

## Joost van den Vondel (1587-1679) at 425

...but what is in my heart

Wells up towards my lips; the inward pressure grows:

Fermenting like new wine, it bursts and overflows

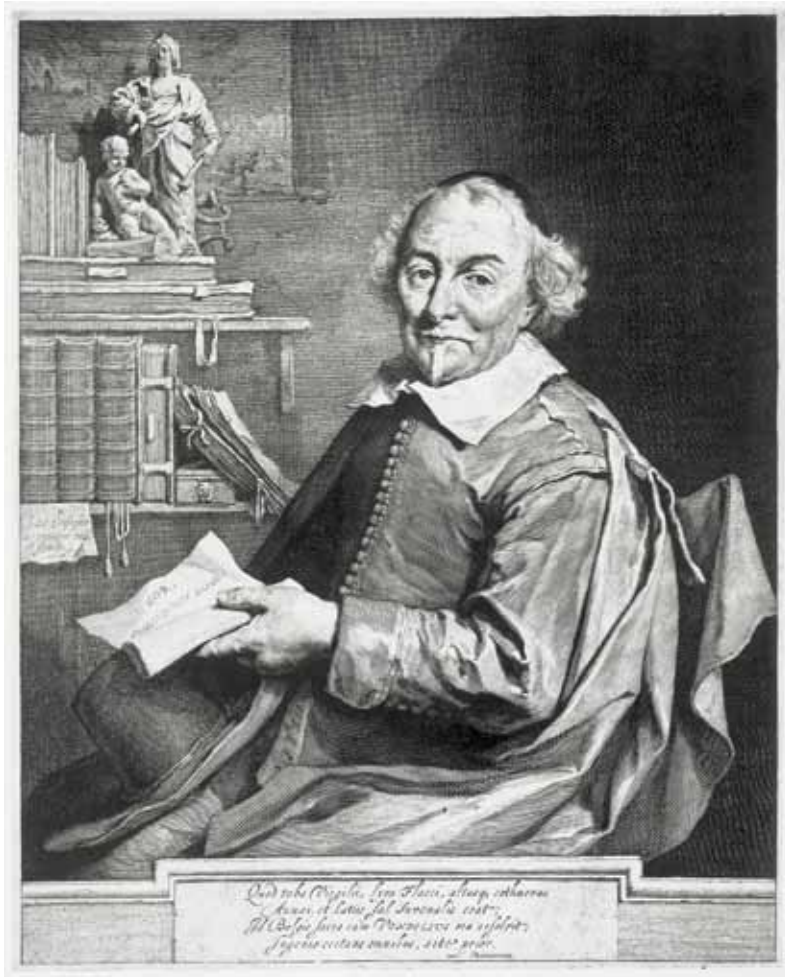
Curry-Comb, 64-66

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[ KAREL PORTEMAN ]

*'La langue de Vondel'* – one occasionally still reads it in the French-language press as an alternative to 'Flemish' or 'Dutch'. In the nineteenth century such 'literary' language designations were commonplace, but the formulation has little substance today: the once flourishing Dutch Vondel tradition belongs to the past. Those participating in the 1987 commemoration – predominantly academics – admitted as much. Yet their attitude was not totally one of gloom and doom. Vondel was dead, so long live Vondel! By which they simply meant that what had been forgotten could be rediscovered. Freeing the poet from his own monumental shadow and the many ideological bonds by which he had for so long been shackled, would, they hoped, lead to a renewed and intensified literary-historical encounter. It seemed as if the claim that almost every Dutch political and ideological grouping had laid to Vondel, was now the exclusive right of literary historiography, the focus of whose inquiry would be on the poet as a figure from the past: what his work was like, what his intention was in writing it, what it meant and why people *found* it so wonderful. 'Vondel is a historical figure and only as such does he form part of culture,' wrote the authoritative journal *Tijdschrift voor Nederlandse Taal- en Letterkunde* in its commemorative issue.

