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## Huygens' Pilgrimage Through the Calendar Year

Charles I, hearing of Huygens' intention to translate some of Donne's poems, "declared he did not believe that anyone could acquit himself of that task with credit."<sup>1</sup> Huygens' response was, "I feel sure that he would not have passed so absolute a sentence had he known the richness of our language, a moderate command of which is sufficient to enable one to render the thoughts of peoples of all countries with ease and delight." (Grierson lxxvii) Huygens had every right to claim knowledge of that richness; he used it in a range that is not easily surpassed, either in subject matter or in style.<sup>2</sup> Not only are the translations of Donne's poems an evidence of his knowledge and control of the Dutch language, but Huygens' own poetry demonstrates his superb ability in handling that "richness of language."

Because of Huygens' friendship with Donne, and his close knowledge of at least some of Donne's work, according to Rosalie Colie, he has at times been studied in order to assess the "influence of Donne's obscure and difficult style." (Colie, Mode 59) The Dutch literary critics have disputed any debt to Donne and declared that Huygens "was a genius *per se* and his English affinities, if they ever amounted to anything worth mentioning at all, were no more than of a fleeting nature." (Bachrach 112) Within Huygens' own literary works there is little to suggest that he consciously followed Donne. The longer poems of his early years - *Voorhout*, *Costelich Mal*, *Otia of Ledighe Uren*, and *Daghwerk* - are of an entirely different type from anything Donne wrote.

True, one group of Huygens' religious poems are reminiscent of some of Donne's "Holy Sonnets." Donne's *La Corona* (1633), a series of seven pentameter sonnets on the high points of the incarnation and life of Christ, is comparable to Huygens' *Heilighe Daghen* (1645), a series of nine hexameter sonnets on the special days of the church. Similar conceits, paradoxes, and analogies are found in both sets of poems, although the harsh quality of the *Heilighe Daghen* recalls such sonnets as "Batter my heart, three person'd God" rather than the more subdued *La Corona* sonnets.

Even though one's initial reaction to a reading of *Heilighe Daghen* would be to notice the obvious similarities to Donne's sonnet sequence, a closer study displays Huygens' uniqueness. The sonnets of both poets were written in the metaphysical mode, but while Donne's Catholic and Anglican background are reflected in his poems, Huygens' poems distinctly manifest his Calvinistic tendencies.

Until 1971 when L. Strengholt found a 1645 edition of the *Heilighe Daghen* in the British Museum, there had been no historical evidence that the sonnets had a specific order. In the preface to the republication of the sonnets in 1974, Strengholt confirms the original plan for a particular order - an order that is substantially different from that of *La Corona*. Huygens' sequence begins with Sunday, and then is followed by seven holidays in their calendar order: New Year, Epiphany, Good Friday, Easter, Ascension, Pentecost, and Christmas, and concludes with a sonnet on "The Lord's Supper," which, of course, would involve another Sunday. The implications of the order mark the series as Calvinistic. Very likely Huygens was responding to the Protestant emphasis on the Sabbath. The early Synod of Dort of 1574 held that the weekly Sabbath alone should be observed and that the observance of all other days should be discouraged. (Monsma 201) Recognizing that it would be extremely difficult to set aside all feast days, a provision was added in 1578 that allowed for the observance of seven feast days.

The first of the "Holy Days" sonnets, "Sondagh," begins with the colloquial, "Is't Sabbath-dagh, mijn Ziel, of Sondagh?" ("Is't the Sabbath day, my soul, or Sunday?"). The response, "geen van tween. /De Sabbath is voorby met syne diestbaerheden" (Neither one, / The Sabbath of servitude is no more"), recalls to mind the statement from one of the three Synod of Dort creeds, the Belgic Confession, emphasizing the end of all the ceremonial laws of the Old Testament with the coming of Christ. (Beets 193) The poet continues with a playful exploration of the essence of "Sunday." The Dutch language lends itself to this beautifully; thus in the third quatrain, Huygens

juxtaposes God's Sunday, Sondagh, Redemption Day, with the last two lines and the personal "Sinday." The final couplet places a fitting commentary on the playfulness by asking the question:

Hoe lange lijdt ghy, Heer, dijn' Soon-  
dagh, Soen- dagh. Sondagh,  
Ondanckbaerlick verspilt, verspeelt,  
verspelt in Sond-dagh?

