51] Finally in lines 24-25, he returns to the image of the door and I suggest that here he makes a reference to Christ, whose pain on the cross would have caused him more pain than that VdW himself experienced. The reader might like to think of William Holman-Hunt's depictions of Christ at the door in his paintings *The Light of the World* in St. Paul's Cathedral, London, Keble College Chapel, Oxford and Manchester Art Gallery.

The poem was composed on 3rd and 7th March, 1924 and was first published in the journal Third Annual of the World Library.

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[50] Note how VdW only slowly develops the trope of the poet as house. After saying in line one 'I close my door', the trope does not appear again until line 20 in which he talks of 'the twilight dwelling of suffering.' The trope is only fully developed as an allegory in the fifth and final strophe, where he talks of having finally entered himself with the 'past immured.' (cf. Vandevoorde p. 320).

[51] Vandevoorde (p. 313) sees the twilight dwelling of suffering (*schemer-woning van het lijden*) which the poet increasing inhabits and in which he withdraws from the world and turn inwards to

GZ15

Here, we see a fine example of how VdW uses these poems to present and develop a narrative about his journey towards the divine. In the final stanza of GZ14, he talks of being trapped inside his own existence. In GZ15, he recalls that once he escaped himself[52] and became a creative column of fire. But he concludes this poem with the words 'but no' and in GZ16 recognizes that he cannot find release through his own creative powers. Throughout this narrative, the attention is on the 'I' that is the poet and, as we discuss elsewhere, it is worth remembering that 'I' (*Ik*) is one of the five subjects of his collection of short poems, *Substrata* (1918-1921), the others being town (*stad*), sea (*zee*), woman (*vrouw*) and God. The 'I' in this poem is a creative power 'a riot of fire that celebrated its mighty flame with a feast' (lines 7-8) and one that creates 'all-consuming verse' (line 10). In line six, VdW recalls the time when he broke free from himself saying 'I have danced like a pillar of fire'. The reference to dancing points us back to the title of this section, The Scabby Dancer, whilst the pillar of fire may refer to Exodus 13:22, where, as the reader will know, we are told that God used a pillar of fire to lead Israel through the wilderness at night. It may be going too far here, but there is a sense in which VdW seems to take on the mantle of divine creative force in this poem, only to withdraw from it in GZ16. As well as this allusion to God's sign to Israel in the wilderness, in lines 20-21 he calls himself the 'source of all beauty' which we have been told 'could light up the universe' (line 9). But no…

From the close association between this poem and the previous one it should not surprise us that he wrote GZ15 on the same day, 7th March 1924, as the second draft of GZ14. In his notebook VdW wrote a number '2' next to it, having numbered the second draft of GZ14 '1', which indicates the order that he intended for it in this group of poems, The Scabby Dancer (Jansen, pp. 428 and 430). It

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his own suffering as the central theme of the poem.

[52] Likewise, Vandevoorde (p. 313) talks of a moment of ecstasy or rapture (*extase*) being remembered in the poem.

was first published between GZ14 and GZ16 in the Third Annual of the World Library.[53]

GZ16

VdW recognizes that he cannot free himself from himself by his creative power and concludes this first part of the section, The Scabby Dancer, by recognizing his own limitations and realizing that he must now just lie down and wait. Jansen (p. 143) notes that whereas VdW began this section in GZ12 by coming to the sea to seek a new orientation in his life, in this poem and in the previous one, in concluding the section, the poet is now rather skeptical about reaching his goal and expresses this in line one of the present poem: 'In vain have I drilled a root through the ground.' In a similar vein, in the second stanza, VdW says that he does not make honey by causing 'the rhombic honeycomb to swell.'[54] We could simply take this as an interesting image by which the poet puts limits on his own creative powers, or perhaps recognize that he is tapping into the rich tradition of mystical poetry in Flanders. For the Flemish mystic Jan Ruusbroec made use of bees and honey to refer to the divine and for example on one occasion wrote 'In the most inward parts of our Lord Jesus Christ flow rivers of honey beyond all taste and sweetness, that one can imagine,'[55] which contrasts sharply with VdW's current plight. Finally, I should note that my translation of this poem differs from

[53] See note 45 above.

[54] It is interesting to note that in his earlier poetry, VdW used a bee metaphor in quite a different way. In a poem he wrote in 1908, *Ach weet ik?...* (*VWI, op. cit.*, 360), he says he is like a bumble bee (*hommel*) that strikes its head and beats its wing against a window pane, as it seeks a light, but which will die, like him, in its fateful search for happiness (*geluk*). See also Walter van Hemeldonck, *Antieke en bijbelse metaforiek in de moderne Nederlandse letteren (1880- c. 1914)* (Ghent: KANTL, 1977), 145-6, in which the author contrasts a more positive attitude towards the bee, and indeed other insects, in ancient literature, with that which we find in modern literature, of which VdW's 1908 poem is an example. This suggests that at least here, VdW returns to the older way of symbolising the bee in his later work.

[55] Middle Dutch: *In die binnenste Ons Heeren Jhesu Cristi vloeyen honeghvloede boven allen smaec end suetegheit, diemen ghedinken mach* (Jan Ruusbroec, *op. cit.*, 131, ll. 32-34). (For a discussion of this, see Van Elmbt, p. 289). As the reader will appreciate, this is only one of a number of metaphors in the poem and Vandevoorde (p. 318) suggests that this can be seen as part of a move from simile to metaphor in VdW's work.

that of Tanis Guest[56] in one important regard. Guest translates *tegen* (l. 12) as 'against'. This is, admittedly, the standard meaning of the word. However, in Flemish it can also mean 'towards' (c.f. German *gegen*) and I suggest that this is what it means here.

VdW wrote the poem on and/or shortly after 17th March 1924, some ten days after he had written the second draft of GZ14 and GZ15 and again it seems to form a unity in some sense along with them. It was first published along with them in the Third Annual of the World Library.

GZ17

This poem, one of the few sonnets in this collection (the others being GZ2 and GZ28), opens the second part of this section, which consists of four poems, and in it we read words put into the mouth of a being whose identity cannot clearly be discerned. Rutten (p. 199) suggests that it may be a voice that comes up from the depths of the poet's very own being: perhaps it is the voice of that which belongs to his 'whole and healthy humanity.' Or, he goes on, maybe here we listen to the voice of God himself, who, although invisible, is finally present in VdW.[57] Whatever the voice represents, though, it is clear that it points, Janus-like, in two directions.[58] In lines 1-8,[59] it highlights VdW's discontent with the current world, but accuses him of not wanting to leave the world behind, despite this discontent. In line seven, the voice says 'You hold onto your fear as to a favourite cure,' as if

[56] T. Guest, *op. cit.*, 25-26.

[57] See also Jansen p. 143. He refers to the voice as a 'sort of cosmic universal conscience (*al-geweten*).'

[58] Mention of Janus reminds us that in 1908, VdW published *Janus met het dubbele voor-hoofd* (Janus with the double forehead), and that in the poet's life and work there does seem to be a Janus- like quality. For example, in this volume there is a tension between the sensual and the spiritual, with the poet looking each way at given moments, and in his own life, his decision not to leave Belgium in WWI, but then to operate under the Germans as a 'passivist' may also point to a certain Janus- like character. I thank Peter Theunynck for highlighting this aspect of VdW's life and work.

[59] Again, with reference to one of Vandevoorde's (p. 319) central themes, we should note that in this first stanza we have a piling up of one metaphor after another. Placing the metaphors in the broader context of the collection as a whole, Vandevoorde also notes that here they are becoming more daring, e.g. 'the chandeliers of your most beautiful knowledge' (l. 4).

it is better to live with an imperfect present than an unknown future. In the final six lines, the voice points VdW to the possibility of a different existence and suggests that there are already signs of this in the poet's present life. But he will continue to experience emptiness (*leêgte*) until the Day of Judgment. Then and only then will he 'dance divinely' once more. This image contrasts nicely with that of the scabby dancer referred to in the title of this section of the collection and gives us a glimpse of the final vision that VdW alludes to at the end of the postlude of the poetic triptych, Wingbeat on the Horizon, of which God by Sea forms the central panel. Here, poetry becomes solely praise to God and the poet a singer dedicated to God in the middle of a dancing choir of the saved (Van Elmbt pp. 234-5). Finally, I wonder if we also see in these last six lines a couple of references to Christ's death on the cross. In lines 9-10, the voice tells the poet that

> …you know no greater joy
> than to kneel before the fiercest wound on God's rock

This may point to VdW genuflecting before a crucifix. Secondly, in lines 13-14, the voice talks of

> …the day of judgment when God shall pierce you
> With his lance…

To my mind, this is suggestive of the passage in the bible (John 19:34) in which a soldier pierces the side of Christ's dead body with a lance. Tradition has it that the soldier's name was Longinus and in sculptures of the dead Christ's body he is usually depicted as having the wound in his side.

VdW wrote the first draft of the poem on 17th January 1923, but he re-drafted it and added lines to make it into a sonnet on 11th March 1924, again at about the time that he was producing other poems in this section of the collection. As with GZ12, and GZ14 through to GZ20, the poem was first published in the Third Annual of the World Library.

GZ18

This is the second of four poems in which we hear a voice, the identity of which is discussed in the commentary for GZ17, addressing the poet. In the last poem, the voice accuses VdW of being drunk with emptiness. In this poem, the admonitory tone continues and here it addresses his solitude (*eenzaamheid*) head on. The voice likens VdW to a she-wolf that throws her cubs out to fend for themselves. VdW's cubs are his poems and he must throw them away, says the voice, to overcome this feeling of solitude.[60]

On 23rd February 1923 VdW wrote a fragment of nine lines which may indicate that he initially had a shorter poem in mind than the one he eventually produced. He wrote the longer version on or shortly after 21st March 1924 and as with the preceding poems first published it in the Third Annual of the World Library (Jansen pp. 435-6).

GZ19

This third of the four poems in which a voice is addressing VdW picks up directly from the previous poem, GZ18, and here the voice tells the poet that it will not suffice merely to throw away his poems in order for him to deal with the pain and solitude of existence in this world.[61] The first two quatrains point to the beauty of nature and seem to suggest that the poet acts in vain if he tries to cut himself off from the allure of physical and creaturely nature.[62] In the third quatrain, the voice tells him that he needs to move away from self-love and only then will he

[60] Vandevoorde (p. 313) has a different reading and suggests that the voice is exhorting VdW to bear fruit like the she-wolf in order to escape his solitude. It is also worth noting (cf. Vandevoorde p. 320) that whereas the voice says in line one 'You are *like* that she-wolf' (my italics), at the end of the poem, it merely says 'Throw out your children, you!' suggesting a move from simile to metaphor that reflects a general trend in VdW's later work.

[61] Vandevoorde (p. 313) suggests that in this and the next poem forms of the verb which are either imperatives or which recommend or give advice predominate. Certainly I would agree with the latter, though I am not sure there are any more imperatives (*imperatieven*) in this poem than there were in the previous one, GZ18, which finishes with an imperative.

