"A CROWNE OF PRAYER AND PRAISE:" DONNE AND HUYGENS AT PRAYER

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THE SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY POETS turned with religious zeal to the writing of Protestant metaphysical poetry. Herbert, Donne, Crashaw and Vaughan in England, and Revius, Huygens, Gryphius, de Sponde, Artale and de Vega on the Continent, expressed their relation to God and their place within Divine Providence, trying to make the transcendental leap from the aesthetic to the revelationary, from the physical world to a spiritual appropriation of this world. Using John Donne as a touchstone, Frank Warnke isolates the characteristics peculiar to metaphysical poetry: "an awareness of contradictory truths," "the tendency to view experience in the light of total reality," "the intellectual conceit," and "the conversational tone" (2-24). Combining wit with passion, expressed by paradoxes, metaphors, and biblical parallels, these poets celebrated a reconciliation of their universe and its inhabitants with God in a re-creation of Christ.

The religious poets faced conflicting aims in their individual prayers to their creator. Helen Gardner defines these pitfalls as the conflict between "the ostensible ... emotion and the artist's actual absorption in the creation of his poem and his satisfaction in achieving perfect expression" (*John Donne: The Divine Poems*, XV-XVI). How John Donne and Constantijn Huygens sought to realize a delicate paradoxical balance between self and creator, in poetry that is simultaneously lyrical and sincerely religious, will be the focus of this paper.

From Exodus to Revelation, believers have prayed to and praised God in song: "I will sing to the Lord for the has triumphed," exclaims Moses after the Israelites have been delivered from Egypt (Exodus 15:1). This song is echoed throughout the Bible and renewed in Revelation 15:3: "And they sing the song of Moses, the servant of God." In his letter to the Ephesians (5:19), Paul exhorts Christians to be "singing and making melody unto the Lord." Both Donne in "La Corona" and Huygens in *Heilighe Daghen* used linked sonnets to make "melody unto the Lord." Their use of linked sonnets celebrated the perfect eternal circle of Christ; upon finishing, readers as well as singers discover that they are not done but are constantly urged back to meditation on the life and death of Christ. The historical events celebrated by Donne and Huygens are immutable, yet are contained in a mutable system in which, although completed, they are forever relived.

"La Corona," a sequence of seven linked sonnets, can be considered as one of Donne's earliest Divine poems; many critics, however, regard it as a series of unremarkable meditations on the life of Christ (O'Connell, 119).[1] Yet the sequence lends itself to close scrutiny of the conflicts that Donne as a religious poet sought to resolve, and seems a mirror in which Huygens' *Heilighe Daghen* is reflected. Donne weaves the seven sonnets together by repeating the last line of each sonnet as the first line of the next one; the last line

of the seventh sonnet, "Deigne at my hands this crowne of prayer and praise," also begins the first sonnet. Thus Donne completes the circle and invites the reader to repeat it.

The first sonnet clearly focuses the dilemma of the religious poet. Asking his muse to inspire his "white sincerity," the persona engages in rapid-fire wordplay, manipulating the word "crown" several times as noun and verb. The persona's poetic crown is compared and contrasted with both the perishable "vile crowne of frail bayes" that crowns a successful poet or athlete and the eternal "thorny crowne" of Christ, symbol of his redemptive suffering that earned for humanity a "crowne of glory." Since the poet need not — and indeed cannot — exchange the crown he is weaving for the salvation Christ's "thorny crowne" has already earned, he needs to interweave his crown with Christ's crown as a devout participant in the life and suffering of Christ. The first sonnet resonates with scriptural references both to the Old and New Testaments. Since it preceded the life of Christ, the Old Testament offers a fitting context, prophesying the birth of the saviour. However, since it, in the end, becomes the eighth sonnet, following Christ's Ascension, the New Testament represents the fulfillment of prophesy: "the first last end."