(How long, Lord, allowest thou to have  
Son-day, Sumday, Sunday  
Ungratefully misplaced, misplayed, and  
misspelled as Sinday?)

Outwardly, Huygens does the appropriate thing to start his holyday series with "Sohndagh" but Huygens, the poet, is intent on doing more, particularly in this very first sonnet. He admits in the second quatrain that his vision has been disturbed; he sees the sun through the film of his sins. When he recognizes in the next quatrain that "ich vint ons in de Schuld" ("I am in Debt" or "I am Guilty"), he uses the pronoun for the first person singular. Huygens suggests, "Lord, by the obscured vision, I misplace, misplay, and misspell right here in this poem," approaching Herbert's confession in the flower:

We say amisse,  
This or that is:  
Thy word is all, if we could spell.

Donne's *La Corona* has no sonnet comparable to Huygens' introductory "Sondagh." There are four sonnets in both Donne's and Huygens' series that deal with parallel feast days: Good Friday, Easter, Christmas, and Ascension, yet Huygens' treatment of these four feast days differs remarkably from Donne's. For example, in Huygens' sonnets, Mary is mentioned only once as the virgin who conceived and bore him, and "nu te voete light" ("And now lies at his feet)." Huygens' Calvinistic de-emphasis of Mariology is unmistakable in this last remark. For Donne, however, Mary is not only the "faithful Virgin" and "his kinde mother," but the whole "Annunciation" sonnet is addressed to her:

That all . . .  
faithful Virgin, yeelds himselfe to lye  
In prison, in thy wombe. . .  
Ere by the speares time was created,

thou  
Wast in his minde, who is thy Sonne, and  
Brother;  
Whom thou conceiv'st, conceiv'd; yea thou  
art now  
Thy Maker's maker, and thy Father's  
mother. . .

Even more noteworthy, Donne and Huygens differ significantly in the relative position of the four sets of sonnets. Donne uses the church or liturgical calendar, thus following the life of Christ in his sonnets. After the dedicatory sonnet, the subjects continue logically from the annunciation, through the nativity, Christ's appearance in the temple, the crucifixion, the resurrection, and the ascension of Christ.

Huygens' sequence at first seems to lack that logical order. True, the sequence follows the calendar year. Still, to have "Epiphany" first and "Christmas" five sonnets later seems strange. Christmas, appearing last on a list of religious feast days, seems out of place. But Huygens' handling of the situation is superb, almost as if he is constantly aware of the declaration made at the 1578 Synod of Dort:

. . . it would be desirable to celebrate Sunday only, according to God's ordinance. But inasmuch as Christmas Day. . ., Easter, Pentecost, and in some places also New Year's Day and Ascension Day were legal holidays by authority of the governments, the ministers should preach appropriately on these days in order to turn a fruitless and harmful idleness into a holy and profitable exercise. (Monsma 201)

The sonnets do just that. They de-emphasize the feast days as such, and attempt to turn the sequence into a "holy and profitable exercise" that unifies the sonnet series far more than the sequential order of the calendar year. Throughout the sonnet series runs the metaphor of a journey or pilgrimage. The narrator himself takes on the pilgrimage through the calendar year, moving from feast day to feast day as his "holy and profitable exercise."

The journey, using the wayfaring Christian or the struggling pilgrim motif, is a common one in

Christian literature, but it was particularly popular in Calvinistic circles, both in the sermons preached and in the literature written during the seventeenth century. In the sonnet "Sondagh" the "poet-sinner" identifies himself, and in "Nieuwe Iaer" he explicitly asks:

Maeckt my maer op de reys van't eewigh  
vaderland  
In dese wilderniss een' dijner Israelijten.