[62] I wonder whether here we find echoes of Jan Ruusbroec's idea, the *lijflijc sinlijc wech* (corporeal sensory way), that it is through an engagement with the world, rather than escaping from it, that

recognize true, earthly, love and acknowledge the importance of this to his life in this world. Finally, as well as love, he will have to embrace suffering. It is interesting that the voice tells the poet that he will have to taste his suffering 'like a ripe fruit' (l. 14). Fruit is of course best tasted when it is ripe, so perhaps the idea here is that suffering is something to be cherished and seen almost as something to delight in. It is also worth noting that elsewhere in his work, VdW refers to his heart as a fruit that ripens (Van Elmbt p. 211, n. 70), and there is perhaps the sense here that through suffering the poet's heart will mature much like a fruit.

Jansen (p. 438) tells us that VdW composed the poem on or shortly after 21st March, 1924, a time similar to those for the preceding poems, and like them it was first published in the journal, the Third Annual of the World Library.

GZ20

In this final poem of the four in which a voice addresses the poet, it suggests that it is by listening to his heart that the poet can both deal with current existence and move beyond it towards God.[63] The voice says, 'don't you hear your heart beat? // That is the measure by which your days have danced' (ll. 1-2). For the voice, and thus for VdW, it is the fact that the heart beats that is important here, for this is the basis of rhythm. But, this is not rhythm for the sake of rhythm, but a cosmic rhythm that corresponds to the music of the spheres of which God is the centre (Van Elmbt p. 201). God is also the creator of this rhythm and so the voice is pointing VdW towards God. It is not VdW, but God, who ordains the weight of sheaves and assays all seed (ll. 11-12) and so VdW must turn to God in order to escape the suffering of his present existence. Finally, the references to flower and rose in the last two lines of the poem are intriguing and worth briefly reflecting

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one finds a way to the divine. See the introductory essay to this volume for more on this.

[63] Whereas we note that the voice in GZ19 gives advice with the phrase 'never will you…, if…,' now the tone is more exhortatory, e.g. l.1 'Listen to your heart…' and l. 13 'Try…to believe in yourself.' (cf. Vandevoorde p. 317, where he notes that the exhortations of the voice are one of the ways in which VdW effects a quickening rhythm in his poetry).

on. The rose is a symbol of perfection and as such again points to the divine (Van Elmbt p. 201, n. 42).[64] It is also symbolic of the connection that VdW finds with *het Hogere*, i.e. The Higher Being, or God, (Van Elmbt p. 179), and as I suggest in the commentary on GZ9 above, it may also allude to his soul. If it does, and I make this assertion based only on my reading of VdW's poetry, then reference to the flower, a rose, in lines 14-15 of the present poem, where it seems that voice is exhorting the poet to lift his heart and his soul to God, may allude both to the soul and to the symbolic connection between the soul and God that Van Elmbt refers to. But, in line 15 we learn that no rose has a fragrance in the void. This may seem strange as Van Elmbt suggests that the fragrance of a rose is suggestive of an invisible presence. However, perhaps the point is, though it is by no means incontestable, that if the soul, alluded to by the rose, attains to the void (*ijlte*), i.e. God, it will be subsumed within him and lose its earthly attributes such as fragrance. Finally on this point, reference to the rose being subsumed in the void echoes the allusion to the soul inhabiting the divine in line one of the next poem, 'Being a shadow in the shadow.'

The poem was written during a period, between 21st March and 4th May, 1924, close to the time when VdW wrote the preceding poems and like them it was first published in the journal, the Third Annual of the World Library.

GZ21

After the four poems in which the poet is addressed by a voice from the depths, VdW concludes the second section of God by Sea with a third sub-section, consisting of one short poem. Both Rutten (p. 201) and Jansen (p. 144) see the poem as a synthesis of what Jansen calls the central problem of the collection up to now: namely that the poet wants to become nothing (to be able to approach God) (lines one and two), but is still assailed by old desires that prevent this (the

[64] See also commentary on GZ9 above concerning VdW's relationship to the rose. Jan Ruusbroec comments that the rose is the flower that symbolizes God's and Christ's love.

'old pain' of line four).[65] The desire to become nothing in order to approach God that Jansen refers to is alluded to in line one in the reference to 'being a shadow in the shadow.' The shadow in VdW's work has something in common with the metaphysical night to which he refers and which is found in the work of other mystical writers such as John of the Cross. It is in the shadow that one can encounter God, or as Van Elmbt (p. 182) puts it, appropriating the term void (*ijlte*) that VdW uses to refer to the divine, 'the shadow becomes the sign that indicates that the emptiness (*leegte*), the void (*ijlte*) is filled in (*gevuld*).' As well as becoming a shadow, he wants to forget himself (l. 2), but, as we have said, he recognizes that he still carries the old pain within him (l. 4).[66]

VdW mentions pain again in the third stanza, lines 9-10, where he talks of being nailed, Christ-like, in pain and then finally implores God to produce some sparks, some signs of life, from him (Vandevoorde p. 313, 'the one who is petrified in pain like a rock'). This final image of sparks pouring forth from a rock is somewhat reminiscent of Moses, following God's instructions, striking the rock at Horeb, from which water would come out for the people of Israel to drink (Exodus 17). It also acts as a bridge to the next section of the collection (cf. Vandevoorde p. 313).[67]

The slight distance that seems to exist between this poem and the other poems in this second section of the collection may in part arise because this poem was written on 10th October 1923, whilst the rest were substantially written in 1924, many of them in March of that year. Further, whereas many of them were published together for the first time in the journal, the Third Annual of the World Library, this poem was published for the first time in the journal Orpheus in February 1924.

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[65] To put it another way, he is again acting somewhat Janus-like, recognizing his dissatisfaction with his current or old ways but at the same time looking for a way for God to take him beyond this.

[66] For a further discussion of this stanza, see the introductory essay to this volume.

[67] Vandevoorde (p. 313) suggests that the poem has a *wenskarakter* ('wishfulness') to it.

VERZOEKING VAN GOD (TEMPTATION OF GOD)

Vandevoorde (p. 314) sees this section as the 'existential nadir' (*existentiele dieptepunt*) of this collection and as the reader will see there is much evidence to support this view. However, there is a glimmer of hope of something more positive in the final poem of the collection, in which VdW seems to recognize that God needs to be approached not with words, but with silence. The title of the section itself is intriguing and a number of possibilities have been given as to its interpretation. Rutten (p. 202) interprets it as a *bekoring van het goddelijke*, or 'allure of the divine' i.e. God is tempting or even seducing the poet, and for Rutten this allows VdW to get a sense of the existence and closeness of God. Jansen (p. 146) argues that the title refers to the pride or arrogance that the poet throws at the feet of God and that VdW is putting God to the test or mocking him. Vandevoorde (p. 314) offers other alternatives whereby the title may refer to a testing that God inflicts on the poet or, taking another classical meaning of *verzoeking*, it could refer to the mollifying (*vermurwen*) of God, by suffering. All of these it seems are possible.

Four of the poems in the section, GZ23, GZ25, GZ28 and GZ29, were first published as part of a group of poems under the title *Verzoeking van God* in Elsevier's Illustrated Monthly, Issue 31.1, April 1921 (Jansen pp. 263-4).

GZ22

In this first poem of the section, the focus is very much on the fact that VdW is still beholden to his senses: l. 1 'we are not yet cured of our eyes'; l. 6 'we are not yet cured of our hands'; and ll. 11-12 'we are not yet cured of our noses, nor of our ears, // we are not yet cured of speech.' But he recognizes that trying to escape the world of the senses is futile: 'Vain hope, just to be full of emptiness…' (line nine). The way forward to quench the divine vengeance of line 22 is not to embrace pain as joy, but to embrace death (l. 19) and acknowledge our sinfulness, from which we can then be purified (ll. 20-22). The image that VdW uses in line

21, in which sin, or repentance for sin, 'can purify our lips with its fire,' recalls the vision in Isaiah 6:6-8, in which a seraph touches the mouth of the prophet with a live coal and says 'now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out' (NRSV). Vandevoorde (p. 318) sees this reference as a continuation of the erotic-sensualistic imagery of VdW's earlier poetry now being used in a religious context, and which is used to talk of God in particular in subsequent poems in this collection.

On 12 January 1923, VdW wrote a rough quatrain which would form the basis of the eventual first stanza and opposite this he wrote a line *En waar wij zullen van het woord genezen* which was the basis of the eventual line twelve (Jansen p. 445). Over a year later, on 15th February 1924, he wrote a full version of the poem and it was published for the first time a month later in the journal, *Dietsche warande & Belfort*.

GZ23

In this poem, the poet presents himself as someone looking for answers to the problem of earthly existence. Rutten (p. 202) suggests that here the poet is a pilgrim searching for the absolute, the eternal seeker for God. I am not sure I agree with this, certainly in the first instance. Rather I think that what we have here is VdW describing a search for answers in everything other than God. After this search, and only after this search, does he admit that the answer lies with God. The sounds in lines four to six grab the reader's attention, with the alliteration of *fakkel* and *feller* and *zalve* and *zonde*, the repetition of *geen* (no) at the start of each line and the rhyme scheme.

The imagery in the second stanza is quite striking and worth commenting on. The poet suggests that in times past he indulged himself at a table….without God. Van Elmbt (p. 231, n. 58) notes that whenever VdW uses the word *maal*, as he does here in line 11, which I translate as 'feast,' he is referring to the Eucharist. He does not refer to these lines directly at this point, but I suggest that although there is a clear allusion to the Eucharist here it is a perverted Eucharist, for it is a

'feast of [the poet's] own ashes,' at which he, not a priest, pours out his own blood, not that of Christ, which would be the understanding of the Eucharist familiar to the Catholic, Van de Woestijne. This is of course a celebration of the sacrament without God and pertinently the poet asks in line 13 how long this feast lasted. He provides the answer saying it lasted until the last guest, death, came along. In other words, the Eucharist without God, without Christ, is no Eucharist and so he has to continue on his journey to find a more satisfying booty.

VdW first began to draft this poem in his notebook on 22nd December, 1920. Above the date in his notebook, he writes *Gebruik van God* (Use of God) which Jansen (pp. 447-8) takes to be a potential title for a group of poems including this one. Under the date, he wrote two lines

'k Ben hier geweest, 'k ben daar geweest,
'k ben al de kappellekens naar geweest.

and under them the word *Volkslied*. This is the Dutch word for folk-song and indeed the lines are from a Flemish folk-song, translating as

I have been here, I have been there,
I have been to all the little chapels.

So we can see where the inspiration for the poem and indeed its first line come from. A *terminus ante quem* for the poem is 16th February, 1921 and it was first published Elsevier's Illustrated Monthly, Issue 31.1 in April 1921.

GZ24

As mentioned in the introductory essay to this volume, François van Elmbt has devoted considerable attention to this poem in an article on possible influences of the medieval Flemish mystic Hadewijch on VdW's poetry.[68] He suggests that

[68] François van Elmbt, 'Karel van de Woestijne en Hadewijch,' in: *De Nieuwe Taalgids, 77de jg., 1984*, 235-246, at 242-44.

several motives in this poem, the tree, the eye of God and the chalice or cup (*kelk*) echo motives found in the first vision of Hadewijch, *De weg naar God langs 'de brandende bomen der waarheid'* (The Way to God by "The Burning Trees of Truth"),[69] and concludes, though not without recognizing that it cannot be asserted beyond doubt, that VdW drew on Hadewijch's vision in drafting this poem. Certainly the correspondences are striking, but there are certain questions which are left unresolved.

