

**TWO LOVE SONNETS BY P.C. HOOFT:
23 JANUARY & 17 FEBRUARY 1610**

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SONNET

Mijn lief, mijn lief, mijn lief; soo sprack mijn lief mij toe,
Dewijl mijn lippen op haer lieve lipjes weiden.
De woordtjes alle drie wel clear en wel bescheiden
Vloeyden mijn ooren in, en roerden ('ck weet niet hoe)
Al mijn gedachten om staech maelend nemmer moe;
Die 't oor mistrouwden en de woordtjes wederleiden.
Dies jck mijn vrouwe bad mij clearder te verbreiden
Haer onverwachte reên; en sij verhaelde' het doe.
O rijckdoom van mijn hart dat over liep van vreuchden!
Bedoven viel mijn siel in haer vol hart van deuchden.
Maer doe de morgenstar nam voor den dach haer wijck,
Is, met de cleare son, de waerheit droef verresen.
Hemelsche Goôn, hoe comt de Schijn soo naer aen't Wesen,
Het leven droom, en droom het leven soo gelijk?

SONNET

Geswinde grijsart die op wackre wiecken staech,
De dunne lucht doorsnijt, en sonder seil te strijcken,
Altijdt vaert voor de windt, en ijder nae laet kijcken,
Doodtviandt van de rust, die woelt bij nacht bij daech;
Onachterhaelbre Tijdt, wiens heten hunger graech
Verslockt, verslint, verteert al watter sterck mach lijcken
En keert, en wendt, en stort Staeten en Coninckrijcken;
Voor ijder een te snel, hoe valtdij mij soo traech?
Mijn lief sint ick u mis, verdrijve' jck met mishae ghen
De schoorvoetighe Tijdt, en tob de lange daeghen
Met arbeit avontwaerts; uw afzijn valt te bang.
En mijn verlangen can de Tijdtgod niet beweghen.
Maer 't schijnt verlangen daer sijn naem af heeft gecreghen,
Dat jck den Tijdt, die jck vercorten wil, verlang.

THIS ARTICLE DISCUSSES TWO LOVE SONNETS by P.C. Hooft written within a period of three weeks. The sonnets are "Mijn lief, mijn lief," and "Geswinde grijsart"

(Antonissen, 205-206). These are not the titles of the sonnets, but the initial parts of the first lines. The sonnets themselves were not titled by the poet. "Mijn lief, mijn lief" was written on Saturday, 23 January 1610, and "Geswinde grijsart" on Wednesday, 17 February 1610. Both sonnets are dedicated to "Mithra Granida," a pseudonym for Christina van Erp, whom Hooft would marry on May 23 later that year (Smit, *Hooft en DIA*, 22).

According to Smit, Hooft started working on a series of poems for Christina van Erp during a period of six months which began after June 28, 1609, when he finished the last poem ("Leidt") for a previous beloved, called "DIA." Both "Mijn lief, mijn lief" and "Geswinde grijsart" were written during his courtship of Christina van Erp; the second sonnet, as mentioned at the end of the poem, was written "Op 't huis te Muiden," that is, in his home, the Muiderslot. Both sonnets were published anonymously, together with five other sonnets by Hooft, in 1611, in *Emblemata amatoria. Afbeeldingen von minne. Emblemes d'amour*. "Mijn lief, mijn lief," is the fifth poem in this collection, "Geswinde grijsart" the eighth. The other poems in this trilingual collection are by Plempe and De Neree (Van der Elst, 148).

Since we know when and for whom Hooft wrote "Mijn lief, mijn lief" and "Geswinde grijsart," the question arises whether this knowledge influences, or rather *should* influence our reading of these sonnets. Since we have knowledge of the receiver, if we think in terms of Jakobson's communication model,¹ we could ask ourselves whether or not Hooft wrote these poems to court his future wife with the intention of publishing them, and in case the answer is positive, whether this additional knowledge would change our reading of both sonnets.