(Make me travel the road to the eternal  
fatherland  
In this wilderness, as one of your  
Israelites.)

Each of the sonnets begins with a reference to the particular feast day and then uses that feast day as a springboard to pursue the subject of a pilgrimage. Thus the third sonnet, "Dry Coninghen Avond," is not so much about the visit of the wise men to the Christ-child as it is about the pilgrim asking:

Waer is Gods eenigh Kind, dat ick't  
aenbidden magh?  
O Wijsen, wijst my't pad. 'k zie duysend  
Sterren proncken.

(Where is God's only Child?, that I may  
worship him?  
O Wise men, show me the way. I see a  
thousand stars beckoning.)

The path of the "Leid Sterr" or lode star brings him into the vicinity of bitter laughter. The Poet-Pilgrim distinguishes between the laughter of the drunken city of wealth and wine, and the King who "drinckende voldaeen het bittere gelagh" (while drinking fulfills or satisfies the bitter laughter). Frank Warnke correctly points out in his *European Metaphysical Poetry*, in a footnote to the "Goede Vrydag" translation, that the word "voldoen" (which appears in five of the sonnets) may mean "to satisfy" as well as "to pay for." (235) The pilgrim finds a king who, while drinking the bitter cup of Gaethsemane, satisfies the pilgrim's need, in fact meets all the requirements of salvation for him. The narrator acknowledges that what the King has fulfilled took place for his sins. Like John Bunyan's pilgrim, the significance of the cross comes early in the journey. Now the pilgrim can continue with confidence; now he can lead the way for the

wise men because he has learned that the Child himself is the lode star. The Pilgrim-Poet leads the reader through "Goede Vrydagh," "Paeschen," "Hemelvaert," and "Pinxteren," and ends his journey at "Kersmis," the second to last sonnet. Huygens ends where, in a sense, Donne begins.

Donne, after his dedicatory sonnet, discusses the intricate relationship of Christ and Mary, especially in the months after his conception in her womb. The progression of the sonnets that follow contemplate Christ's youth, suffering and resurrection, and concludes with a sonnet of praise to the ascended Christ. The spiritual and emotional movement of the sonnets is analogous to the upward movement of Dante's *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*, or even to the ascent of the poet's soul as described in the second of Donne's anniversary poems, "The Progresse of the Soule."

Huygens' pilgrim is not so outgoing or lofty in his expression of moving towards his King. His hesitancy finds expression in the use of clothing references and imagery. In "Nieuwe Iaer," a need for new clothes is established, not only because the pilgrim is starting out on a new journey, but also because he needs to be cleansed or renewed:

Voor wien ick desen dagh mijn' vuyle  
ziel ontklee  
Van't smodderligh gewaed van veertigh  
en twee.

(For whom I this day undress my dirty  
soul  
From the muddy past of forty years and  
two.)

New Year's Day is an opportunity to start anew. He is given a new suit, "een schoonder pack ick 'er oyt aen dee" ("a cleaner suit than I have ever put on"), and more - a new cloak also - but here the Poet-Pilgrim expresses a strange plea regarding this cloak - not anything about the cloak wearing out but "laet dit nieuwe kleeed mijn leven niet verslijten" ("don't let this new cloak wear out my life"). He is concerned about the weight or the heaviness of this new cloak.

In the last sonnet, the poet again refers to the cloak, saying

Heer, het Bruylofts - kleed daer in ick  
lest verscheen  
Is over halver sleet, jae't en gelijkt 'er  
geen.

(Lord, the Wedding-cloak where I  
appeared before  
Is more than half worn out, 't is like not  
having any.)

He is, once again, right where he started - in need of a new cloak. Interestingly, there is no mention of a new suit; that is the *basic human-ness*, that was a once-for-all renewing, having been made a new creature in Christ. But the cloak gets soiled and worn on the journey and needs to be renewed again and again.