The overarching thrust of Hadewijch's vision is that she is led from a picture of the fallen nature of man's sin through to salvation by the blood of Christ. If we conclude that a similar arc of sin to salvation is at work in VdW's poem, then this does seem at odds with the poems which follow, GZ25 and GZ26, where the predominant sense is of VdW's awareness of his own guilt and a feeling of corporeal and moral turpitude. We should of course recognize that the trajectory that VdW follows in this collection as a whole is not a smooth, linear one from sin to salvation, but talk of salvation at this point does seem somewhat premature. If we take each of the motives mentioned above in turn, then we can see how robust Van Elmbt's argument is.

In Hadewijch's vision, the tree has rotten or decayed roots.[70] An angel which accompanies the mystic tells her that the roots point to man's fallen nature, whilst the trunk refers to man's eternal soul.[71] However, in VdW's poem there is no mention of roots. That said, the tree grows out of the poet (line one), so here the poet in his fallen nature may correspond to the roots of Hadewijch's tree.

The angel then leads Hadewijch to another tree and on each leaf of the tree are written the words 'I am the power of total will; nothing can escape me.'[72] For Van Elmbt this evokes the notion of God's eye, for it is all-seeing and nothing can

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[69] For the full text of the vision, see Hadewijch, *Een bloemlezing uit haar werken*, ed. N. de Paepe (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 1979), 5 ff. The extract to which Van Elmbt refers begins on p. 6, l. 16.
[70] Middle Dutch: *Die ierste boom hadde ene verrotte wortele die overbroosch was.*
[71] Hadewijch, *op. cit.*, 6, ll. 24-26.
[72] *ibid.*, 7, ll. 45-6: Middle Dutch: *Ic ben de cracht van volcomenen wille; mi en mach engeen dinc ontbliven.*

escape it.[73] Whereas Hadewijch does not explicitly mention God's eye, VdW does (line four). For him, God's eye is to be found in the cups which the tree carries and in this sense there is a correspondence between it and the words on the leaves of the tree. We find reference to God's eye no less than five times in this collection and it is a motive found elsewhere in his work.[74] His use of it here certainly allows him to respond to the pattern of Hadewijch's vision, but it should be said that the shift from words on leaves to God's eye at first sight at least seems a considerable one.

A little later, the angel leads Hadewijch to a place where they find a cup full of blood.[75] Given the context and given that there are subsequent references to Christ in the vision, it is not unreasonable for Van Elmbt to assume that this is the blood of Christ,[76] in what seems to be a reference to the Eucharist. In VdW's cup, we do not find blood, but his putrid flesh. Any attempt to draw parallels between the blood of Christ and the poet's putrid flesh may seem bound to fail in the first instance, but there is reason to believe that there is a certain correspondence between them, at least for VdW. In his poem, what is in the cups shifts from being God's eye (line four) to his putrid flesh (line eight). Angels, which are again a feature common to both Hadewijch's vision and VdW's poem, can only feed on God,[77] so if, as VdW suggests in the second stanza of his poem, they quench their thirst on the cups, then they will be drinking the poet's putrid flesh. This line of reasoning would suggest that the poet's flesh, having dissolved in line two, has in some way been sanctified, and, perhaps drawing on the notion of *Imitatio Christi* that we see elsewhere in this collection, his flesh once sanctified

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[73] Van Elmbt (1984), *op. cit.*, 244.

[74] H. A. Wage wrote a short essay entitled 'Het Oog Gods,' published in: *Opgrond van de tekst. Opstellen aangeboden aan prof. Dr. K. Meeuwesse* (Utrecht: HES, 1983), 75-79. However, despite the title and the fact that it does review this collection, it makes little reference to the eye of God. An early reference to the eye of God in VdW's work comes in the poem *Keer Niet Uw Oog* ('Do not turn your eye') from the section *Zeven Gebeden* in the collection *Het Vaderhuis*, first published in 1903 (Karel van de Woestijne, *VWI*, *op. cit.*, 66-7). Line one runs *Keer niet Uw oog van wie Ge in vrede leven liet* ('Do not turn your eye from the one whom you let live in peace'). See also Van Elmbt (1973), *op. cit.*, pp. 54-5.

[75] Hadewijch, *op. cit.*, 10, l. 119.

[76] Van Elmbt (1984), *op. cit.*, 244.

has become like the blood, and indeed the flesh, of Christ. As the reader will recognize this reading is fairly involved and leaves certain questions unanswered, but I would suggest it does have much to recommend it, and if it stands up to close scrutiny we would have to conclude that the eight lines of VdW's poem amount to a fine, dense reconception of Hadewijch's first vision.

In relation to Hadewijch's image of the rotten root, which VdW may well have transformed into his own fallen body, and with reference to the French poet, Charles Baudelaire, Van Elmbt warns his readers against seeing anything more than a superficial correspondence with what he calls a 'decadent Baudelairean use of metaphor.'[78] This is certainly something one should guard against, but I wonder whether the same is true of VdW's use of the trope of putrid flesh, for as Van Elmbt himself notes elsewhere (p. 241), it closely mirrors that of symbolist writers such as the German poet, Rainer Maria Rilke in his *Aufzeichungen*, and Baudelaire himself (see also Rutten p. 203, n. 1). In his poem, *Une Charogne* (A Rotting Corpse), from the collection *Les Fleurs du Mal*,[79] Baudelaire writes (lines 13-14),

> And the sky watched the splendid carcass
> Open out like a flower.[80]

This reminds us of the tree growing out of VdW in line one of his poem. A little later (lines 17-20), Baudelaire writes,

> The flies buzz on this putrid stomach,
> From which come some black battalions
> Of larvae, who ran like a thick liquid
> Along these living rags.[81]

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[77] *ibid*., 243.
[78] *ibid*., 244. See the introduction to this volume for a further discussion on parallels between VdW's work and that of Baudelaire.
[79] For a copy of this poem, see Charles Baudelaire, *Les Fleurs du Mal*, ed. John E. Jackson (Le Livre de Poche, 1999), 77 ff.
[80] French: *Et le ciel regardait la carcasse superbe // Comme une fleur s'épanouir*.
[81] French: *Les mouches bourdonnaient sur ce ventre putride, // D'où sortaient de noirs battalions //*

References to the putrid stomach and the thick liquid that emerges from it remind us of lines two and eight in VdW's poem.[82] Clearly in both poems there is a transformation of the flesh, and it is reasonable to assume that VdW would at least have been familiar with Baudelaire's famous poem. The absence of the motive in Hadewijch's vision means that VdW would have had to look elsewhere for this particular trope. This does not mean that he is an unoriginal poet; rather that his originality lies in reconceiving an existing trope and turning it towards his own ends.

VdW wrote the first draft of this poem in his notebook on 11th March, 1921. After the date he wrote *Zicht op een magnolia* (Sight of a magnolia) and this seems to have been the impetus for his writing of the poem. Almost a year later, on 4th February 1922, VdW re-drafted the poem with changes in another notebook with the heading *Tenebrae* (Shadows), and it was under this title that this and several other poems appeared in May 1922 in Elsevier's Illustrated Monthly, Issue 32.1. Finally, in a neat copy of the collection for the publisher, A.A.M. Stols, and in the first proofs for publication, the order of this poem and GZ25 was reversed (Jansen pp. 454 ff.).

GZ25

This is the second of three poems in which VdW expresses his awareness of his own moral and physical turpitude. As well as referring to his own struggles within himself, though, he also refers to his struggles with God. In the first stanza, he addresses God directly, in the person of Christ, asking, rhetorically, what he had ever suffered, knowing full well what Christ experienced before and during his crucifixion. He then says that for his part he has had to deal with suffering all his life (ll. 6-8) and to deal with the caprices of Death at every turn.

De larves, qui coulaient comme un épais liquide // Le long de ces vivants haillons.

[82] The image of putrid rotting flesh also appears in the next poem and Vandevoorde (p. 314) suggests that the poet can only dedicate his flesh to 'the rejection of God' (GZ25, l. 15) in the hope that his ordeal will sadden God.

But he has managed somehow to bear this pain. In line four, he seems to liken himself to a dog saying he has wagged his tail, perhaps happily, at Death's caprices, and we should note that the reference to 'paw' (*poot*) in line 17, continues this image of the poet as a dog, which is also how he portrays himself at the start of poem GZ4 'Like a dog that strolls around its own mess' earlier in this collection. Again in line ten of the present poem he says that in the face of pain he will not cry, but sing, and in line twelve even suggests he cherishes this suffering.

As the poem progresses we see a move towards self-description which speaks of self-loathing. In the fourth stanza he remembers that he was orphaned by God on this earth and in the fifth he imagines himself as 'the last of the lepers.' In the final stanza, he calls himself 'pure rot' (*rotte pure*) which echoes line 13, 'that rots all his flesh' and recalls the imagery of Baudelaire discussed in detail in the commentary on GZ24. But through all this suffering, VdW continues to endure and he concludes by saying that through his endurance he 'make[s] that bleak God sad.' There is a note of defiance here, emphasized by the repetition of the final line, and perhaps a suggestion that VdW feels it is God who is responsible for inflicting this suffering on him.

Jansen notes that the first draft of the poem was composed towards the end of December 1920. On the reverse of the page on which this was written, VdW noted several quotations opposite his first draft of the poem which became GZ7 in this collection. One of these, *Et statuit super petram pedes meos* ('And he set my feet upon a rock') from the 39th Psalm of the Vulgate,[83] was included with GZ25 when it was first published, in April 1921 in Elsevier's Illustrated Monthly, Issue 31.1, though not when it was published in the current collection. Finally, in a neat copy of the collection for the publisher, A.A.M. Stols, and in the first proofs for publication, the order of this poem and GZ24 was reversed.

GZ26

This is the third of a mini-series of poems in which VdW expresses his own deep suffering.[84] Rutten (p. 205) notes that such intense expression of the mocking of his own suffering, pent-up rage and tragic sarcasm are unusual in VdW's poetry and that they should not be seen as the principal features of his personality. He does however consider it to be one of the high points of this collection and suggests that in modern Flemish literature only Paul van Ostaijen[85] can match the power and individuality of VdW's poetry as we find it here.

The imagery is stark but perhaps the most interesting reference is to Job, the Old Testament figure who willingly suffered to show his faithfulness to God. In a sense, although he does not make explicit reference to it there, in GZ25 VdW also casts himself as the Job-figure, who is prepared to suffer whatever is thrown at him. Christ himself of course allowed himself to undergo terrible suffering on the cross, and Van Elmbt (pp. 237-8) suggests that in VdW's work the Job-figure is part of a larger schema of *Imitatio Christi*, which also includes motives such as baptism (GZ1) and images such as the rose, honey etc. discussed above (GZ20 and GZ16).[86] Finally, Van Elmbt (p. 232) also notes that in the work of VdW the Job-figure has something in common with his night imagery. This is not something we see so much in this poem, but we do see it at work in the next poem, GZ27.

VdW wrote a first version, scored this out and then a second version on the opposite page of his notebook on the same day, 1st March, 1921. It was not published before appearing in the current collection (Jansen, p. 460).

GZ27

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[83] See the commentary on GZ7 for a fuller discussion of this passage.