We are now a quarter of a century and a new commemoration further on. Is the tide turning? In the current craze for historical rankings, which has not spared the Low Countries, Vondel has fared well. If in the list of the Greatest Dutchmen he ranks only (or, if you prefer, still) 53rd, in the Dutch literary canon, voted on in 2002 by the approximately 1,600 members (literary specialists, linguists and historians) of the venerable *Maatschappij der Nederlandse Letterkunde* (Society of Dutch Literature, 1776!), he still occupies second place (after Multatuli). At the same time he is top of the list of unjustly forgotten writers. Productions of his plays remain rare, but when they are performed they still provoke comment. From the 1980s on they were virtually the exclusive province of Vondel's passionate advocate Hans Croiset, often with splendid results. This director was one of the co-founders of the Amsterdam company *Het toneel speelt* (Stage Play, 1996), which specialises in literary theatre and in the past few years has revived the tradition, begun in 1641 but discontinued in 1968, of performing Vondel's *Gysbreght van Aemstel* (1637) every New Year's Day. This tragedy, which dramatises the siege and fall of Amsterdam in 1304 in



Vondel aged 70 (1657), engraving by Cornelis de Visscher from his own drawing. The translation of the Latin inscription is: What Virgil's trumpet, Horace's lyre, Seneca's high buskin and Juvenal's salt wit was to the Romans, Vondel is to the Dutch, when he, vying with all in talent, opens his gifted mouth as the pinnacle of art.

'Trojan style', had, like Rembrandt's *Nightwatch*, almost become a national icon. It had all the ingredients: shocking changes of fortune for brave forefathers, emotional dialogues and blood-curdling narratives, supremely lyrical choruses and the sense of Amsterdam patriotism that was particularly intense in the Golden Age. Cultured Dutch people can still quote the Christmas and marriage choruses without stumbling. A film version announced a few years ago has still to materialise. There has also been an increase in the number of - sometimes very radical - adaptations of Vondel plays or cases of creative rewriting. On the other hand stage critics - often through laziness - continue to express their dislike of their obsolete language and themes.



The actor Willem Ruyter dressed as Bishop Gozewijn for a performance of *Gysbreght van Aemstel*. Drawing by Rembrandt in the wings of the Amsterdam Theatre (Dresden, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen).

If older literature has been forced onto the defensive in secondary education, contemporary academic Vondel studies present a more hopeful picture. Slowly and accompanied by sometimes heated debates, interpretations are gaining ground that offer a reading of Vondel (mainly his plays) based on new approaches employed by contemporary literary studies which had rarely if ever been applied to canonical authors in Dutch literary history – such as deconstruction, discourse theory and new historicism. Vondel's work, we are now told, is not buried in his own age, but exists in the present and should be the subject of a wide variety of reading strategies. The standard-bearer of this approach is the Leiden professor Frans-Willem Korsten, who uses contemporary perspectives to demonstrate how Vondel's 'polyphonic' plays deal with 'sovereignty' and violence. He reads them as intellectual expressions of political theory that weigh the sovereignty of a natural order positively against the power-based order imposed by God. The fact that in this Korsten virtually always goes beyond the framework of interpretations based on the 'historical' Vondel and the explicit discourse with which the writer positioned his dramas in the so-called 'Berechten' (introductions) to his work, provoked much criticism. On the other hand, these extremely provocative analyses, which are now also available in English (see reading list), have reawakened interest and made the academic world at large aware that Vondel is a great and interesting poet who is still worth studying today. Korsten sees the dramas as 'politically charged, aes-

Title page print of Vondel's *Lucifer* (1654), probably engraved by S. Savry. Michael strikes down Lucifer with a lightning bolt. The rebel army fights in a Turkish crescent formation.



thetically multi-faceted works of art, with their own special linguistic sparkle'. At the same time he has proved a passionate advocate of their consistent translation into contemporary and lively Dutch *and* English.

Meanwhile, more traditional Vondel studies have not fallen silent. Recent years have seen, for example, an edition of six plays in modern spelling and with ample notes in a classic series that has since folded (*Delta*) and a new not particularly searching biography by Piet Calis. In the as yet incomplete large-scale eight-volume *Geschiedenis van de Nederlandse literatuur* the volume on the 17th century places great emphasis on the way in which Vondel's work functioned in the literary life and society of his time, and the focus extends to other countries also.