In order to blend his and Christ's crowns harmoniously, the persona begins to meditate on the life of Christ. Donne highlights all crucial stages of Christ's earthly existence: Annunciation, Birth, Teaching in the Temple, Crucifixion, Easter, and Ascension. In the sonnet on the Annunciation, the persona tries to express the paradoxes implied in the virgin birth: "Ere by the spheares time was created, thou / wast in his mind, who is thy Sonne, and Brother, / Whom thou conceiv'st, conceiv'd; yea thou art now / Thy Makers maker, and thy Fathers mother" (23-26). Again Donne uses twisted syntax and repetition in an attempt to articulate the inexpressible. Skilfully used, as Donne is eminently aware, repetition can lead to the revelation of truths. The word "all," carried over from the previous sonnet, is repeated five times in the opening two lines, and is by poetic manipulation incarnated into the Logos: "That All, which always is All everywhere" (16).

Until that moment the poet has distanced himself from his prayer; as soon as he understands that the proper subject of his crown is Christ and not his poem, he assumes an active role in Christ's life: "Seest thou my soule, with thy faiths eyes," he admonishes himself and prepares to travel to Egypt with the Christchild. Although Christ's teaching in the Temple as a young boy is not often celebrated as a crucial event, Donne chooses this stage as his central sonnet. According to Donne, this moment reveals Christ both as man and God, "A shallow seeming child" who nevertheless becomes the ultimate poem: "And the word was made flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld his glory" (John 1:14). With Joseph, the persona needs to "turne back" and accept Christ on Christ's terms, not his own.

In "Crucifying," the persona has become deeply involved in Christ's suffering and speaks directly to Him: "Now thou art lifted up, draw mee to thee, / And at thy death giving such liberall dole, / Moyst, with one drop of blood, my dry soule" (68-70). The poet who in the opening sonnet tried to partake in Christ's sacrifice by the creation of his own logos wants to surrender himself to Christ as a redeemed sinner who may eventually partake in the resurrection and eventual Ascension into heaven.

The prayer loses both its distance and its individuality in the sonnets on the crucifixion and resurrection. The poet echoes John 12:32, "And I, when I am lifted up, will draw all men to myself," The persona, Donne, and humanity merge into one and converge with Christ in a rebirth from death to eternal life. In the last sonnet, past, present, and future coalesce on a spiritual level: "the "strong Ramme" (the peace offering of the old covenant) and the "mild lambe" (Christ, the peace offering of the new covenant) become one. Redemption also brings revelation as Donne now turns to the Pentecostal promise and realizes that the Holy Spirit should be the true inspiration for religious poetry: "And if thy holy Spirit, my Muse did raise, / Deigne at my hands this crowne of prayer and praise" (97-98). He has tried to close the circle successfully with Christ as the center and to restore the proper relation between himself, his poetry, and his creator.

Yet, as a whole, the sonnet series skirts dangerously close to distancing both reader and poet by the linguistic tour de force of weaving together words, lines, and sonnets through repetition, antithesis, ploce,[2] puns, and paradoxes. The persona expresses a deeply felt doubt about his personal power to will salvation as he so blithely expressed it in his opening sonnet: "'Tis time that heart and voice be lifted high, / Salvation to all that will is nigh" (13-14). By the final, triumphant sonnet on the Ascension, the persona undercuts his confidence by the conditional clause with which he closes the series: "And if thy holy Spirit, my Muse did raise, / Deigne at my hands this crowne of prayer and praise" (97-98. Because the sequence is circular, the persona becomes forever trapped by the "if" clause, never able to know for sure that the Spirit raised his muse, never sure that grace through God's mysterious providence will vouchsafe him adoption into the elect:"If in thy little booke my name thou'enroule" (79).

