

Ziende verbeelding : over zien en (on)zichtbaarheid in poezie en poetica van P. C. Boutens

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SUMMARY

Imaginary sight. On vision and (in)visibility in poetry and poetics of P.C. Boutens

The object of this study is the work of the Dutch poet P.C. Boutens (1870-1943). In the first half of the twentieth century, Boutens was one of the most important Dutch poets. He published many volumes of verse, such as *Verzen* (*Poems*, 1898), *Praeludiën* (*Preludes*, 1902), *Stemmen* (*Voices*, 1907), *Vergeten Liedjes* (*Forgotten Songs*, 1909), *Carmina* (*Songs*, 1912), *Zomerwolven* (*Summerclouds*, 1922), *Bezonnen Verzen* (*Reflective Poems*, 1931) and *Tusschenspelen* (*Interludes*, 1942). As a classicist he translated work of Homer, Plato, Aeschylus, Sophocles and Sappho. He also translated work of Omar Khayyam, Shakespeare, Louise Labé, Goethe, Novalis, Oscar Wilde, Alfred Douglas, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Charles Baudelaire, Paul Verlaine and Leopold Andrian. Moreover he played an important role in the Dutch literary world before World War II as president of the 'Vereeniging van Letterkundigen' (Society of Literary Men), the Dutch P.E.N. Club and the 'Willem Kloos-fonds' (Willem Kloos Fund).

Boutens' life and works have already been researched (the most important publications are written by De Clerck, Irons, Blok, Sötemann and Van Halsema). But until now, little attention has been paid to the themes of vision and (in)visibility in Boutens' poetry. Only Sötemann has written a clarifying article about Boutens' well known poem 'Domburgsch uitzicht' (View from Domburg), one of the best examples of a poem in which vision is a very important theme. Besides this famous poem, a great many of Boutens' poems refer to

a visual or visionary theme, like: 'Oog in oog' (Eye to eye), 'Oogenblik' (Twinkling of an eye), 'Spiegelbeeld' (Reflection), 'Oogen' (Eyes), 'De ziener' (The seer) and 'Vizioen' (Vision). In his poetry there also are numerous words referring to vision and (in)visibility, like: 'oog' (eye), 'zien' (to see) 'staren' (to stare), 'blik' (gaze), 'oogenblik' (twinkling of an eye), 'schouwen' (to behold) and 'vizioen' (vision).

The 'gaze' in Boutens' poetry is mostly a *visionary* one. On rare occasions it is possible for the lyrical subject to perceive a higher, invisible reality *through* the common world. The 'I' tries to see what is invisible. Words like 'onzienlijk' (unseeable), 'onzichtbaar' (invisible) and 'blind' (blind) can frequently be found in Boutens' poetry. My hypothesis is that there is a certain connection between the semantic field around 'vision' in Boutens' poetry and his symbolist poetics, in which words like 'onzegbaar' (unsayable), 'woorde-loos' (wordless), 'zwijgen' (to be silent) and 'geheim' (secret) are predominant.

The central question in this dissertation is: which role play vision and (in)visibility in Boutens' poetry? Two complementary questions are: what are the relations between Boutens' poetics and his conception of vision and (in)visibility; and how do the themes of vision and (in)visibility fit into the literary and cultural context?

Six texts (five poems and one lecture) have been selected in which the above-mentioned themes are present. These texts have been analyzed and interpreted in detail in separate chapters. In addition, attention has been paid to the relation between the texts and their literary and cultural-historical contexts. In every chapter a different object – as seen by the lyrical subject – is highlighted: the inner world (chapter 3), a work of art (chapter 4), the other (chapter 5), the cosmos (chapters 6 and 7) and something mysterious like a sudden flash of lightning (chapter 8).

Chapter 2 deals with eye-imagery in Boutens' poetry. The following topics are discussed: the relation between the eyes and the soul, the image of rays being emitted and received by the eyes, the metaphors of eyes as mirrors and as abysses, and the image of the veiled eye. The eye-imagery in Boutens' poetry is very complex, because of the fact that different images play a role at the same time.

Chapter 3 offers a detailed analysis and interpretation of the poem 'Ik sloot de blinkevenstren van mijn Ziel' ('I closed the shining windows of my Soul'). Boutens published this poem in the *Utrechtsche studenten-almanak* in 1892. It is one of his first poems. It is about closing the eyes. But before closing his eyes, the lyrical subject observed certain aspects of the outside world, which he subsequently transplanted into his inner world, his soul. In this poem Boutens uses explicit terms like 'verbeelding' (imagination) and 'herinnering' (memory). The things seen in his inner world are products of imagination, based on observations of the outside world. In this chapter I also focus on the relation between the poem and the context of literary mysticism, especially the work of Maurice Maeterlinck.