Evaluating Vondel in a European context for a foreign audience, is in any case no easy task. Vondel is in an unfavourable situation. His work originates from a relatively small language area. Even in his own day, with the exception of Germany his work had a low international profile. Only later did it reach other language areas (French, English, Russian), in fragmentary form and not always in particularly impressive versions. Other frequently heard explanations for the scant international interest in Vondel maintain that major sections of his work present worlds that no longer strike a chord with most people, such as that of the opulent, self-assured Catholic baroque. Another argument is that the (mainly Biblical) tragedies, written in a brilliant classicist

style, when compared with those of Shakespeare or Racine in which compelling passion and its effects are central, often give the impression of being laborious intellectual constructs. While they treat problems of conscience with great moral and religious intensity, it is felt that they lack theatricality. Their enduring appeal, so their critics maintain, resides mainly in their lyrical content. For this monologues, descriptions of catastrophes and especially the choruses do deserve a place in the European canon. It looks as if a revival in Vondel studies will give further depth and substance to this vision. At any rate, the publishers Brill of Leiden brought out a new English-language volume of studies on Vondel's drama in 2011 (see reading list).

## Living for 'Poesy'

Joost van den Vondel was born in Cologne on 17 November 1587 into an Anabaptist family that had fled from Antwerp and in 1595 was also forced to leave its new home on the Rhine. In 1597, after moving from place to place in Germany, the family settled in Amsterdam, where they ran a silk and stocking business, which from 1613 on was managed independently by the poet. His first poems date from 1605. As a devout Anabaptist Vondel is a member of the Chamber of Rhetoric for immigrants from Brabant, his own countrymen. Biblical piety and moral concern for the fatherland are the great themes of his didactic and erudite poetry.

In around the 1620s Vondel, an autodidact busily studying Latin and antiquity, fully embraces the humanist culture of the Amsterdam literary elite. Initially this volte-face is accompanied by a serious depression. As a moral guide for society he begins to speak out in passionate, mostly anonymous satires and invectives on the corrupt greed of church and state and the dangers of theocratic Calvinism. Central among these are works in which he takes the side of Johan van Oldenbarnevelt, the elderly chief government adviser, who in 1619 following a power-struggle with the stadholder Maurits van Nassau was sent to the scaffold by the latter under pressure from Calvinist fundamentalists. For Vondel this statesman symbolised peace and resistance to religious meddling in politics. Immediately after Maurits' death the key Senecan drama *Palamedes* (1625), which was interpreted as a political pamphlet, appeared, in which the 'martyred hero' Oldenbarneveltdt appeared as a Greek commander falsely accused of treachery. Vondel avoided a potential death sentence from the Court of Holland when well-disposed Amsterdam patricians fined him and banned the play. Naturally the drama went through many editions in a very short time, and Vondel was to be eagerly read in this way on many occasions. Those combative years also see the appearance of the first great hymns, which in exalted or epic style accompany various brilliant facets of the Dutch Golden Age. One true heritage text is *In Praise of Navigation* (Het lof der zee-vaert, 1623): trade and shipping are the route to progress, provided they are employed in the service of peace in a society based on reason and mutual respect. Here Vondel is taking a stand against the violent monopolistic policies being pursued in Asia at that time by the Dutch East India Company and following the line set out by the lawyer Grotius in his treatise on the freedom of the seas.

In the 1630s Grotius, himself forced into exile as a victim of the hard-line Calvinists, becomes a literary and ideological beacon for Vondel: peace among

Vondel died on 5 February 1679 at the age of ninety-one. The drawing by Philips de Koninck dates from shortly before his death (Amsterdam, Rijksprentenkabinet). The poet wrote his own epitaph: Here lies Vondel, his story's told, He has perished from the cold.



nations and restoration of the ancient universal and unified Christianity. Like a man possessed, the ambitious poet labours for a long time on a classical epic on Constantine, the first Christian emperor. The project ends in failure and the destruction of the copy. The loss of two children – one of them a son named Constantine after his hero – and his wife was commemorated in funerary poems that have become iconic in Dutch literature. He now turns his full attention on the theatre: in 1638 the Amsterdam Theatre opened with a production of *Gysbreght*, which provoked controversy because of its Roman Catholic setting.