When the Dutch poet Constantijn Huygens turned his pen to the religious lyric, he gave a heightened dimension to the genre. According to many critics, his nine linked sonnets *Heilighe Daghen* (Holy Days) stand as some of the strongest metaphysical poetry of all time, eclipsing even Donne's "Holy Sonnets."[3] (For this paper, the Zwaan edition was used). Huygens translated, in 1630 and 1633, nineteen of Donne's poems and may have read more of Donne's work by 1645, when he wrote *Heilighe Daghen.* There is a continuing debate about possible influences of Donne's style and techniques on Huygens, and certainly in *Heilighe Daghen* one seems to hear echoes of "La Corona," the "Holy Sonnets," and "Good Friday."[4] It is true that there existed a close political and poetic affinity between the two poets, and Huygens admired Donne's poetic style. However, metaphysical religious poetry that shared many of Donne's stylistic approaches and techniques flourished all over Europe, and even in England it was not confined to Donne only (Warnke 1-89; Lewalski xix-xxxi). Huygens may have been inspired by Donne; however, when he turned his poetic genius to religious sonnets, he sang authentic hymns of prayer and praise based on an intimate personal relation with his God, as a man sure of his adoption as a son of God and heir of heaven with Christ, as Paul testifies in Romans 8:15-17:

> For ye have not received the spirit of bondage again to fear; but ye have received the spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father. The spirit itself

> beareth witness with our spirit, that we are children of God: And if children, then heirs; heirs of God and joint-heirs with Christ; if so be that we suffer with him, that we may be glorified together.

Huygens wrote the nine sonnets that comprise *Heilighe Daghen* in an outburst of poetic inspiration in eight days — New Year's Eve 1644 and the first week of 1645. They saw their first printing within a month from their conception on January 28, 1645. Huygens ordered his sonnets according to the religious feast days that were recognized by the Dutch Reformed Church as they occurred in the calendar year: "Sunday," "New Year," "Epiphany," "Good Friday," "Easter," "Ascension," "Pentecost," "Christmas," and the "Lord's Supper." Of the nine sonnets, four coincide with Donne's stages in the life of Christ. Huygens started with Sunday, since that day constantly recurs and is therefore the most significant Holy Day and, in strict Calvinist terms, the only sanctified feast day. He ended the series with the Lord's Supper, a crucial part of the believer's witness of faith, celebrated four times yearly in the Dutch Reformed Church. At the moment that Huygens conceived the sonnets, Sunday, New Year, and the Lord's Supper were all celebrated on the same day: January 1, 1645. The series, therefore, is not only cyclical in nature, but interdependent as well. *Heilighe Daghen* complements Huygens' great secular poem *Daghwerk*; together they bear witness to the life of a Christian in seventeenth century Holland.

In his dedicatory poem to Leonore Hellemans, wife of his friend and fellow poet Hooft, Huygens stressed that these sonnets were no jest, but "'Tis ernst; en uijt mijn' adren / Het binnenste geweld" (It is seriousness; the innermost strength from my veins [20-21]). From the onset, Huygens defined his purpose clearly: "'Tzijn tochten van mijn' Ziel;" the sonnets represent the journeys of his soul towards the "eternal New Year."

"Sondagh," his first sonnet, is by far the most Donnean in its application of metaphysical language, conversational tone, the direct question in the opening line, and the extended wordplay that has bothered so many of his twentieth-century readers.[5] Unlike Donne, Huygens participates on an immediate personal and spiritual level. He asks his soul to mediate between the controversy of the Sabbath of the old law and the Christian Sunday: "Is 'tsabbath dagh, mijn ziel, of sondagh?" (Is it the sabbath, my soul, or Sunday?). His soul answers correctly: "neither one." The controversy probes deeply below surface differences; it spans all space and time and brings the relation between the poet and his God into focus: it is the way Christians spell Sunday that matters. The poet realizes that he can only see Christ, the true sun, through an awareness of his sinfulness. Christ's suffering has brought an eternal Sunday: "Ksie Sondagh sonder end door dijne wonden heen" (I see an eternal Sunday because of thy wounds [8]).