The Christmas sonnet leads up to the final sonnet, "'s Heeren Avontmael" ("The Lord's Supper"), in a most appropriate manner that ties the whole sequence together, and brings the end back to the beginning. Huygens in the Christmas sonnet does not discuss the nativity as Donne does in terms of a Christ who made himself "Weake enough, now into our world to come," but concentrates more on the mystery and the paradox of God in our flesh; God, fatherless on earth, God, the creating Word. The only fitting response for the Poet-Pilgrim is the silence of awe and humility. Where Donne ends his progression of meditation with a cymbal-clang of joy and praise, "Salute the last and everlasting day," Huygens ends with an "I am unworthy." He concludes the sonnet as he did earlier in "Sondagh" by looking at himself and acknowledging what he has been doing with his words:

Mijn Ziele, maekt een end van  
d'ongerijmde Rijmen;  
Ons beste seggen waer oodmoedelijck  
beswijmen.

(My soul, make these unrhymed rhymes  
cease;  
Our best expression now were humble  
peace.)

What Huygens implies is analogous to Francis Bacon's suggestion that the creature should bring "his mind and heart into the stillness of listening and thus into the harmony of universal rhythms." But, the

reader needs to stop and consider what the Poet-Pilgrim-Narrator has suggested, or ordered, that he should do, and is *not doing*. He says, "stop this unrhymed rhyming," but he not only completes the couplet but also blatantly rhymes the last word of the sonnet with the capitalized "Rijmen." The complex nature of the last two lines is intensified when we realize that "rijmen" may also mean "doggerel," or "poorly constructed verse." There is then the ambiguity of meaning: "Stop your poor rhymes and hold your peace," or "Stop your unrhymed rhymes." But what about good rhymes such as Huygens' own? The poet is still dealing with the problems of the first sonnet; he is still playing with words so that they are "verspilt, verspeelt, verspelt" ("misplaced, misplayed, misspelled").

Thus, in Huygens' as well as Donne's sonnet sequence, there is a circular pattern. In Donne's work the pattern is obvious, even in the name of *La Corona* or crown. Donne makes his crown of praise by interlocking the sonnets. The last line of each sonnet is repeated as the first line of the next sonnet. The very last line of the sonnet sequence is the same as the very first line of the sequence. In Donne's poems the circular movement is one of form rather than theme, for the thematic movement goes from a humble prayer, "Deigne at my hands this crown of prayer and praise," and rises steadily to the triumphant sonnet of praise that invites man to "Behold the Highest." But in Huygens' sonnets the circular movement is an inner thematic part of the sequence. The end is a subdued understanding that, having found the Christ child, the Pilgrim in humility must lie at his feet, acknowledge his sinfulness, and realize the consequent need for further renewal which can be done at the Lord's Table.

Many elements of the sonnet sequence are resolved or completed in the last sonnet. Although the final sonnet in Huygens' series, "'s Heeren Avontmael" or "The Lord's Supper," is referred to as "dijn hooge Feest" ("thy high Feast"), this concluding sonnet has a somber, penitent tone. This feast is not yet the final triumphant wedding feast, but only a temporary Sabbath's rest period at the Lord's table. Tomorrow he must begin his pilgrimage anew. He has experienced a difficult, weary journey to arrive at another day of rest, another Sondagh (another Sunday or Sinday), but, in fact, a special Sondagh that includes The Lord's Supper or the Eucharist. His

"Bruylofts-kleed" ("wedding cloak") is worn from his travels; he will be fed at the Lord's table because he knows it all depends "op Geloof aleen" ("on Faith alone"). And yet, he sounds discouraged when he asks:

Wanneer wil't boetigh wesen,  
 Voor nu, voor gisteren, en voor den tijd  
 naer desen,  
 Eens boetigh voor altoos; en wanneer  
 wilt ghy't, Heer?  
 Is it altijts weer op nieuws, en altijts weer  
 op't ouwe?

(When should I be debt-conscious?  
 Now, yesterday, besides all the times  
 thereafter,  
 Once penitent for always; and when  
 would you have it, Lord?  
 Must I always be renewed, and always  
 the old that's meant?)