[84] Vandevoorde (p. 321) describes the poem as enigmatic (*raadselachtig*). He says that the poem as a whole may be considered an 'autonomous metaphor' as for example we do not know what VdW's paralysed legs (l. 1) stand for. See also Urbain van de Voorde, *op. cit.*, 490-1 for a discussion of the poem, particularly in relation to the Job figure (l. 6).

[85] See Reinder P. Meijer, *Literature of the Low Countries: A short History of Dutch Literature in the Netherlands and Belgium* (Cheltenham: Stanley Thornes, 1978), 312-316 for introduction to Van Ostaijen and his work.

[86] See the introductory essay to this volume for a further discussion of the *Imitatio Christi* in

After these two poems of self-flagellation, the tone of this poem is somewhat more gentle and reflective. We enter the evening and then the night. VdW closes himself off from the external world and retreats into his own inner world in his continuing search for God. One feature of VdW's night imagery is blindness (cf GZ22). This is a pre-condition for higher insight and it is alluded to here by the 'yielding eyes' (*wijkende oogen*) of line 14. However, when VdW has retreated into himself, rather than finding immediate consolation, he becomes aware of the desolation of his human existence, longing to 'cry out like a child, whose hope is deceived.'

Finally, it is interesting to note that in the first two stanzas VdW addresses parts of his body, first his hands, then his arms. This may strike us as somewhat unusual, though reminds us of the very physical nature of his poetry and finds an echo later in GZ34, where the poet addresses his eyes.

On 4th February, 1922, VdW wrote two complete versions of this poem on facing pages in his 1921-22 notebook. A week later, on 11th February, he crossed out the version on the right-hand page and replaced this with a new version of the poem. He first published the poem in Elsevier's Illustrated Monthly, Issue 32.1, in June 1922.

GZ28

We move back towards some of VdW's more direct language in this poem, which along with GZ2 and GZ17, is one of the three sonnets in the collection God by Sea. In the two quatrains, VdW notes that the world is full of 'sluts and soldiers' who ignore or despise God, and whilst the focus is clearly on them at this point, there is also reference to the poet himself, e.g. line two. In the two tercets, VdW turns to consider much more his own condition and remarks that although he himself bears the pain of the world and scorn of those who mock him, he is still denied the consolation of seeing God's 'soiled face.' In lines 9-10, VdW makes the transition from talking primarily about others to talking primarily about

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VdW's work and possible sources for his use of it.

himself by contrasting the neglected seeds in their bodies with his attempt to clean his own withered seed, and his use of the image of the seed has provoked critical comment.

Van Elmbt (243, n. 102) notes that the motive of the seed belongs to the same family of imagery as that of corn, the ear of corn and the tree in VdW's work. The poet uses the term *ontkeesten* ('germination')[87] to refer to these motives and so there is a sense in which they refer to being born again and in which seed specifically refers to the divine seed in all of us, which only some of us nurture and allow to flourish.

In this regard, I wonder if 'the other sense' in which VdW is living in a bad house refers us back to the metaphor of himself as a house which we see at work in the first section of this collection (e.g. GZ5). This may point to the fact hat he sees his sinful body as having something in common with a house 'full of sluts,' to use his own language.

VdW wrote first wrote draft lines for the poem on 16th March, 1919. In December 1920, he wrote a quotation from the bible, *Exultatio eorum, sicut eius qui devoret pauperem in abscondito* and the author, *Habacuc*. This was written above the poem when it appeared in Elsevier's Illustrated Monthly, Issue 31.1, in April 1921. However, the text from the Vulgate, Hab. 3:14, contains a couple of errors and should read *Exultatio eorum sicut eius qui devorat pauperem in abscondito*. In the NRSV this passage runs '[their] gloating as if ready to devour the poor who were in hiding.' VdW made a further draft of the poem shortly afterwards on 20th February 1921 (Jansen, pp. 464 ff.). In his commentary on VdW's work, P. Minderaa suggests a relationship between this poem and a passage in a letter from the poet to his brother, the artist Gustave (Gustaaf). Minderaa writes

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[87] In a lexicography of Van de Woestijne's terminology and word-use, under the entry *ontkeesten*, Anne Marie Musschoot points the reader to the entry *keest*, which equates to the term *kiem*. *Kiem* means seed, so *ontkiemen* and thus *ontkeesten* mean 'to germinate.' See Karel van de Woestijne, *Verzameld Dichtwerk,* eds. Anne Marie Musschoot et al., *2 delen, deel 2, Epische Poëzie* (Tielt: Lannoo, 2007), 464.

> For the content of the poem it is enlightening that in a letter dated 25th January 1919, [Van de Woestijne] writes to his brother Gustaaf that he is living in a bad house, in a double sense: the ladies, who occupy a part [of it] and who receive Tommies and poilus (French soldiers), sometimes keep him awake the whole night.[88]

GZ29

In this final poem of the third section of God by Sea, VdW, in a highly structured and deliberate manner, searches, ultimately in vain, for language to express his desire to break away from the bonds of earthly existence and move into the presence of God.[89] In the first stanza, it is as if his will in trying to seek God is like an astronaut, launched into space to seek out the furthest recesses of the universe. The void (*ijle*) is an allusion to God that we find elsewhere in this collection, e.g. GZ2 (*ijlt*), as is the trope of God's eye (GZ24). In the second stanza, he seems to go in the other direction and thinks of himself as a candle, 'so scant that the sun (God) eats it up' (l. 6), but which cannot be snuffed out. The candle is another trope that we find in the work of Jan Ruusbroec (Van Elmbt p. 253, n. 148).[90] As he goes on, he rejects these analogies and seeks others which he expresses in turn in stanzas three, four and five and it is notable that in stanza five, he returns to the Baudelairean language of dead and oozing flesh that he used

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[88] Dutch: *Voor de inhoud van het gedicht is verhelderend, dat [Van de Woestijne] in een brief van 25 Jan. 1919 aan zijn broer Gustaaf schrijft te wonen in een slecht huis, in dubbele zin: de dames, die een deel bewonen en die tommies en poilus ontvangen, houden hem soms heel de nacht wakker*. See P. Minderaa, *Karel van de Woestijne, Zijn leven en werken II, De Jaren 1914-1919: bezette stad en geestelijke vernieuwing* (Gent: Re. A. Deprez / C.A. Zaalberg, 1984), 37-8.

[89] Van Elmbt sees this poem as a 'meditation on the essence of divinity' (note this is on p. 254, not 154 as Vandevoorde (p. 314) indicates). Jansen (p. 146) says that in this poem VdW is looking for a metaphor for the reception of his nothingness into the divine unendingness (see also commentary on GZ5 above), finally alighting upon that of the stutterer. Vandevoorde (p. 314) sees the poem as an expression of the poet's inability to express the immaterial (*het onstoffelijke*), recognizing that such attempts always bring him back to the material. Again it is through stuttering that there may be a way forward, though ultimately I would add it is through silence and a recognition that silence is the way to the divine that VdW finds a way to approach God.

[90] Compare also the reference in line five to 'light in light' with that in GZ21 of 'shadow in the shadow.'

in earlier poems in this section. But finally, he realizes that he cannot express what it is like to approach God; it is literally ineffable. And so he stammers 'like the…', 'like…', '…' This stammering has a long pedigree amongst those who sense they stand in the presence of God and we certainly find it in the work of John of the Cross (Van Elmbt, p. 255), and Old Testament prophets such as Jeremiah.

Jansen (p. 472) sees echoes of a note on a manuscript possibly from July 1911 in the second stanza of this poem, but it is not clear whether the poet would have had this in mind when he came to begin composing the current poem nearly eight years later. In the first quarter of 1919, he wrote some fragments for a poem *Doode karpers*, 'Dead carp', which was never completed. However, some of these formed the basis of the third stanza of the poem and so we can see this earlier poem as contributing to the present poem. VdW began to write GZ29 in earnest on 2nd February 1921, writing further drafts on the 15th and 18th of the same month. Above the date for the first of these drafts, he wrote *als een goede instrument (Wilhelmus)*. These words, which mean 'like a good instrument' come from the second verse of the *Wilhelmus*, the Dutch national anthem, generally ascribed to the avid supporter of Dutch independence from Spain, Philips van Marnix van St.-Aldegonde (1540-1598). This line and the previous line run 'But God shall rule me // like a good instrument.'[91] The line which VdW wrote in his notebook also appeared above this poem when it was first published in Elsevier's Illustrated Monthly, Issue 31.1, in April 1921.

[91] Dutch: *Maer God sal my regeren / als een goet instrument.*

GEBOORTE VAN DEN HONIG (BIRTH OF HONEY)

In a sense the eight poems which form this fourth section of God by Sea follow on naturally from the end of the third section. In GZ29, the final poem of the third section, after floundering around for language to describe a sense of the divine, VdW admits defeat and ends the section with '…' to denote that words fail him. Silence (*stilte*), the word with which he begins the first poem in this section, GZ30, may be a more fruitful approach, allowing the poet to enter the depths of his own being to find God. We discuss the motive of silence in more detail below, especially in the commentary on GZ30, but here we shall make a few more general comments about this section as a whole. Rutten (p. 207) provides an excellent summary of them. He refers to the eight poems as *'atmosferische' stemmingsgedichten*, which we may translate as '"atmospheric" mood poems'. He notes that they are succinct, calm, slightly languid, somewhat melancholic (a mood often associated with VdW's disposition), bobbing along, as it were, on silent rhythms. Some of them make reference to autumn, VdW's favourite season, in particular GZ31. Given the common associations with autumn, it is no surprise that the key themes in the section are the poet's longing to die, eternity and God (cf. Vandevoorde p. 315). Despite the poet's longing to die, or, if we understand his underlying purpose, because of this, this section has a more positive tone to it than the previous sections as the poet feels he is making a breakthrough in his search for God (cf. Jansen p. 149 n. 113).[92]

Finally, we should say a word about the title. As VdW turns inwards to find God in his own inner stillness, a honey is born. Van Elmbt (p. 288) talks of a whole

[92] In the same note, Jansen adds that in an earlier plan for this collection, this section had the sub-title of 'honey to be sucked from the most poisonous flowers' (*honig te zuigen uit de giftigste bloemen*), and this inevitably makes the reader think of the title of the collection *Les Fleurs du Mal* by Baudelaire. It is also worth noting that in this plan, from 1923, this fourth section of the collection originally had the title *Geheim van den Honig* ('Secret/Mystery of honey') which sounds less optimistic than the title he eventually chose (Jansen p. 135 and Vandevoorde p. 314).

honigbeeldspraak ('honey imagery') that VdW uses, which alludes to the feeding of oneself at the source of all life, which for him is of course God. Elsewhere (p. 242) he refers to VdW's use of the image of the flower to allude to the presence of God and to how the poet talks in one place of the angels drinking spiritual honey from the calyces of flowers. Honey, it seems, here, is a product for VdW of encounter with the divine and so it should not surprise us that Van Elmbt (p. 238) also includes it in his list of images which constitute the complex of motives of the *Imitatio Christi* in work of VdW.

GZ30

This is one of a number of short, two-stanza poems in this section of God by Sea. It immediately offers up the main theme of this poem and indeed this section, silence (*stilte*), a word that occurs three times in the first stanza.