In about 1640 the poet converts to Catholicism, which he makes no secret of. Witness the Roman Catholic martyrdom plays, including *Maria Stuart* – which again earned him a fine – and a didactic poem defending the Catholic eucharist (*Altaergeheimenissen/ Secrets of the Altar*, 1645); Grotius is annexed as a crypto-Catholic. However, Vondel's devotion to city and fatherland remains unshakable, with as its guiding light peace and freedom, including freedom of conscience. In 1653 the Dutch painters acclaim him as their Apollo. These are years of great creativity and high points in his dramatic production and philosophical reflection. Two years after his son, who had taken over the poet's none-too-flourishing business, went bankrupt in 1656, the city regents secured for the destitute Vondel a sinecure post with the official pawnbroker's office. The poet remained extremely active well into old age, and in the 1660s produced a further eight plays (including some of his best-known works), plus a translation of four Greek tragedies and two great didactic poems – averaging



over 5,000 lines of verse per year. The high-quality poem *Reflections on God and Religion* (Bespiegelingen van Godt en Godsdienst, 1662), an inspired and well-thought-out synthesis of his theological thinking in no less than 7,352 lines, represents a high point here. In the first book the poet is unmistakably taking issue with the core views of Spinoza: the unity of God and nature and its necessary mathematical basis. Thanks to his private contacts Vondel was able to do this before the philosopher, whose views had become known to an intimate circle, had published a single word. The third book has often been called a masterly interpretation of the Christian view of creation.

### Master of modern Biblical tragedy

Vondel's twenty-four original tragedies form a unique contribution to European drama in the seventeenth century, the age of drama par excellence. He is one of the great creators of modern Biblical tragedy – his life's ambition. Moreover, after translating Sophocles' *Electra*, from *Brothers* (Gebroeders, 1640) onwards his aim was to construct them in the Greek style. *Brothers* is a richly textured and emotional play based on the revenge of the Gibeonites (2 Sam 21), in which David is obliged, because of a previous crime of their father Saul, to order the execution of seven young men. Vondel concentrates mainly on the Sophoclean motif of postponed punishment, David's inner conflict about exacting the unnatural penalty and the pathetic complexity of conflicts within a family. The play made a great impression on audiences and remained in the repertoire of the Amsterdam Theatre for a considerable time. The tormented house of David was to function in a number of plays as *the* counterpart to the Greek Atrides. As regards the application of Greek-Aristotelian dramatic theory, with the preface to his *Jeptha* (1659) the Amsterdam playwright was ahead of the French Classicists. This drive to create a 'modern' tragedy based on a contemporary cultural and philosophical dramatic grammar produced Vondel's masterpieces, which have become classics of the genre.

He begins with a number of pious plays, constructed according to the principles of multiple Biblical interpretations, in which the poet shows himself mainly as a talented innovator in the indigenous rhetorical tradition. His vocation as a 'modern' tragedian really takes off after 1620 via a number of translations of Seneca. From 1640 on this vocation becomes an obsession, certainly after he has abandoned his ambition as a writer of epics. The result is a series of well-crafted plays that are never banal and which pay less attention to the prevailing fashion for spectacle, which gradually distances him from the Amsterdam stage. The stepping stones are easy to trace. Intensely Catholic martyrdom plays which are mainly the expression of a universal idea and in which the influence of Greek concepts is increasingly clearly felt are succeeded by dualistic dramas about savage confrontations between good and evil and end with plays in which the depiction of the *peripeteia* (the sudden reversal in fortune or circumstance) forms the basic principle. The final play in the series is *Noah* (Noach, 1667), an original synthesis of the ancient Christian drama of redemption and Greek tragedy. A further point: few European tragedians have commented on and justified their evolution as explicitly in extensive introductions. These 'prose poetics' – Vondel's preferred form of self-presentation – are among the most interesting meta-texts in seventeenth-century European

dramatic literature, all the more so since they relate to plays that are very much part of the collective imagination of Western baroque: rebellious sons, humiliated and triumphant fathers, the self-affirmation of the individual, the fascination of pride and violence, conflicts between reason, passion, faith, authority and justice.