He is being fed at the Lord's table, but this Calvinist, this Poet-Pilgrim knows already that during the next year he will need to continue on his pilgrimage. Now and then there will be an Avontmael or Eucharistic Supper, and periodically there will be a "sabbath's-day rest" for him - a rest that is meant to refresh as well as remind him of that Eternal Sabbath that Hebrews 4:6-16 promises, or as one of the Synod-of-Dort creeds puts it, "that all the days of my life I rest from my evil works, let the Lord work in me by his Holy Spirit, and thus begin this life the eternal Sabbath." (Heidelberg # 103) On that last Sunday of the year, he must pick up again and continue his difficult penitential pilgrimage, each year again until the end of his life, but in the meantime he may look forward to the Eternal Sabbath.

#### APPENDIX HUYGENS' YEARLY PILGRIMAGE

Sonnet 1 - "Sondagh": The poet acknowledges his mistakes.

Sonnet 2 - "Nieuwe Iaer": The poet-pilgrim acknowledges his sins and pleads for a new suit. He asks God to send him on a journey through the wilderness as one of his Israelites to the eternal fatherland.

Sonnet 3 - "Dry Coninghen Avond": The pilgrim asks

where God's only child is, so that he may worship Him. He asks the wise men to show him the way because he cannot find the lode star and there are a thousand stars to confuse him. When he turns to the direction of the Lead-Star, he hears and acknowledges the bitter laughter of Gall; the King has satisfied the requirements for him. From here on he can lead the Wise Men, because he knows the Child itself is his star.

Sonnet 4 - "Goede Vrydagh": Exhausted and thirsty he arrives just in time to hear the "it is finished." He recognizes that it will not be finished for him until God murders him and he learns to hang on that cross.

Sonnet 5 - "Paeschen": He makes it through the passover night and then through the Red Sea. When the Angel with the flaming sword appears, the pilgrim asks that the angel pierce his heart.

Sonnet 6 - "Hemelvaert": The pilgrim sees the chariot and horsemen taking up his royal Lord and questions whether his King is going to abandon his struggling people. He pleads that the Dove will take him up where He is now.

Sonnet 7 - "Pinxteren": God in his super-generosity gives out many tongues. All of creation speaks of him. The pilgrim asks to be given a Tongue that fits or suits him and will not stammer; he will not even worry about what it will say in eternity.

Sonnet 8 - "Kersmis": Even though the stable is full, there is room for his Soul. The pilgrim is awe-struck by God-in-our-flesh, and the Creating Word, and recognizes that only Silence would be suitable here, yet he "rhymes" on.

Sonnet 9 - "'s Heeren Avontmael": He arrives at the table with a worn-out cloak. By Faith alone he may be nourished at the table (while others are weeping outside). The restored pilgrim recognizes that he has not completed his penitence or his need for restoration. The same "old" pilgrim must continue to be renewed until that "hollow repentance finally would repent."

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> H.J.C. Grierson, "Introduction," *The poems of John Donne* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1912), I, p. lxxvii; quotation is translated from *Korenbloemen* by Huygens.

<sup>2</sup> Besides Rosalie Colie's essay, "Constantijn Huygens

and the Metaphysical Mode," *Germanic Review*, 34 (1959), 59-73, see also "The Cosmology of Constantijn Huygens," *Germanic Review*, 30 (1955), pp. 101-109; and her book, *Some Thanks to Constantine* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1956), 158. See also Henrietta Ten Harmsel's essay, "The Metaphysical Poets of Holland's Golden Age," *National Literature*, "Holland" issue (1977) 78-83.

- <sup>3</sup> A.G.H. Bachrach, "Constantine Huygens' Acquaintance with Donne," *Neerlandica Manuscripts*, ed. J.P. Gumbert and M.J.M. De Haan, 112: A. van Dorsten, "Op het kritieke moment" (Groningen: Wolters Noordhof, 1981) 50-53; and Koos Daley, "Donne and Huygens at Prayer," *Canadian Journal of Netherlandic Studies* XIV (1993) 96-102.

<sup>4</sup> See appendix "Huygens' Yearly Pilgrimage"

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