The sonnet "Mijn lief, mijn lief" opens with a triple repetition of the address "Mijn lief." These words are spoken by the beloved of the poet whose lips touch hers (line 2). The poet hears the words very clearly (line 3); apparently this outpouring of emotion came unexpectedly, for in lines 4 & 5 we read that he has been confused by the words ("roerden al mijn gedachten om"); his thoughts keep on whirling and spinning around (line 6), and never seem to stop, as his apparent surprise at the utterance of the words "mijn lief" indicate. This reading is supported by line 6, in which we read that even the poet's ear is not sure to have heard these words: the words are refuted ("de woordtjes wederleiden"). We witness an inner conflict within the poet between reason and intuition. For this reason the poet asks the woman to repeat the unexpected words for him loud and clear (lines 7-8); she gives in to this request (line 8).

In line 9 the poet is convinced that he has clearly understood and grasped the extent of her words, for he invokes the richness of his heart, which brims over with joy; his soul is submerged into her heart, which is full of virtues (line 10). But when the morning star takes refuge before the breaking of the dawn, the sad truth emerges with the rise of the bright sun (line 12). The poet invokes the heavenly gods (line 13), and asks them how it is possible that appearance and being resemble each other, that life and dream are so close (line 14); in other words, the sweet words he heard were only a dream. His beloved, "Mijn vrouwe" in line 7, is not his woman, but the woman he adores, who has as yet not made it known to him that his love for her is returned by her.

As Van der Elst (154) and Roose (28) have argued, the position of the chute in the poem is ambiguous. Should it be positioned between octave and sestet, in other words between lines 8 & 9, or between lines 10 & 11? We could even argue that, in spite of the contrast introduced by “maer” in line 10, the chute should be positioned between lines 12 & 13. The fact that the sonnet tends towards an epigrammatic conclusion — appearance and reality resemble each other closely — would support this interpretation, although the rhyme scheme of the last four lines (d-e-e-d) would contradict this. The rhyme scheme forces the reader in any case to keep the last four lines together, introduced as they are by “maer.” Lines 9 & 10 could in that case be read as a sublimation of joy, which is still doubted in the previous lines.

The poem deals with the theme of the love dream, according to Roose (28), a traditional Renaissance theme which is, especially in sonnets in the Petrarchan tradition, connected with the rise of the sun. When dawn breaks, the make-believe world of the night with all its dreams dissolves, to make room for the realities of daily life. We come across the same motif in a sonnet by Bredero that opens with the line, “Van dat Aurora vroech den dach begint te kippen (Roose, 27), and also in “The Sun Rising” by John Donne: “Busy old fool, unruly Sun / Why dost thou thus / Through windows and through curtains call on us?” But extra-literary evidence suggests additional elements at work in the poem.

A knowledge of seventeenth-century customs often aids in the interpretation of literary works from this period. In the specific case of this poem, a concrete event may be alluded to. Hella Haase writes that young Hooft made ample use of the specific seventeenth-century custom of courtship called “queesten.” She writes that Hooft “graag en goed gebruik gemaakt heeft van de oude Noord-Hollandse (toen ook bij de Amsterdamse burgerij nog wel in ere gehouden) gewoonte van het ‘queesten:’ had een meisje een bepaalde jongen als vrijer aanvaard, dan mocht hij haar ter nadere kennismaking ‘s nachts bezoeken, naast haar in bed liggen ... met haar praten, haar liefkozen, tot ongeveer een uur voor zonsopgang” (50). One may encounter a similar theme in an earlier poem by Hooft, “Galathea,” a variation on the medieval watchman’s song, the so-called “wachterslied:” “Galathea, siet, den dach comt aen. / Neen, mijn lief, wilt noch wat marren, Tsijn de starren” (Antonissen, 195).

If we keep this extra-literary context in mind and realize that the poem was dedicated to Christina van Erp, it could well be that Hooft wrote the sonnet before or after a “queeste” with Christina, hoping to convince her of his love for her. The poet tries to win her unruly love in a witty way by making her repeat in line 1 three times the sweet words “mijn lief,” hoping that by this ironic portrayal of her love for him her refusal to give in is turned into reciprocation of his love. Because she has allowed him a “queeste,” he thinks he has won her love; at day break, however, this turns out to be appearance only, as the sad truth becomes clear: “is met de claere son, de waerheit droef verresen.” By dedicating this sonnet to Christina, who on 23 January had as yet not openly declared her love for him,² the poet hopes to win her over as his woman, so that reality will not turn out to be a dream, but dream will turn out to be reality. That Hooft has indeed been successful in this enterprise is obvious from their wedding on May 23.