First and foremost comes *Lucifer* (1654), which depicts the fall of the rebel angels. Combined with the hierarchical splendour of the verse, the daring location – ‘The play is set in the heavens’ – gives this typical courtly and political drama extraordinary depth. The great conflicts of seventeenth-century government are given a truly cosmic resonance: the revolt against the notion of order, the clash between absolutism and feudal allegiance, humility and self-exaltation, the dangers of the destructive power of rhetoric. When after two performances Calvinist ministers had this heavenly decor removed from the theatre as a sacrilegious provocation, the play went into seven editions within the year. *Adam in Exile* (Adam in ballingschap, 1664), forms part of this same heavenly cycle that Vondel calls ‘the tragedy of tragedies’, not only because it deals with the fall of the first human couple, but also because peripeteia occurs in it in prototypical form. Absolute happiness is juxtaposed with utter abasement. It is Vondel’s most lyrical tragedy, full of lines on marital happiness that are both ecstatic and sensual. Not until the nineteenth century did it have its first performance.

## Poet of the community

A fascinating section of Vondel’s poetry comprises the hundreds of poems in every conceivable genre in which, as a city laureate *avant la lettre* he loyally celebrated or mercilessly lampooned the life of his home town of Amsterdam and the Republic. And few poets of the time followed European history so closely and so critically: the horrors of the Thirty Years’ War, the Turkish threat, the British troubles. England plays a major role in Vondel’s European poetry, and a translation of these ‘British’ poems would make a remarkable volume. They focus mainly on England’s participation in the Dutch struggle for liberation, the arguments concerning Charles I and what Vondel considered his outrageous execution – contemporaries saw the protagonist of *Lucifer* as a portrait of Cromwell – the family ties between the Stuarts and the House of Orange, the restoration of the monarchy and of course the three wars fought by the Dutch against ‘seasick Albion’ with the Fire of London as a well-deserved punishment. And to think Vondel once promised Charles II an epic if he would take on the Turks....

Vondel’s many poems on works of art and paintings are also increasingly appreciated. He had close friendships with many artists, and apart from that his whole oeuvre is thoroughly pictorial from the outset. Religious fantasies and descriptions of nature and the human face are often consciously couched in the jargon of the artist’s studio. He presents a ground-breaking play like *Brothers* at length as a fictionalised painting by Rubens, undoubtedly his favourite artist, with whose work his verse is often compared. That too makes Vondel an eminent representative of the European baroque. ■



## WORKS IN ENGLISH BY AND ABOUT VONDEL

### PLAYS:

*Gysbreght van Aemstel*. Trans. Kristiaan Aерcke. Toronto: Dovehouse, 1991.

*Lucifer*. Trans. L.C. van Noppen. New York: Continental Publishing, 1898.

*Lucifer*. Trans. W. Kirkconnell. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1952.

*Lucifer*. Trans. Noel Clark. Bath: Absolute Press, 1990.

*Mary Stuart*. Trans. Kristiaan Aерcke. Ottawa: Dovehouse, 1996.

*Samson*. Trans. W. Kirkconnell. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1964.

### OTHER WORK:

*Lof der Zeevaart*. In *Praise of Navigation*. Trans. Peter Skrine, *Dutch Crossing* 8, 1979, 4-33.

*Roskam*. *Curry-Comb*. Trans. Paul Vincent and Noel Clark, *Dutch Crossing* 32, 1987, 107-15.

Survey of Vondel's work in English :

P. Vincent, 'Vondel in English. A Bibliography', *Dutch Crossing* 8, (July 1979), 87-88 and 32 (August 1987), 102-105.

### FURTHER READING

Theo Hermans (Ed.), *A Literary History of The Low Countries*. Rochester, New York, 2009.

Frans-Willem Korsten, *Sovereignty as Inviolability*.

*Vondel's Theatrical Explorations in the Dutch Republic*. Hilversum: Verloren, 2009.

J. Bloemendaal and W-F. Korsten (Eds.), *Joost van den Vondel*,

*Dutch Playwright in the Golden Age*. Leiden: Brill, 2011.

## Five Poems

By Joost van den Vondel

### Beggars' Evening Prayer

Complaint against the 'money-hungry' calvinist judges of Oldenbarnevelt. Ca. 1630, stanzas 1-4.

Did he bear the fate of Holland  
On his heart,  
To the latest breath he drew  
With bitter smart,  
Thus to lave a perjured sword  
With stainless blood,  
And to batten crow and raven  
On his good?

Was it well to carve that neck  
Within whose veins  
Age the loyal blood had withered?  
'Mong his gains  
Were not found the Spanish pistoles  
Foul with treason,  
Strewn to whet the mob's wild hate,  
That knows no reason.