Silence, the poet tells us, is the certainty that never fails. Silence is not merely for VdW a lack of sound. It ranks with *leegte* and *ijlte* (both 'void') as a predicate of God. Elsewhere, VdW writes 'the highest love is silence.'[93] For Van Elmbt, there is a sense in which silence in VdW's work is a place. At one point (p. 247) he refers to a *land van de stilte*, which has something in common with the *land van de nacht*, and elsewhere (p. 225 n. 44) suggests that stillness belongs to the imagery of the poet which alludes to the wilderness, a place to which God leads the soul and in which the Holy Spirit fructifies the person.

Finally, in this regard it is worth reflecting on how the soul reaches this land of stillness. To begin with, the soul (*geest*)[94] focuses all its efforts on one point, as the archer does on the target, until he sees or experiences nothing other than the One. The result of this is that the person involved gradually dies to the world and to their experience of it and stands free of everything else. It is then that they suddenly find themselves in a stillness that is experienced as being alive. Van

[93] Dutch: *De hoogste liefde is stilte* from the poem *Wees stil* ('Be silent') in the section *Verzen aan eene Vrouw* from the collection *Het vader-huis* in: Karel van de Woestijne, *VWI, op. cit.*, 42.

[94] *Geest* can mean soul or mind, but soul seems more appropriate in this context.

Elmbt (p. 260) tells us that it is then that the soul becomes absorbed, as it were, into the stillness and that divine revelation finally becomes possible.

The other image that we should make note of in this poem is that of the bee. In lines 7-8, VdW talks of 'a dark bee' that 'will come and shimmer.' This should perhaps not surprise us given the title of this section, but it is perhaps worth reflecting briefly on the place of the bee in Christian, and indeed non-Christian imagery. Since antiquity, the bee has been a symbol for the soul that has come down into the world and longs to return to its lost ideal state. In a related manner, bees have been seen as divine beings, which have God to thank for their origin. Here, I suggest, we find clear resonances with VdW's hankering after the divine. He longs for his soul to be united with God, whom he has to thank for his origin, but at the moment, like the bee, he is left to long for this ideal state.[95]

A *terminus ante quem* for the poem is 7th December 1923, for on this date, VdW sent a manuscript of the poem to C.S. Adama van Scheltema for publication in the journal, *Orpheus*, in which the poem appeared in February 1924.

GZ31

In this poem, VdW evokes his favourite season, autumn. This is the season when much of nature dies, or begins to die, ('like your chapped stem, o stooping acacia' (line six)) as winter approaches, which VdW refers to as 'blessed' (*zaal[i]g[]*) in line twelve. One reason that we might expect VdW to like autumn is that it suits his melancholy character. But here it seems that the season strips nature bare and affords him the opportunity to look in at himself without the distractions of the colours and scents of summer.[96]

VdW wrote the first stanza of the poem in his notebook between 28th October and 8th November, 1923. He wrote three manuscript drafts, the third of which he sent on 7th December 1923 to the publisher of the journal, *Orpheus*, in which the poem was published in February, 1924. Finally, in a neat copy of the collection for the

[95] For a suggested meaning of the silk rose (line five), see Vandevoorde (2002), *op. cit.*, 218.
[96] For a further discussion on autumn in VdW's work, see the commentary on GZ6 above.

publisher, A.A.M. Stols, and in the first proofs for publication, the order of this poem and GZ32 was reversed (Jansen pp. 479 ff.).

GZ32

Again we meet the motive of autumn, and on this occasion the season is named explicitly: line three *herfst*. Much of the poem is suffused with a sense of hopelessness, e.g. line six 'No more hope around me,' but towards the end the darkness of God offers some hope.

Perhaps the most striking and interesting image in the first two stanzas comes in line three, where VdW says 'all of autumn freezes on the vine.' In the previous poem, VdW evoked the pleasure he found in autumn, but concludes with a hint that winter is coming. Winter has now arrived, death is here. Autumn has congealed and turned to ice…on the vine. The vine (*wingerd* and elsewhere *druivelaar*) is of course something which Christ calls himself in the Gospel of John: 'I am the true vine' (John 15:1). Van Elmbt (p. 237) lists it along with the tree and the cross as part of the imagery of the *vitis mystica* ('the mystical vine'), which is a common trope in mystical literature and, as with many other tropes used by VdW in this collection, Van Elmbt places the *vitis mystica* amongst the motives which form part of the *Imitatio Christi* in his work.

Given his sense of hopelessness, in the final stanza the poet conjures up two images of the divine, both of which at first sight might make the reader think that VdW has gone beyond even hopelessness. But on closer inspection this turns out not to be the case. The first of these images is the abyss (*afgrond*) line ten, at the edge of which he will set his final seat. With reference to GZ29, Van Elmbt (pp. 254-5) comments that for VdW life in God and the divine being are like a bottomless abyss, in which humans are 'drawn up downwards' (*neerwaarts opgezogen*). Elsewhere (p. 180), Van Elmbt refers to 'the abyss of the divine' (*de afgrond van het goddelijke*) and it is not going too far to see that the use of this image has something in common with that of the void (*ijlte*) to refer to the divine. Finally, in this regard we should note that the poet sets his seat at the edge of the

abyss and then (…) waits, rather than falling (upwards) into the abyss at this point.

In the final three lines of the poem, we encounter another trope which has a long history in mystical literature: the darkness of God. In our commentary on GZ27, we noted that blindness affords the poet a higher insight into the divine and here he notes that God will bathe his eyes with darkness,[97] which I suggest, has a similar effect. As is well-known, darkness and the night are central themes in the mystical writings of John of the Cross. For him, mystical experience is a victory that takes place in secret at night and it is here, paradoxically, that the ray of God's grace can be experienced as a ray of darkness or even a ray of dark light. Perhaps here the darkness VdW refers to is a ray of darkness; dark as light. This may seem too strong a claim at first, until we move onto the next poem, GZ33, in which line one runs 'close your eyes to the light,' for in the darkness he will have the possibility of seeing God.

Finally, in his commentary and apparatus on the collection, Leo Jansen (p. 481) notes that VdW seems to have compiled this poem in one day (27th June, 1923) and that in the first draft he wrote two stanzas, which resemble closely the first two stanzas of the final version, although they were originally in reverse order. The poem was first published in the journal, *Dietsche warande & Belfort 24.1* in March 1924 and finally we should note that in a neat copy of the collection for the publisher, A.A.M. Stols, and in the first proofs for publication, the order of this poem and GZ31 was reversed.

GZ33

Here, VdW shifts the focus from himself in GZ32 to a child, and I think Rutten (p. 208) is right to see this poem as a sort of lullaby (*berceuse*). In a lullaby of course, the singer is encouraging the child to sleep, to move towards the darkness of night. This as we have suggested in the commentaries on the preceding poems

[97] Line eleven. In a similar vein, Vandevoorde (p. 315) suggests this line and the two final lines point to an expression of trust in God by the poet.

is where the poet hopes to find God: 'the metaphysical night.' So it is interesting to ask whether VdW is, as Rutten suggests, addressing his own child, whom we met in GZ7, or whether he is in a sense addressing himself as the child who needs to be directed towards the night. For it is worth remembering that he casts himself as an orphan elsewhere in this collection, e.g. GZ11. Or, we might ask whether some child-type is at work here. Van Elmbt identifies several child-types in VdW's work. One of these (p. 237) is the child to be sacrificed (*het te slachten kind*), which he lists in the complex of imagery which constitutes the *Imitatio Christi* in VdW's work. I do not see much evidence to suggest that this is the child-type VdW would have had in mind here, but another type which may be at work here is that of the innocent child (*het onschuldige kind*). Van Elmbt notes (pp. 217 and 223) that the innocent child, because it is innocent, can lead the sinful father to the Promised Land or Paradise. In truth, there is little if any explicit reference to this child-type in the current poem, but there is of course a sense in which VdW as a sinful father is seeking God here and an innocent child would be the perfect guide at this point as the father seems on the verge of an encounter with God.

We should also note here that this poem continues with the theme of the seasons which VdW has been developing in the preceding poems. GZ31 is suffused with a sense of autumn and concludes with a hint of approaching winter. In GZ32, autumn freezes on the vine and we are well and truly in winter. Here, there is mention of spring (line twelve), but it has not yet arrived; we are still in winter. Although we have noted that autumn is VdW's favourite season (commentary on GZ31), I wonder if he thinks that it is in winter, the season of death of much of nature, that we can truly find God, much as he seeks God in the metaphysical night.

Finally, Jansen notes (p. 484) that the poem was constructed over a period of three years. On 21st February, 1919, he wrote two lines (*Sluit op de eenig-waarde wake, // oogen, uwe glanzen toe*), which have something in common with the first two lines of the final version. Over three years later, in the second half of July 1922,

he wrote a line which again has something in common with the last two lines of the final version: *Uw haar is geel en groen gelijk de maan ten nachte.* He produced the final version three months later on 21st October, 1922 and first published it in Elsevier's Illustrated Monthly 33.11 in August 1923.

GZ34

In the previous poem, VdW has been addressing a child, possibly his own, or a child-type, but here he is addressing his own wife, who is referred to in several of the poems in the first section of this collection. In the help that she gives him, he finds the happiness, even the laughter of God. But, despite the comfort she brings him, VdW knows he must leave his wife in order to meet God for as he concludes 'all the world is too blind // to get used to God's eye.'[98]

In this poem we find two particularly striking examples of the ascription of human attributes, or anthropomorphism, to God, something which also features elsewhere in this collection. In line eight, VdW talks of a kiss (*zoen*) from God. We find reference to the bite (*bijt*) of God in GZ12, where God is alluded to by the term void (*ijlt*), and also in GZ42 (*bete*), where the poet also speaks of the mouth (*mond*) of God.[99]

The second example of VdW giving God human attributes in this poem comes in the last line, quoted above, in which he makes reference to God's eye. Jansen's apparatus tells us (p. 487) that at first VdW wrote God's image (*Godes beeld*), then changed this to God's eyes (*oogen*) and finally to God's eye. Perhaps this allows for a contrast with the eyes of himself and his wife in line 13, and the eyes in line 15. We find reference to God's eye in GZ24 and GZ29 and Van Elmbt (p. 250) places it with the sun, God's watchfulness over humanity and His abiding presence in the VdW's poetic language.[100] The poem was composed on 1st September 1923 and first published in the journal, *Orpheus 1.4*, in February 1924.

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[98] I discuss the interconnectedness of references to God and VdW's wife in this collection in the commentary on GZ10 above.

[99] See also the commentary on GZ42 below and Vandevoorde p. 318 for discussions on anthropomorphism in relation to God in VdW's later work.

[100] Vandevoorde (p. 315) suggests that a turning away from the outer world and from the (worldly) self are the pre-conditions for 'get[ting] used to God's eye.'