The sonnet ends with an expansion of the common pun Sun/Son. Huygens also calls this dag "soen-dagh" (Expiation day) and ends in a crescendo of semantics, giving dramatic urgency to his question by the use of double asyndeton: "Hoe langhe lijdt ghij, Heer, dijn' soondagh, soendagh, sondagh, / Ondanckbaerlick verspilt, verspeelt, verspelt in sonddagh?" (How long will thou suffer, Oh Lord, that thy Sonday, Sumday, Sunday, ungratefully is spoiled, spilled, spelled as Sinday [13-14]).[6]

The first sonnet establishes the critical tension between redeemer and sinner, time and timelessness, transient beauty and eternal glory that all subsequent sonnets share. Moreover, the frequent allusions to parallel scriptural passages from both the Old and New Testament sustain the poet, his poetry, and all its images. This short article does not allow for an in-depth study of all nine sonnets, each a gem in a priceless crown. But some that mirror Donne's stages need closer scrutiny. Huygens' "Good Friday" involves brilliant wordplay on Christ's last words on the cross: "'Tis voldaen" (It is finished). While heaven and earth mourn, Huygens asks permission to speak. Playing on "voldoen," he bursts out: "O my volldoende God ... / 'Tvoldaen voldoet my niet" (Oh, my sufficient God, the reparation does not satisfy me [9-10]. He finishes this anguished cry with a plea to be made new in language that echoes Donne's "Good Friday" and "Batter my heart:" "ten zij ghij mij vermoort / En van mijn seluen scheurt, en brieselt de gewrichten / Van mijn' verstockte ziel" (unless thou murder me and tear me from myself and pulverize the joints of my hardened soul [10-13]).

The Easter sonnet departs significantly from an expected celebration of Christ's triumphant victory over death that Donne honoured in "La Corona." In sharp contrast, Huygens creates a dark tension, bringing together Exodus and Revelation in a series of anguished references to the Passover night when the first-born of the Egyptians were slain. Huygens does not celebrate the sparing of the Israelites or Christ's redemptive enactment of the Passover offering: "Oh! midden in de baren, / De baren van ons bloed, veel holler dan dat meer. / Den Engel komt weerom, en 'tvlammighe geweer / Dreight nieuwen ondergang" (Oh, in the middle of the waves, the waves of our human nature that are higher than the Red Sea, the angel comes again, and with his flaming sword he threatens a new death [9-12]). In a brilliant reversal of images, both taken from Revelation 5, 5-6, Christ, the paschal lamb, becomes the fear-inspiring apocalyptic presence, while the fierce lion of Judah becomes the saviour for those who believe: "Merckt onser herten deur, o leew van Iudas Stamm, / En leert ons tijdelick verschricken voor een Lamm" (Mark the doors of our hearts, oh lion of Judah, and teach us in time to fear a Lamb [13-14]). These images, brought harmoniously into such paradoxical tension in the sonnet that Huygens chose as his central sonnet, compare resplendently with poems on like subjects in any language by any poet.

Huygens placed "Christmas" in the penultimate place. Like Donne, he celebrates the virgin birth in metaphysical paradoxes: "God light'er in ons vleesch; God, Vaderloos op aerde, / God, moederloos bij God; het mede-scheppend Woord; / God, Vader vande maeghd die hem ontfing en baerde" (God lies there in our flesh; God, fatherless on earth, God motherless in heaven; the co-creating Word; God, Father of the maiden who conceived and bore him [9-11]). Halfway through these verbal manipulations, Huygens halts abruptly with an end-stopping period in the middle of a thought.[7] He has learned that the complexities of language, the spelling and misspelling of crucial words, the metaphysical conceits, and the semantic rearrangements ought all to be transcended by the only language fit to honour the mystery of the Logos: silence.

When Huygens returns to speech in his last sonnet on the Lord's Supper, he brings the series to a fitting close. Drawing on the wedding feasts in Matthew 22:11-14 and

Revelation 19:19, he rues that his wedding garment is unfit for inclusion in either. Repeating the temporal adverbs of "when" in lines 10 and 12, and "again" used twice in both lines 1 and 13, while balancing the difference between "old" and "new," he illustrates not only his (and humanity's) sinfulness but also Christ's ever present pardon because of the sinner's faith, a faith that brings him forever to repentance and renewal in Christ.