But the Cruelty and Greed  
Which plucked the sword  
Ruthless from the sheath, now mourns  
With bitter word;  
What avails for us, alas! that  
Blood and gain  
Now to dull Remorse's cruel  
Gnawing pain?

Ay! content you now all preachers  
East and West,  
Pray the saints of Dort to find your  
Conscience rest!  
'Tis in vain! The Lord stands knocking  
At the door  
And that blood will plead for vengeance  
Evermore!

*Translated by H.J.C. Grierson*



### Geuse Vesper

Hadt hy Hollandt dan ghedragen  
Onder 't hart,  
Tot sijn afgeleefde dagen,  
Met veel smart,  
Om 't meyneedigh swaert te laven,  
Met sijn bloet,  
En te mesten kray en raven,  
Op sijn goet?

Maer waerom den hals gekorven?  
Want sijn bloet  
Was in d'aders schier verstorven.  
In sijn goet  
Vont men noyt de Pistoletten  
Van 't verraet,  
Wtghestroyt, om scharp te wetten  
's Vollecks haet.

Gierigheyt en wreetheyt beyde,  
Die het swaert  
Grimmigh ruckten uyt der scheyde,  
Nu bedaert,  
Suchten: Wat kan ons vernoeogen  
Goet en bloet?  
Och, hoe knaecht een eeuwich wroegen  
Ons ghemoedt!

Weest te vreen, haelt Predikanten,  
West en Oost:  
Gaet en soeckt by Dortsche santen  
Heyl en troost.  
'Tis vergeefs, de Heer kooft kloppen  
Met sijn Woort.  
Niemand kan de wellen stoppen  
Van die Moort.

## Dirge for a Child (1632)

Constantine, blessed child benign  
Cherub mine, sees from on high  
Pomp and show in man below,  
Therefore laughs with twinkling eye.  
'Mother', said. 'Lo, wherefore fret so  
Why regret so by my corpse?  
I'm alive here, I survive here  
Angel-child in heav'nly courts:  
Brightly gleaming, sprightly gleaming  
All the bounteous Giver showers  
And unfolds on myriad souls,  
Wanton with such lavish dowers.  
Turn your face then and so hasten  
To this place thence from the mess  
Made on earth, of little worth.  
Moments yield to endlessness.

## Kinder-Lyck

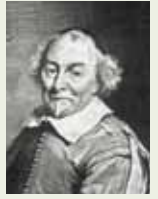
Constantijntje, 't zaligh kijntje,  
Cherubijntje, van om hoogh  
D' ydelheden hier beneden,  
Uitlacht met een lodderoogh.  
Moeder, zeit hy, waerom schreit ghy?,  
Waerom greit ghy op mijn lijck?  
Boven leef ick, boven zweef ick,  
Engeltje van t' hemelrijck:  
En ick blinck'er, en ick drinck'er,  
't Geen de schincker alles goets  
Schenckt de zielen, die daer krielen,  
Dertel van veel overvloets.  
Leer dan reizen met gepeizen  
Naer pallaizen, uit het slick  
Dezer werrelt, die zoo dwerrelt,  
Eeuwigh gaet voor oogenblick.

*Translated by Peter King*

## Blessed Albion

Chorus following Act III of *Mary Stuart*, 1646.

The antiphon that follows speaks of 'wretched Albion'.



Blessed Albion,  
Concede how blessed you are  
By heaven's will and grace:  
You proudly rule the seas,  
And from your snow white neck  
Have thrown the oppressing yoke  
Of foreign slavery;  
The Romans nor the Danes  
Exact your cows or grains;  
Your sheep roam unenclosed,  
Of wolves there is no trace,  
And snakes you needn't fear.  
Fragrant are your hedges  
With rosemary fine; no reefs  
Impede access to your shores;  
No shallows your ports  
Endanger, and ships can sail  
Swiftly, undisturbed.  
Oh Isle, so many envy you  
And you have no idea!