GZ35

This and the subsequent poem, GZ36, are both eight-line poems, consisting of two quatrains each. They were written several years later than those either side of them in this collection. Jansen (p. 488) tells us that this poem was written between 12th May and 23rd September, 1926. The focus switches back from the child of GZ33 and his wife in GZ34 to himself and his own longing for God. Despite its relative shortness, though, the poet manages to work in several of his more frequent images. On one level in VdW's work the sea alludes to God.[101] But here the poetic figure grows out of the swelling surge of the sea. This might at first sight seem to take VdW away from God, which may create a problem for us if we consider that the poet is trying to draw nearer to the divine. But a closer look at his complex use of this image allows us to see more clearly what might be at work here. In the first instance we should note that VdW refers in line one to the swelling surge (*brassend weven*) (of the sea). Initially (Jansen p. 488), he wrote *luidruchtig* (noisy) before replacing it with *brassend*, and although the reason for the change is not clear, the noisy surf may make us think of the voice of the sea, a biblical trope which alludes to the voice of God (see for example Revelation 14:2). So, here we may think of the voice of God and indeed God himself, but this still leaves us with the question of why the poet seems to be moving away from God at this point. Interestingly, the first version of this line was *rijpen* in *'t luidruchtig weven* ('ripening *in* the noisy surf') (my italics). However the final version takes us away from the surf. Perhaps the answer lies in the fact that the sea is seen not only as an end point for the pilgrim in search of God, but a point of departure as well. Water gives life and is, as the reader will

[101] Although I would assert, as I do in the commentary above, that the sea often alludes to the divine in this collection, Vandevoorde (p. 314) is, broadly speaking, right to say that VdW does not find God by the sea, as the title of the collection might suggest. Nevertheless, VdW does, he asserts, find God in the collection, though not until the end of it. I would qualify this though by saying he certainly gains a sense of God by the end of the collection, but by no means fully enters into the mystery of him. Further I would say that although he does not fully find God by the sea, again he gets a certain sense of him in his references to the sea in the collection, such as in GZ36

know, what Christians are baptized in at the start of their journey with God (cf. Van Elmbt p. 226). So perhaps after all it is not so strange that VdW is moving away from the sea at this point.

In line two, VdW turns into a flower. Perhaps the greatest of all religious poets to emerge from Flanders in the last two hundred years, Guido Gezelle (1830-1899), wrote a poem *Ego flos* (I am a flower). Gezelle's flower, like VdW's, grows towards the sun, and here we gain a sense of verticality, with the poet directing himself to heaven,[102] and also that of God as sun or light, which needs no further explanation here.

Having grown out of the swelling surge in line one, in line five, VdW moves away from the swelling dung-heap, perhaps a further nod to the Baudelairean language we saw in GZ24, towards the clarity (*klaart*), which is closely allied to light in VdW's allusive imagery. The clarity, alluding to the divine, is receptive, waiting for VdW to enter it. In the final two lines, the poet addresses his soul, which is ripe, like a fruit. In the commentary on GZ19, we suggest that the poet's heart has become ripe through suffering and I suggest the same idea is at work here. However, it is not only a case of VdW's soul ripening, it has also needed to be pruned. In John 15:2, Jesus tells his disciples that in order to bear fruit they will need to be pruned. Here, God the Father is cast as a vine-grower. In this poem, he is the gardener (*hovenier*).[103] The garden and indeed Christ as the gardener have a long history in the Christian tradition and the *hortus conclusus* in particular has a long history stretching back to Song of Songs (4:12).[104]

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below. Perhaps this leads us to reflect on the question of what it means 'to find God.'

[102] See Van Elmbt (1973), *op. cit.,* 241 for a further discussion of verticality in VdW's work and of the sources on which he draws.

[103] In an earlier poem, *De Dichter* (The Poet), from the collection *De gulden schaduw*, God is again cast as a gardener with the poet conceiving of himself as a vine: (l. 11) *Ik ben een druivelaar door Godes hand geleid* ('I am a vine, led by God's hand'). Karel van de Woestijne, *VWI, op. cit.*, 191.

[104] Vandevoorde (p. 321) suggests that a plant metaphor lies at the root, as it were, of this poem, though he makes no mention of the religious connotations I discuss above.

Jansen (p. 488) tells us the poem was composed between 12th May and 23 September, 1926, thus shortly before the whole collection was published, and it was not published before appearing in the first edition of the collection.

GZ36

This poem, which for the critic Urbain van de Voorde was his favourite poem of the entire collection, is the second of two eight line poems written several years after those either side of them in the collection. Jansen (p. 490) tells us that the poem was written over a period extending from shortly before to shortly after 21st April, 1926. In the poem, VdW is searching for a path to follow. He has walked along the paths trodden by many others, but is now reproached for this. He contrasts his journey with that of the sea, which can, without the help of a beacon, and without leaving the harbour it occupies, reach unendingness.[105] A clue to how it does this is found in line six, where we learn that 'the sea keeps time with the moon forever.' What I suggest VdW is pointing to here is that the rhythm of the sea is part of the cosmic rhythm, which we discuss above in relation to the beating of the heart in GZ20. Thus the sea, without undergoing physical displacement, can escape the constraints of earthly existence. But this option is not open to VdW and he has to find another path. For him, it is the way of death that will bring release from earthly existence and allow him to do God's will.

Finally, it is worth noting that the phrase *klotst om haar-zelf* ('sloshes around herself') in line three may be a reminiscence of a line from the 19th century Dutch poet, Willem Kloos (1859-1938), *De zee, de zee klotst voort…* ('The sea, the sea, sloshes forth…').[106]

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[105] The self-sufficiency of the sea strengthens the sense in which it alludes to God – Van Elmbt (p. 70) makes a similar point suggesting that it is because God is *het Ongebondene*, 'The Unbound One', that the free wide-open expanse of the sea can in some sense allude to him.

[106] Franz De Backer, 'Enkele Aanteekeningen over literaire invloeden,' in: *Gedenkboek A. Vermeylen: Aangeboden aan August Vermeylen: Ter Gelegenheid van zijn Zestigsten Verjaardag 12 mei 1932, eds. Herman Teirlinck et al.* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1932), 469-478, at 475-476.

GZ37

This is the final poem in the fourth section of God by Sea, Birth of Honey. In connection with this theme, Rutten (p. 209) suggests that here the poet is filled with the 'honey' of resignation (*door den "honig" der berusting vervuld)*. This to my mind seems to be stretching the metaphor a little far, but he is right to say that VdW's only hope in finding God now rests in dying.[107]

Jansen (p. 491) records that the poem was composed between 10th November and 6th December, 1922. It was first published in the journal *Vlaamsche Gids* ('Flemish Guide') (Jansen p. 493). Ten months after its publication, on 16th October 1923, VdW wrote in his notebook for that year a paragraph which has a close thematic relationship to the present poem. He wrote:

> There is no time, there is no space. The past, the far-off, have become in me the symbols of Being, that define what I shall see in the future, what I shall gain from the future. All that has passed away becomes brighter for me in a definitive form. There will be nothing other than that which functions as this form, which is the image of my conception of the Absolute.[108]

VdW concludes the poem, and thus this section, by returning to the paradox of finding the light in darkness,[109] or the metaphysical night. To put it another way, he realizes that to find life, he must die and here the reader may be reminded of the verse in the gospel of Luke in which Christ says, 'Those who try to make their life secure will lost it, but those who lose their life will keep it' (Luke 17:33) (NRSV).

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[107] The idea of dying to find true life seems to be paradoxical, but is of central importance to Christianity. This sense of paradox, which we also find in line one 'There is no time. What was yesterday…' leads Vandevoorde (p. 315) to call the poem *Eliotiaans*, after T.S. Eliot, and indeed references to time and paradox are reminiscent of Eliot's Four Quartets.

[108] Dutch: *Er is geen tijd, er is geen ruimte. Het verleden, het veraf-staande, ze zijn in mij de symbolen geworden van het Wezen, die bepalen wat ik in de toekomst zien zal, wat ik aan de toekomst hebben zal. Al het vergane klaart aan mij op in definitieve gedaante. Er zal niets meer zijn dan in functie van die gedaante, die het beeld is van mijn bevatting van het Absolute* (Jansen, p. 495).

[109] Van Elmbt (p. 58) suggests that for VdW dusk and dawn are both times when we can meet God, when day changes to night, or vice versa. Here, he chooses *dageraad* (dawn), l. 20. Death

GOD AAN ZEE (GOD BY SEA)

So, we come to the final section of this collection and note that the section has the same title as the collection as a whole. Up to now the poet has undergone a journey in which he tries to break free from the bonds that tie him to his current, earthly existence and move towards God. We should ask though whether he manages to take this journey forward at all in this final section. Rutten (p. 210) argues that in this section we find no new elements which help us to solve the question of whether VdW does manage to move forward in his search for God. What he does say we find though is a deepening of the state of mind that we see at the end of the previous section, Birth of Honey. Vandevoorde (pp. 315-6) notes that despite the title there is not much reference to the sea in this section and gives two possible reasons for this. First, it may be that parts of another collection, *Het zatte hart*, that VdW later admitted was published too early, should have been included in God by Sea. The second possible reason is that the sea is not so much a mirror of or symbol for God but rather of the human soul. I am not so sure that this explains the lack of reference to the sea in this section, and as I state earlier I think that the sea is sometimes a symbol for God in this collection, though it is all but absent in this final section. But perhaps the point is that we should look elsewhere for images of the divine and indeed we find them in small things such as a rose (GZ38) and a glass (GZ39) in this section.

GZ38

This poem is another of the atmospheric mood poems (*stemmingsgedichten*) in this collection.[110] It conceives of and addresses God as a flower, more specifically a rose, and has something in common with the following poem, GZ39, which conceives of and addresses God as a glass. In the present poem, the rose is seen as a 'sober sign' (*nuchter teeken*) of God, standing as a motionless sun. But

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comes to us at night, but dawn marks a new beginning, life in eternity.

[110] Cf. Rutten's description of the four poems in section four of this collection, Birth of Honey,

whereas the rose can illuminate itself with its own light, VdW has to settle for the safety of darkness.

The rose is mentioned in GZ9 and GZ20 and the reader will find further references to the flower in the commentaries on those poems.[111] Van Elmbt (p. 238) suggests that the rose forms part of the complex of images which constitute the *Imitatio Christi* in VdW's work. In the work of the medieval Flemish mystic Jan Ruusbroec the rose symbolizes God's and Christ's love and there is no doubt that VdW is drawing on that tradition here (Van Elmbt p. 169).[112] The rose may also be considered the symbol of perfection (Van Elmbt p. 201, n. 42).[113]

Finally, we should note that this poem took shape much earlier than those around it in this collection.[114] A *terminus ante quem* for the poem is 28th July, 1917, when VdW sent a version of it which is close to the final version to Hermans Robbers for publication in Elsevier's Illustrated Monthly (Jansen p. 496). A dating of the earliest manuscript is difficult. However, after 1917, the poem underwent revision, with a later version appearing in *Orpheus* in February 1924 before the version we have appeared in the present collection.

GZ39

In the previous poem, VdW addresses God as a rose, drawing on the use of this flower as a symbol in the mystical tradition. Now he likens God to a glass[115] and asks the glass, which has time and again sated his thirst, whether he, i.e. VdW, has loved the glass enough (line one). The answer is a resounding 'no' and he has not even thanked the glass (line 12). In fact, the poet's denial and pride have smashed

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discussed above in the commentary introduction to that section.

[111] For further poems by VdW which refer to roses, see: van de Woestijne, *VWI, op. cit.*, 153 and 254.

[112] See also Vandevoorde (2002), *op. cit.*, 218.

[113] See also J. G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough*.

[114] Jansen (pp. 149-50) discusses the reasons why this much earlier poem is included in the collection, God by Sea.