One feels a strong personal conviction in Huygens' series, with none of the doubt of Donne's "La Corona." Huygens celebrated his complete dependence on Christ and his firm belief that he was among those invited to the "marriage supper of the Lamb," no matter how often Christ — on the merit of His sacrifice and not on the merit of the poet's contributions — needed to change the wedding garment. The troubling uncertainties and fear of rejection woven into Donne's "La Corona," expressed by his use of a conditional clause at a key moment in the circular movement of the sonnets, have no existence in Huygens' *Heilighe Daghen.* Although Huygens acknowledged and rued the condition of the sinner who all too often wears "tsmodderigh gewaed" (the dirty garment ["Nieuw Iaer" 5]), he celebrated the reliance on God's mercy given him as an adopted son: "maer ick betrouw dijn' hand: / Die sal't mij lichtelick wat ruijmen en wat lenghen" (I trust in your helping hand; you will make [the new argument] roomier and longer with use["Nieuw Iaer" 10-11]). And in "'sHeeren Auondmael" (The Lord's Supper), Huygens testified to his faith in "being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus" (Romans 3:24): "Noch borght ghij mij 't gelagh, en, op Geloof alleen / En wat boetveerdicheids, en laet mijn' ziel niet vasten" (you give me to eat on faith alone and a bit of contrition, and keep my soul from starving [7-8]).

Commemorating the "Heilighe Daghen" of his Church, Huygens corrected the balance from the poet's absorption in his literary creation to devotion to his creator. The sonnets transcend through their humility and faith the separation between God and His creation. In a true blending of the physical and spiritual worlds, Huygens offered a crown of prayer and praise to God's perfect wit, using his own wit to reach a closer understanding of the religious analogies by which one may come to know God. He knew that the Spirit has raised his muse according to Christ's promise in Matthew 10:20: "For it is not ye that speak, but the Spirit of your Father which speaketh in you" as he testified, appropriately, in "Pinxteren" (Pentecost): "Heer, deelt ghij Tongen om, siet noch eens naer beneden / En deelt er mij een' toe die Dij in mij bevall, / Die niet en stamer' daer de boose sullen beuen" (Lord, are you issuing tongues? Look down and give me one that pleases you, one that will not falter where the evil ones tremble [10-12]). While Donne's persona is weaving an uncertain maze where grace may be deliberately withheld, Huygens' speaker walks with the confidence of grace received: "Komt, wijsen, 'kweet het pad; all is het steil en verre, / Ick vrees den doolwegh niet, 'tKind selver is mijn' Sterre" (Come, wise men, I know the way; it may be steep and far, but I do not fear the maze, the Christchild is my lodestar ["Drij Coninghen Auond" 13-14]).

NOTES

1 O'Connell lists J. B. Leishman, *The Monarch of Wit* (London: Hutchison, 1962), 257-258 and Louis I. Martz, *The Poetry of Meditation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1962), 110.

2 Ploce: Emphatic repetition of a word in order to bring out one of its meanings, e.g. "a wife who is a wife indeed."

3 See, for example, J. A. van Dorsten, *Op het kritieke moment* (Groningen: Wolters-Noordhof, 1981) 50-53; Henriette ten Harmsel, "The Metaphysical Poets of Holland's Golden Age," *Review of National Literature*, 8 (1977), 78-83; and Koos Daley,*The Triple Fool* (Nieuwkoop: De Graaf, 1990), 70-81.

4 Robert G. Collmer identifies ten Brink, Jorisson, Polak, De Hoog, Kalff, Pienaar, Knuvelder, Bachrach, and Warnke as advocating influence of Donne on Huygens (Collmer, "Donne's Poetry in Dutch Letters," *Comparative Literature Studies* vol. II, No. 1, 34-35). To this list, I would add Colie and Sellin.

5 See, for example, Jacob Smit, *De Grootmeester van Woord- en Snarenspel* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1980), 219. Van Dorsten (cf. note 3).

6 In order to retain the asyndeton, I have changed Warnke's translation of these lines. I have, however, retained his excellent translation of "Sumday" for "Zoendagh" and "spilled," "spoiled,"and "spelled" for "verspilt, verspeelt, verspelt."

7 Leendert Strengholt meticulously explains why the period is missing in the first edition. Huygens was very perturbed over the important omission and made sure that subsequent authorized editions had the correct punctuations: "En nu te voete light. Hier light." Strengholt, 12-15.

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