Geluckigh Engelant,  
Bekende ghy 't gheluck  
U toegeleit van boven,  
Die trots de zeekroon spant,  
En hebt het uitheemsch juck  
Der slaverny geschoven  
Van uwen blancken neck;  
't Zy Cesar, 't zy de Noor  
U eischte vee en vruchten;  
Ghy sluit noch koy, noch heck,  
Uit angst voor wolvespoor,  
Noch hoeft geen slang te duchten;  
Uw heiningh geeft een geur  
Van roosmarijn; geen klip  
Verbiet uw strant te naecken;  
Geen bancken schieten veur  
Uw havens; dies geen schip  
Zijn vaert behoeft te staecken.  
O Eilant, waert benijt,  
Ghy weet niet wat ghy zijt.

*Translated by Kristiaan Aercke*

## Rebellion threatens, the light's brilliance pales

Chorus of worried angels following Act II  
of *Lucifer* (1654).

Why are the starry outposts glowing  
Red? Why shines the Holy Light  
So crimson in our sight,  
Through clouds of murky vapour flowing?  
What fog and mist obscure  
The silver once so pure –  
Incomparable sapphire –  
The flame, the gleam, the fire  
Of God's serenity?  
Why does the Godhead's light instead  
Now stream towards us here blood-red,  
Which, until recently,  
All eyes rejoiced? Who can explain  
This mystery to Angeldom,  
Which, far removed from Man's domain,  
In songs and chants of praise has swum,  
In fragrant air and radiance, gilding  
Pinnacle, battlement and building,  
Vaulted choirs and garden fair –  
Joy inspiring everywhere  
To all that here above belong!  
Pray, who can tell us what is wrong?

Hoe zien de hoffelycke gevels  
Zoo root? hoe straelt het heiligh licht  
Zoo root op ons gezicht,  
Door wolcken en bedroefde nevels?  
Wat damp, wat mist betreft  
Dat zuiver, noit bevelekt,  
Die vlam, dien glans, dat vier  
Van 't heldere Alvermogen?  
Hoe schynt ons nu de diepe gloet  
Der Godtheit toe, zoo zwart als bloet,  
Die flus zoo klaer alle oogen  
Verheughde? wie begrypt, wie kent  
Deze oirzaeck, onder d'Engelsdommen,  
Die, boven Adams element,  
Noch flus op galm van keelen zwommen;  
Op lucht van Geesten, in den glans,  
Die galery, en tin, en trans,  
Gewelf van koor en hof vergulde,  
En met een ziel van vreucht vervulde  
Al wat hier boven leeft, en zweeft?  
Wie is'er, die ons reden geeft?

*Translated by Noel Clark*

## Living is loving and it's unsinkable

Hedonistic chorus of court ladies from Noah (Noah),  
Act III (1667).



Should it all perish and sink down,  
Where would the swan,  
Where would the swan,  
The swan, that merry water-bird go,  
Never weary of kisses?  
No waters extinguish  
Her amorous glow

She blithely nests on the flowing stream.  
She feeds her flame,  
She feeds her flame  
In the company of her merry mate,  
As her eggs she warmes  
And heeds no alarms,  
And knows no fright.

Fluttering youngsters with her swim  
O'er sea and stream  
O'er sea and stream.  
She loves the fickle element,  
And trims her feather;  
They swim together  
Till life doth end.

Dying she sings a merry song  
Mid the rushes' throng,  
Mid the rushes' throng.  
And, taunting envious Death with glees  
Of mirthful singing  
With triumph ringing,  
She dies in peace.

Zou het al zinken en vergaen,  
Waer bleef de zwaen,  
Waer bleef de zwaen,  
De zwaen, dat vrolijke waterdier,  
Noit zat van kussen?  
Geen wat'ren blussen  
Haer minnevier.

't Lust haer te nestlen op den vloet.  
Zy queekt den gloet,  
Zy queekt den gloet  
Met hare vrolijke wederga,  
En kipt haere eiers,  
En acht geen schreiers,  
Noch vreest geen scha.

Vliegende jongen zwemmen mee,  
Door stroom en zee,  
Door stroom en zee.  
Zy groeit in 't levendigh element,  
En wast de veëren  
En vaert spansseeren  
Tot 's levens endt.

Stervende zingtze een vrolijk liet  
In 't suikerriet,  
In 't suikerriet.  
Zy tart de nijdige doot uit lust  
Met quinkeleeren  
En triomfeeren,  
En sterft gerust.

*Translated by Theodoor Weevers*