[115] Vandevoorde (p. 317) suggests that the metaphorical use of glass is new at this point in the work of VdW.

the glass to smithereens, but despite this he still sees signs of God's presence in the shards of glass remaining (lines 19-20).

Jansen (p. 498) notes that the poem was begun in the autumn of 1925 and worked into an initial completed poem on 26th December of that year. Interestingly there are two lines in VdW's notebook for 1924-5 which seem to have given the poem its first impulse. The first of these is to all intents and purposes exactly the same as line one in the final version,[116] though it did undergo several intermediate changes. The second line is *o laatste scherve* and underneath this *[sche]rvel: God*[117] from which lines 19-20 at the end of the final version are derived. So these two initial lines neatly frame the final version and contain the main motive of God as a glass, but one that now lies shattered.

Let us now look at what this motive offers VdW in his attempt to describe what is in one sense the indescribable, i.e. God. One aspect of the motive is linked to his use of the motive of *kristal* ('crystal') (Van Elmbt p. 251). Here it is the utter purity, or lack of impurity, which is the most important quality of the crystal, and which makes it utterly transparent, almost as if we did not know it was there: 'the invisible void' (*onzichtbare ijlte*) (line five). Another aspect of the motive of glass is to be found in its relation to light. Van Elmbt (p. 250) notes that in VdW's work there is glass that stands outside the light and which is thus impure, and glass which stands in the light, is kept in the light and which sometimes disrupts the passage of light. It is this latter conception of glass that we see in lines seven and eight of the present poem.[118]

Allied to these aspects of glass is that of clarity (*klaarte*) (lines 5 (*klaart*) and 13 (*kla[a]r[])*). This trope occurs elsewhere in VdW's work and as is often the case, we find it also in the earlier work of Jan Ruusbroec: 'The heavens are transparent in clarity; and our inner life is transparent in spiritual clarity, given the grace and

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[116] It ran *Heb ik genoeg U liefgehad, doorschijnend glas*.

[117] These translate respectively as 'O final shard' and 'little shard: God.'

[118] Rutten (p. 210, n. 1) sees in the glass the wife of the poet, whom he will finally see as a symbol of God's presence. A later commentator, H. A. Wage, in: 'Het Oog Gods', *op. cit.*, 78, sees the glass as a symbol of a feeling of guilt, reflecting VdW's feeling that he has not loved God enough (l. 1).

the indwelling of God, by which we are united.'[119] In passing, we should note that it is also a trope used by John of the Cross, as in for example the lines: 'His clarity is never obscured // and I know that all light has come from it, even though it is night.'[120]

Perhaps a somewhat unexpected allusion to the divine is the trope of simple coolness (*simple koelte*) (line 13). The coolness of God contrasts with the hot fist of the poet and the hot-cold antithesis is found elsewhere in VdW's work, but it is a *simple* coolness that he describes here. Van Elmbt (p. 279) notes that this has something in common with the unity (*eenheid*) of light we find in GZ35 and points to the divine indivisibility or simplicity, which is something that can be traced back to ancient Greek philosophy.[121] Finally, we meet the eye of God again, suggestive of God's presence, a trope we have already encountered in GZ24, GZ29 and GZ34.

GZ40

In the previous two poems, VdW has pictured God symbolically, first as a rose, then as a glass. In this poem and the next he addresses God as just that, God, and the poet refers to himself as a symbol. In each case, he alludes to himself as a fruit; here an apple and in GZ41 a raspberry. He continues this pattern into GZ42 with reference to cherries, although here he also conceives of God using an image, this time that of a golden oriole.

The subject of GZ40 is in short the poet's complete dependence on God. He was born out of the hand of God (line one), but despite becoming 'overripe and

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[119] Middle Dutch: *Die hemele sijn doer-schinich in claerheiden; ende onse inneghe leven es doerschinich in gheestelijcker claerheit overmids gracie ende die inwoeninghe Gods, daer wij mede gheenicht sijn*. Jan Ruusbroec, Jan van Ruusbroec, *Werken Naar het Standaardhandschrift van Groenendaal uitgegeven door het Ruusbroec-Genootschap te Antwerpen, 2de druk, eds. J. van Mierlo and L. Reypens, 4 delen, deel 4* (Tielt: Lannoo, 1948), 77, ll. 6-9.

[120] Spanish: *Su claridad nunca es escuricida, // y sé que toda luz de ella es venida, // aunque es de noche*. From: *cantar del alma que se huelga de conoscer a dios por fee*, in: San Juan de la Cruz, *Poesías, ed. Paola Elia* (Madrid: Castalia, 2000), 130.

[121] Van Elmbt (p. 279) also makes a useful parallel with a phrase found in the poetry of VdW's contemporary, the German poet, Rainer Maria Rilke. He talks of *schwer aus Einfachheit* ('heavy with simplicity') in: *Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge* (Frankfurt am Main:

bruised' (*beursch-verdorven*) (line eight) he knows finally that God will sustain him (line nine). However, it is the image of the apple that perhaps deserves most attention in this poem. The trope of ripe fruit occurs elsewhere in this collection and elsewhere in VdW's work. We discussed the trope in relation to the reference to it in GZ19 and are reminded of the sense in which suffering would lead to a maturing of the poet's heart. We also encounter ripening fruit in VdW's collection *Substrata*, which has many thematic parallels to the present collection. In the section entitled *God*, he writes in line three of the opening quatrain, 'I, grape, who hang in the sun to ripen.'[122]

But, returning to GZ40, we have an apple and once the apple has ripened VdW tells us that God let it fall. In the first instance, we are reminded of the fruit that falls in GZ6 and the reference there as well as the one here may lead us to think of the Garden of Eden and the fall of Adam and Eve after eating the forbidden fruit, often referred to as an apple in Christian tradition, though this is not the word that appears in the biblical account. But in the second stanza the apple becomes 'bruised and overripe' and in a sense here we move from life to death, heralded in line six: 'I know the use of flowering and dying.' Van Elmbt (p. 244) notes though that death is no longer to be feared for VdW, but is seen as something positive with brings him into the light and to eternity. There is even talk of the 'fruitful death' (*vruchtbare dood*). God will continue to sustain VdW, even in death. He pictures himself, the apple in an orchard (*boom-gaard*) (line ten) and I wonder here if we have an allusion to the *hortus deliciarum* what is an image of eternity (cf. Van Elmbt, p. 73).

VdW produced the first draft of the poem on one day, 20th July 1923 (Jansen, p. 501). It was first published in the journal *Orpheus* in February 1924. One interesting fact about this poem is that it and GZ11, GZ23 and GZ33 have been translated into the Friulian language, spoken in North-Eastern Italy. The reader can find a full list of translations of poems from the collection Wingbeat on the

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Insel-Verlag, 1958), 219.

[122] Dutch: *Ik, druif die in de zonne hang te rijpen*. Karel van de Woestijne, *VWI, op. cit*, 457.

Horizon, of which God by Sea forms a part in Jansen, pp. 717 ff., but what is particularly striking is how few of his poems have been translated into English,[123] in comparison, let us say, with a relatively minor language such as Friulian.

GZ41

As in the previous poem, a central theme in GZ41 is a fruit, though whereas in GZ40 the fruit is an apple, here it is a little raspberry (*framboosken*). Again, as with GZ40, there is a sense in which there is talk here of the 'fruitful death'. The raspberry is 'full of chaps and bruised to death' (l. 18), but this is not the end of the matter for the raspberry, or indeed for VdW, who wishes to become the fruit. For when the last drop (of juice) has been squeezed out of it, it will fill the day with its scent. So, although the matter of which the raspberry consists has been obliterated, it turns into a pleasant aroma which fills the air.[124] Here, I suggest, we see an allusion to the fact that though VdW will die, and knows he needs to die to approach God, his spirit will live on. In relation to another poem written by VdW in 1911, Van Elmbt (p. 98) talks of scent becoming *effusio Spiritus*, and this is also what is happening in the present poem. Here of course we meet the idea of change or indeed metamorphosis and it is also interesting to reflect on VdW's reference to a butterfly (*vlinder*), the result of a metamorphosis, in the third stanza.

In the section *God* from the collection *Substrata*, VdW writes the couplet:

> I live, turning in myself like a caterpillar.
> O Spirit of God that hovers over me![125]

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[123] Since the list was compiled, I believe that Tanis Guest's (*op. cit.*) collection of translations of poems by VdW, several of which are taken from Wingbeat on the Horizon, has been published. I say 'believe' as no date of publication is given on the copy available to me.

[124] This does seem to be at odds with what we read of the rose in GZ20, which has no fragrance in the void. Either this points to inconsistency, or perhaps even paradox, which we should of course allow for in poetry, or there is an explanation which as yet escapes the present author.

[125] Dutch: *'k Leef in me zelf gewenteld als een rups. // o Geest van God die huivert over mij!* Karel van de Woestijne, *VWI, op. cit.*, 458.

Here, with a clear reference to the account of the creation of the world in Genesis I, there is a sense in which the caterpillar refers to new life and even to incarnation, as it moves through the stages towards becoming a butterfly.[126] However, in GZ41, VdW seems to suggest that he will not become a butterfly. Perhaps this is because the butterfly alludes to life, whereas he now knows that he must die in order to come into the presence of God.

Jansen (pp. 503 ff.) notes that this poem required extensive re-writing before it reached its final form. VdW wrote it over a period from June to August 1922, a year before he wrote GZ40. It was published for the first time in the journal The Flemish Guide, 11, in April 1923 and in August of the same year in Elsevier's Illustrated Monthly.

GZ42

This is the final poem in the collection God by Sea in which VdW expresses a longing to be united with God. However, the question as to whether he is finally united with God remains unresolved. In GZ40 and GZ41, VdW imagined himself to be first an apple then a little raspberry. In GZ42 he continues the theme of food by casting himself as a cherry (*kers[e]*) in stanzas one and three and as sugar cane (*riet*) in stanza two. As in GZ41, the idea of transformation or metamorphosis is at work here. In the case of the sugar cane, he longs to be turned into sugar in the mouth of God and in the case of cherries to be turned into a soft pulp that can rinse the mouth of God.[127]

The mouth of God is an image we find in the work of the medieval Flemish mystic, Jan Ruusbroec. In one poem, he writes of being swallowed up by the abyss of the divine being:

I am swallowed up by his mouth

[126] Cf. Van Elmbt (1973), *op. cit.*, p. 211.

[127] This reference comes from lines one and two of the poem. The Dutch has the phrasal verb *spoelen van*. This is somewhat problematic as one would normally expect *spoelen met* here. Anne Marie Musschoot suggests that VdW may be influenced here by the French *rincer de*.

In an abyss without a bottom,
I shall not return from it.[128]

One of the more unexpected features of this poem is the very first word, golden oriole (*wielwaal*), which VdW uses to refer to God. Jansen (p. 509) notes that VdW wrote three versions of the poem, two on 4th February 1922 and one a week later on 11th February 1922. He scored out the first two, but it is interesting that in the very first version he began line one with the word *vogel* ('bird'). He changed this to *wielwaal* in the second version and retained this thereafter. We may wonder why he chose this to replace *vogel*. One very simple reason is that it has the same number of syllables as *vogel*, and it is worth noting that he used this form, instead of *wielewaal*, which is a more common spelling, but which is trisyllabic. The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary[129] tells us that a golden oriole is yellow and black and is part of a family of birds which is noted for its melodious song and brilliant plummage. Such qualities may make it a more likely candidate for an allusion to God than, say, a crow, and together with its syllable-count, it may have been the most appropriate bird to allude to God to VdW's mind. However, it does seem to be an image peculiar to VdW (Van Elmbt p. 288).[130]

Finally, Jansen (p. 509) tells us that this poem was first published in Elsevier's Illustrated Monthly in June 1922.