If we take into consideration that the poem was written with an eye to publication or public performance, we are, again in terms of Jakobson's model, to assume that although the sonnet was dedicated to Mithra Granida, it is directed to an "unknown" reader, that is the reader of *Emblemata amatoria*, or perhaps even Hooft's fellow members of the "rederijkerskamer" (chamber of rhetoric) (Strengolt, 5). The poetry of the rhetoricians is directed at a public audience, members of the "burgerij" or a small circle within it. As a rhetorician-poet, Strengolt argues, Hooft is not interested in the expression of individual feelings, "niet bedacht op de artistieke expressie van zijn individuele gevoelens en zieleroerselen" (5). Smit, on the other hand, is of the opposite opinion; in his view the autobiographical element is much greater than was originally thought, in spite of all of Hooft's dazzling tactics, and "ondanks de verhulling door stileren, generaliseren en (soms) bewuste camouflage" (*Hooft en DIA*, 16). The question remains whether this knowledge should influence our interpretation of the poem.

Without prior knowledge of the personal circumstances of the poet, the reader will not be able to recognize certain biographical data in the poem, and she will tend to be more focussed on its structural aspects. One of the first things that strike her will be the construction of the sonnet, together with the antitheses within it. There is a difference, for instance, in the words "mijn lief" situated in front or behind the semicolon: the first three utterances of "mijn lief" refer to the *man* in love, whereas "mijn lief" in the second half of the line refers to the beloved *woman*. In line 2 his "lippen" are positioned opposite her "lipjes," in line 10 his "siel" is positioned opposite her "hart;" in line 12 "claire son" opposite "waerheit droef;" line 13 "schijn" opposite "wesen," and finally, line 14 "leven" opposite "droom." Although the experience described in the poem is personal, the insight expressed in the final two lines, i.e. that dream and reality are very often difficult to keep apart, emphasized by the fact that this insight is presented in the form of a question, has a universal appeal that rises above the personal.

That appearance and reality are often difficult to separate we have seen earlier, in lines 5 & 6, where the poet's thoughts keep running through his head, and in the next line, where his reason ("oor") distrusts the sense of truth in the beloved's words, and even refutes them. This refutation, in which something that seems to be true is denied, should be seen as a metaphor for the contrast between appearance and reality. The contrast between day and night, during which something dreamt or thought is forgotten the next day, or appears to be untrue, should be seen in the light of this same metaphor.

In the sonnet "Geswinde grijsart" we come across the same address "mijn lief" (line 9) as in the earlier poem. In contrast to its usage there, however, the phrase is here far more detached. The conceit in the preceding octave deals with time, which usually rushes by, but slows down as the poet is physically removed from his beloved (lines 8 & 9). If we take another look at the extra-literary context, it comes to our attention that the sonnet was written about three and a half weeks after "Mijn lief, mijn lief." The tone of the poem tells us that in the meantime the poet has become more and more assured of Christina's love for him, because, in contrast to the earlier poem, there are no indications whatsoever of despair in the text. The poet, in other words, seems to be very sure of his cause. Christina lives in

Amsterdam at this time, the poet is domiciled “op ‘t huis te Muiden,” i.e. his official abode, the Muiderslot.”

Hooft had been appointed bailiff on 4 June 1609, he was “Drost van Muiden, Baljuw van Naarden en Gooiland” (Haasse, 71 & 73). At the time of his appointment he was still in love with “DIA,” as his last poem for her was written on 28 June 1609. Nine months later Hooft has been wooing another woman, Christina van Erp, for some time already. On 16 February 1610 she has apparently declared her love for him, for every minute the poet spends without her seems too long; her absence suffocates him (line 11); his desire for her is great; time, which he wants to curtail in order to be with her sooner, appears long.

Smit translates “Mithra Granida,” to whom the sonnet is dedicated, as the “Love goddess, my ideal beloved” (*Hooft en DIA*, 216, my translation). There is no indication, he writes, “to suppose that Christina would not have been to Hooft what he called her: Mithra Granida, the highest revelation of love in his life” (217). According to old Indian and old Persian mythology, the sun goddess Mithra has universal power. The name “Mithra Granida” at the bottom of the sonnet not only serves a laudatory function, but also an exhortative one: Hooft urges himself on, as it were, to attain and live up to that name. Smit demonstrates this by arguing that when the marriage between the poet and Christina turned out to be a successful one, the nickname was shortened to Mithra (as can indeed be seen in the poem “Sang,” which starts with the address “Rosemont” (Antonissen, 209).

