BODIES IN PAIN AND THE TRANSCENDENTAL ORGANIZATION OF HISTORY IN JOOST VAN DEN VONDEL

Frans Willem Korsten

For we are in need of pleasure only when we are in pain because of the absence of pleasure, and when we are no in pain, then we no longer need pleasure.
And this is why we say that pleasure is the starting point and goal of living blessedly.

– Epicurus, Letter to Pythocles

Introduction

I want to start by proposing that we take seriously the fact that pain is related etymologically to Latin poena (punishment, fine, indemnification, or sorrow) and that the Latin poena in turn goes back to Greek poinè, which could also mean retaliation or compensation. If we do so, pain becomes, firstly, not something you have, but something you get in return for, or as a consequence of something. It is, therefore, always related to a history. Secondly, you suffer pain for a reason. In this respect, and by implication, the notion of pain may be related to notions of justice. Consequently, in the light of poena and poinè, pain can be defined within the frames of history and justice as either something that is inflicted on you for a justified reason, because of things that happened in the past, or as form of payment, as a matter of justice, in relation to the future. With regard to these two possibilities, so I will argue in what follows, the Christian conceptualization of pain acquires new meanings in relation to the physical body of subjects and in relation to a more elusive politico-cultural body that not only transcends history, but also directs its course (it should be noted that I am not referring to divine transcendence here, but to that what transcends the particularity of a historical situation). In Christianity the infliction of bodily pain is considered to be necessary for the just organization of history, or the
production of just history. That is to say: bodily pain is used to fuel the propelling force of society’s politico-theological organization through time. It is this dimension of pain that is investigated in several plays by Joost van den Vondel, Holland’s most famous seventeenth-century playwright, who lived from 1587 to 1679.

What may have caused Vondel’s concern with the relation between bodily inflicted pain and the realization of a somehow ‘just’ history? First of all, he lived in a country that had seen many bodies in pain in its recent history. Seemingly endless atrocities had taken place in the context of an uprising against the king and a violent suppression of that revolt. Additionally, the Low Countries experienced several forms of civil strife or violent social tensions. Ultimately the Northern Low Countries waged a full-scale war against the mighty empire of Spain. What was at stake has often been described as a particular social, political, cultural, or, indeed, religious conflict in which the States of the Low Countries fought for their freedom. As such, the entire conflict can be located in a specific historical moment, and the pain it embodied can remain restricted to its own era. My hunch, however, is that Vondel, who was enormously troubled by the incessant violence and its historical recurrence, traced a more fundamental problem in the construction of Europe’s politico-cultural ‘house’. It was a problem that transcended the historicity of particular circumstances and that concerned the necessity of a historically particular pain for the realization of the one righteous history. Such a history could acquire its transcendental quality only when the particularity of bodily pain could be transposed to a general politico-cultural body, as if the politico-cultural body of a society was in pain through time, in order to preserve its shape and direction. In addition to addressing the pains of his time, then, Vondel was very much concerned with this latter form of pain as well.

In what follows I will take a closer look at three plays in which Vondel explores the question of whether, in order to realize a ‘right’ kind of history, bodily pain is necessary for the transposition of pain to a politico-cultural body.1 The first play, Gysbrecht van Aemstel, was written by a middle-aged Vondel at the peak of his career in 1637. It was

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1 The texts can be found in Vondel’s Collected Works, edited by J.F.M. Sterck et al., but also online at www.dbnl.org/letterkunde/goudeneeuw. For my readings of the plays I made use of my previous work in Vondel belicht: voorstellingen van soevereiniteit (Hilversum: 2006), which will be published in English in the course of 2009.