GZ43

In this and the final poem in the section we return to the motive of light. In the first two stanzas of this poem, VdW recalls his life up to the present and then in

[128] Middle Dutch: *Ic ben verswolghen in sinen mont // In een abys al sonder gront, // Ic en machs niet weder-comen.* Jan Ruusbroec, *op. cit., deel 4*, (Tielt: Lannoo, 1948), 5, ll. 34-6. A gloss is given for *machs: versta: mag daaruit*.

[129] *Fifth edition, Volume 2, N-Z,* 2022.

[130] It is also worth commenting on the reference to flute in line eight. The Dutch, *fluit(e)*, rhymes with *buit* (booty) in line eight, but this is not the only reason for its presence here. It is of course also used to make music and thus parallels *gorgel* ('throat'), line two, which is both rinsed with ripe cherries (the booty), and makes a gurgling sound. I thank Anne Marie Musschoot for this insight.

the third stanza he sees how flashes of light have now become full-blown Light. Seeing the Light makes him realize that Death is near, but with Death, he tells us in the final stanza, comes freedom.[131] Light as a symbol of the divine needs no comment here, but it is interesting to note that in line eleven, VdW says the light now lightens him (and 'us') up, as if transforming him and others into light. We should also note that the light has turned night to day (line ten). VdW uses the image of the night, the metaphysical night, as a metaphor for entering into the mystery of God elsewhere in this collection, e.g. GZ2 and GZ27, but we should remember that night is merely a stage on the way to the light and here the poet moves on from this stage to that of the light.

Jansen (pp. 512 ff.) notes that VdW sketched a rough version of the poem on 11th January, 1923.[132] Over this version he wrote 'Dood van Thijsje Permeke.' Thijsje was the son of the Belgian artist Constant Permeke, a friend of VdW's, and so it seems that his death on the same day, aged only two years old, was the spur for this poem. VdW wrote a second version of the poem on 10th February 1924 and it was published for the first time in the periodical, *Dietsche warande & Belfort* in March, 1924.

GZ44

This is the final poem of the section and indeed the final poem of the collection before the postlude, GZ45. It is a remarkable poem which is based on the idea of the tension between what is hoped for and what the current reality is. VdW recognizes that he will get glimpses of God, but be denied a full vision of him (lines 3-4 and 7-8). The two most prominent symbols here are the diamond (*diamant*) and the sea/water. The origin of the diamond as a symbol of the divine

[131] I wonder whether the beat of 'the drum of Death' points to the cosmic rhythm discussed elsewhere in this commentary and/or to the inevitability and relentless, almost metronomic, approach of Death.

[132] It is worth mentioning that we get an insight into VdW's use of words and grammar peculiar to old Flemish in line seven of this poem. Here he uses *al naar* ('as'), which is an old Flemish dialectal version of the more modern *al naar gelang van* (Anne Marie Musschoot).

in VdW's work is somewhat difficult to discern. Dante refers to a diamond in the second canto of *Paradiso* (ll. 31-33):

> It seemed to me that a cloud covered us,
> Clear, dense, solid and smooth,
> Like a diamond struck by the sun.[133]

Another writer who uses the trope of a diamond to refer to the divine is Teresa of Ávila. She talks of a very clear (*muy claro*) diamond, and it may be, as Van Elmbt suggests (p. 249), that VdW is contrasting the divine as he currently experiences it, using the word onbehouwen (rough) to refer to the diamond, with the very clear picture of the divine that Teresa experiences.[134] However, we can only take this analogy so far, for Teresa is talking of a Godhead (*Divinidad*) that is 'much larger than all the world.' VdW is talking of the divine inside himself. The fact that it is a rough diamond may, though, draw us back to Teresa's use of the trope, for she goes on to describe the diamond as a mirror (*espejo*), and I suggest that this reminds us of St. Paul's famous reference to how we experience God in the present world, in contrast to how we shall experience him at the end of time: 'For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face' (I Corinthians 13:12) (NRSV). At the end of this collection, then, VdW has gained a glimpse of the divine, but it is only that and he will have to wait, as St. Paul suggests, before he sees him 'face to face.'[135]

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[133] Italian: *Parev' a me che nube ne coprisse // lucida, spessa, solida e pulita, // quasi adamante che lo sol ferisse*.

[134] See the introductory essay to this volume, p. 32, for a further discussion of Teresa of Ávila's use of the trope of the diamond.

[135] Diamonds are of course jewels and we find reference to jewels in the work of Jan Ruusbroec. In one place he refers to a jewel as 'a glimpse of the eternal light and an appearance of the glory of God and a mirror without stain' in which all things live.' Middle Dutch: *een blic des eewichs lichts ende een schijn der gloriën Gods, ende een spiegel sonder vlecke, daer alle dinghe in leven*. J. Ruusbroec, *op. cit., deel 3*, 9, ll. 28-30. This passage is referred to by Van Elmbt (p. 249, n. 134), but he has a mis-reading: the reading *vlecke* is to be found in the edition cited and in the *Opera Omnia* edition of Ruusbroec's work, whilst Van Elmbt has *vlercke*, which is incorrect. Van Elmbt is right though when he reminds us in the same note that with the trope of *blinckende steenken* ('glistening little stone') Ruusbroec is referring to Christ.

The other image of note in this poem is that of the sea/water. We discuss the complexity of the sea metaphor in this collection in the opening commentary to this final section, and there discuss whether it refers to the divine, or, as Vandevoorde suggests, to the human soul. However, here it is worth reflecting specifically on the conjunction of jewels, which can be seen as what Van Elmbt (p. 250) refers to as 'petrified light' (*versteend licht*).

In the passage from Dante's *Paradiso* quoted above, we see indirect allusion to water in the cloud, but the reference is made explicit in the next three lines (34-36):

> The eternal pearl received us
> Into itself, as water receives
> A ray of light whilst remaining unbroken.[136]

With reference to GZ44, Van Elmbt (p. 250) suggests that the proximity of the sea gives the diamond a special significance and that what we have here is a mystic wedding (*mystiek huwelijk*) between water and light, alluded to by the diamond. However, I am not so sure that we do see a joining of the water and light in this poem. I agree that they are both alluded to, but to my mind quite separately. The only occasion in the poem when they come together is in line eight, when the poet says that his eyes only see 'tear-filled prisms' (*prismen van geween*). This seems to me to refer less to a mystic wedding than to the illusion, or delusion, that the poet is left with as he is denied a full vision of God.

Jansen (p. 516) notes uncertainty about when VdW began to draft this poem, giving a possible date of October 1923. Further work was done on it on 3rd August 1925 and 11th September of the same year and it was published for the first time in The Guide in December 1925.

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[136] Italian: *Per entro sè l'etterna margarita // ne ricevette, com'acqua recepe // raggio di luce permandendo unita*.

UITVAART VAN DEN BEDELAAR (EXIT OF THE BEGGAR)

GZ45

Along with the first poem of this collection, GZ1, this poem frames God by Sea and represents a synthesis of the main themes in the other poems of the collection.[137] As in GZ1, the poet's earthly father is addressing his heavenly father, God. As the title of the poem suggests, the poet is cast as a beggar (*bedelaar*) and I discuss VdW's use of this trope in detail in the commentary on GZ1. He is also referred to by his father as a wanderer (*wandlaar*) (l. 17) and this has something in common with the idea of the poet as a pilgrim, on a pilgrimage towards heaven. But the father questions whether his child ever sees God. In lines 46-47 he says that 'in harbours and faces [he] could only see absence (*afwezigheid*)' and goes onto assert that God also keeps knowledge from his son (ll. 56-59). But, despite all these questions and reservations, the father concludes that the only way to salvation is sacrifice (*offerande*).

In the commentary on GZ1, we discuss at length one of the names that VdW gives to God, 'Sweeper of the deserts' (*Veger der woestijnen*), and he repeats it here in line 66. In the previous stanza he gives another name to God, 'the certain Sower' (*de zeékre Zaaier*). Van Elmbt (p. 237) places this in the long list of tropes which constitute the *Imitatio Christi* that VdW constructs in his poetry, and here we are perhaps reminded of the biblical parable of the Sower, which Christ tells in Luke 8:11ff. Van Elmbt also places this trope with that of the seeds (*zaden* or (as here) *kiemen*) which the Sower sows and the ear of corn (*aar*) (l. 55) in a group of images which allude to germination in VdW's work.[138] Here God, as the Sower, places his seed in man and the seed will grow in him and produce the fruits of the spirit.

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[137] Both Jansen (p. 150) and Vandevoorde (p. 309) provide detailed accounts of the main features of both of these poems.

[138] The Dutch word that Van de Woestijne uses for 'germination' is *ontkeesten* (Van Elmbt, p. 243, n. 102). This is an old term, something we often find in his language. The modern term for 'germination' is *ontkiemen*, which is related to *kiemen*, the word he uses in l. 61 for seeds.

Jansen (pp. 518 ff.) notes that it is difficult to date precisely at what points the poet developed this poem. However, he notes that we are able to determine the starting date as 4th August 1925, although the fragment of the poem under this date in VdW's notebook had the title *Begrafenis van den blinde* ('Burial of the blind man'). He also notes that a *terminus ante quem* for the poem must be 23rd September 1926, as this is the date both on the first manuscript on which VdW wrote the poem and on the manuscript that he sent to the publisher of the collection, A.A.M. Stols.

In his notebook on the page dated 4th August 1925 between the original title and a line which was the first attempt at what later became the first line of this poem,[139] there are two references to passages from the Vulgate. The first is *et fortium dividet spolia, et cum sceleratis reputatus est*, after which VdW writes *Isaïas*. This is not a full quote, but refers to the passage *et fortium dividet spolia pro eo quod tradidit in morte animam suam et cum sceleratis reputatis est*, from Isaiah 53:12, translated in the NRSV as 'and he shall divide the spoil with the strong; because he poured out himself to death and was numbered with the transgressors.' A little lower on the same page, VdW wrote *In Te projectus sum ex utero* and added *Psalm XXI*. In the NRSV, this is found in Psalm 22 (v. 10) and is translated there as 'On you I was cast from my birth.' VdW indicates in his notebook that this second quote goes with the first and the connection between this and the eventual poem is clear. Finally, we should note that under a later draft of the poem, VdW wrote *Je t'ai dit que je suis né plusieurs et que je suis mort un seul* - 'I told you that I was born several and I died alone' and added in Dutch 'in God.' Whether or not this refers to a quotation from elsewhere is not clear, but it seems to provide a fitting conclusion to this collection.[140]

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[139] Dutch: *De stilte galmt den toren over* ('Silence echoes over the tower').

[140] Jansen p. 519. See F. van Elmbt, 'E(rik) M(onk) lezen' in: *Spiegel der letteren 24 (1982)*, 239-51, at 243 for the influence of F. Aubanel on this poem (Jansen p. 259).