Much more than is the case in the earlier sonnet, we are in “Geswinde grijsart” dealing with emotional experiences that have been translated into abstractions. According to Knuvelde (178), the forceful yet indirect expression of a sentiment in a sonnet is a form Hooft has borrowed from Petrarch. The poet puts himself at a distance, yet does not remove himself from his emotions, in that he translates them in carefully constructed comparisons and similes, paradoxes, antitheses, hyperboles and puns; the emotions are, however, still present. Smit, in his *Twaalf Studies*, points out that love sonnets written in the Petrarchan tradition usually deal with unrequited love and love’s sorrows (70). In the case of the Hooft sonnets discussed here this does not seem to be the case; these two sonnets serve a different purpose. The second sonnet has, it is true, unrequited love as its theme, but this is only a temporary state of being unfulfilled.

The structure of the second sonnet shows, just like the first, a clear desire for balance; it has a rhyme scheme similar to that of the earlier sonnet, as octave and sestet have again been separated by formal means. The chute could indeed be read in between ll. 8 & 9, because there is also a separation in content; the paradoxical metaphors concerning time in the octave (“geswinde grijsart” in line 1 and “onachterhaelbre tijd” in line 5, as opposed to “schoorvoetighe tijdt” in line 10, e.g.) make room for the feelings of the poet (expressed in a hyperbole) who finds time spent without his beloved very long.

One could also argue, albeit with less convincing power, that the chute could be positioned before the final couplet — introduced by “Maer” (line 13) and culminating in a pun — in which desire lengthens instead of shortens time (line 14). The structure and stylistic devices employed by the poet in his construction of the sonnet are, however, so harmonious that we should position the chute after line 8, where we see the general line of

thought of the octave, directed at the god of time, continued in the sestet, in a personal line of thought directed at the beloved.

The image of time as "geswinde grijsart," as Pretorius points out, is a conventional one, derived from the genre of emblematics. In an English emblem book from the beginning of the seventeenth century, he writes, one of the emblems shows "father time" as "an old man with a beard, a blaze, a sand-hour and two wings, and you suddenly realise that this is Hooft's 'Geswinde grijsart,' that is, time" (44, my translation). We can safely assume that Hooft used a well-known emblematic image, which he integrated in his figurative use of language. From line 1 onwards, specific antitheses are set up making use of paradoxes: "geswind" versus "grijsart," "wackre" versus "staech;" the wings of the old man become sails in line 2; we see Father Time as a fast ship sailing before the wind, leaving everybody behind (line 3); time is represented as the arch enemy of rest (line 4) that cannot but go on day and night. In line 5 time is referred to as "onachterhaalbaar," as it cannot be overtaken. Time is personified in lines 5, 6, and 7 as a gluttonous being that even feasts upon states and kingdoms.

The imagery taken from eating in line 6, "versloekt, verslint, verteert," is converted, in line 7, into a figurative echo as well as into a reversed sound echo in "en keert, en wendt en stort." The factual chute of the sonnet is situated in the middle of line 8: time, which is too fast for everybody, is too slow for the poet. For him the days are long (line 10), and evening has trouble arriving. No matter how great his desire for his beloved is, time will not pass any faster (line 12) — as a matter of fact, it will only lengthen. The "verlangen" in line 12 is in clear opposition to the "verlang" of line 14. The implication of the sonnet is of course that time is a relative notion. Love is not bound by time, and is even stronger than time, since it can speed up or slow down time; in other words, it has an even greater power than that of time as described in the first part of the sonnet.

NOTES

¹ Roman Jakobson's communicative model, published in *Style in Language* (1964), is as follows:



² Strengholt (p. 7). Even shortly before the publication of the banns, the poet declares (in "Sang" of 6 April 1610) that the desires of his beloved are his holy laws; the only thing that is expected of her is an expression of her desires for him. Strengholt sees in this a reproach on the part of the poet towards his beloved.

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