In chapter 4 I focus on the poem "Regenboog": 'Aan J.Th. Toorop / na het zien van zijn krijttekening van dien naam' ("Rainbow". To J.Th. Toorop / after seeing his crayon drawing with that name'). Boutens wrote this poem in 1907 after seeing the drawing *De Regenboog* (*The Rainbow*), made by the Dutch symbolist artist Jan Toorop (1858-1928). Boutens and Toorop were close friends. Toorop portrayed Boutens three times and illustrated his volume of verse *Naenia* (1903). Boutens wrote six poems dedicated to Toorop. The poem "Rainbow" has an exceptional status in this study, because of the concreteness of the object seen by Boutens. In this chapter an interpretation of the drawing and the poem is given, but mainly of the complicated relation between

word and image, with the help of Heffernan's concept of *ekphrasis* ('the verbal representation of visual representation'). Attention is also paid to the relation between Toorop's conception of art and Boutens' poetics.

Chapter 5 deals with the theme of seeing the 'other' in Boutens' poem 'Oog in oog' (Eye to eye), written in 1910. It is not clear what exactly is seen in this poem. The 'I' wants to see 'het geluk' (happiness) and 'God' with open eyes, but he realizes that is impossible during his earthly life. It is only possible to see the 'other' (God or the beloved one?) in one's dreams. In this chapter I also pay attention to the relation between Boutens' poem and some passages in Cusa's *De visione Dei*.

In chapter 6 the central object is the poem 'Sterren' ('Stars'), written in 1917. It is also dedicated to Jan Toorop. In this poem a group called 'wij' ('we') gazes at the stars, after a walk in darkness under trees. But they wish to look beyond the stars, 'aan de overzij van ongemeten aetherstroom' ('On the other side of the inmensurable flood of ether'). They suffer from 'zienden nood' ('the need to see') and are compared to pale children behind closed windows. Beyond the stars there is an invisible world which cannot be seen. Seeing it is only possible in a visionary moment. The poem is also related to Plato's dialogue *Timaeus* and J.H. Leopold's poem *Cheops* (1915).

Chapter 7 corresponds with the theme of the previous chapter. This chapter does not deal with a poem, but with Boutens' lecture 'Vorm en vormeloosheid in de dichtkunst' ('Form and formlessness in poetry'), held in 1933. This lecture was one of the very rare occasions when Boutens explicitly spoke about poetry. Remarkable is that the lecture contains a long passage about looking at the cosmos. In this chapter a detailed interpretation of this passage will be given. Boutens opposes the endless imagination of the poet and the possibly limited universe, a subject very much discussed at

the time. Boutens uses this passage about the cosmos to enable him to speak about 'rhythm' in poetry and about the exceptional position of the poet in society. It is demonstrated that Boutens' lecture is imbedded in scientific (cosmological), literary and social contexts.

Chapter 8 deals with the poem 'Vizioen' ('Vision'), published in Boutens' final volume of verse *Tusschenspelen* (*Interludes*, 1942). This poem is the most abstract of the poems that are interpreted in this study. There is no explicit lyrical 'I' and no addressed 'you'. There are many paradoxes and oxymorons. It is not clear what is viewed: 'wit dat even opschiijnt' (a suddenly glimmering white). In this poem can be found some features of traditional mystical and visionary literature (like suddenness, a flash of lightning, paradoxes, oxymorons), but an important difference is that it is not clear what is exactly the object of the vision in Boutens' poem.

Finally, in chapter 9 the conclusions of this study are given. The differences and similarities in the analyzed poems are discussed. Similar themes are: (1) the contrast between the inner world (the soul) and the external world, (2) the important role of light and (3) the search by the lyrical subject for something or someone unreachable. The lyrical subject wants to see something or someone that or who is by definition unseeable. It is only possible to see this with his 'inner eye' in imagination, dreams or visions. However, some of the analyzed poems also contain situations where the lyrical subject observes things with his sensorial eye, like Toorop's drawing (chapter 4) or the stars (chapters 6 and 7). These real objects form *intermediate* worlds between the lyrical subject and a metaphysical, unattainable world.

It is demonstrated in the chapters 3 to 8 that the analyzed poems can be related to Boutens' symbolist poetics. The unseeable or invisible is at the same time unspeakable or

unsayable. It is principally impossible to speak of the higher reality (cf. 'Het schoonst dat bleef onuitgezegd', translation: 'The most beautiful remained unsaid'). The poet is only able to *suggest* it. Boutens' ideal poem is therefore a poem without words ('zonder smet van taal of teeken', translation: 'without the blemish of language or sign'). Nevertheless, Boutens tries to approach the unseeable and unsayable world in his poetry, but he realizes that in this he will not succeed. For this reason, Boutens' language is very complex. Not only is the eye frequently veiled in his poems, but also is his difficult language concealing, by the use of complex metaphors, complicated syntax, ambiguities, paradoxes and oxymorons. These aspects can be connected with the poetics of literary symbolism and mysticism. It can also be related to Paul Rodenko's concept of 'het vlies' (membrane, or *hymen*, to speak with the French symbolist poet Stéphane Mallarmé). The poem is a concealing 'membrane' between the reader and the (suggested) higher reality. At the same time this 'membrane' of language is unveiling something of this reality.

It was Boutens' opinion – as he said in his lecture in 1933 (see chapter 7) – that no one but a poet could guess at 'Gods geheim' (God's secret). For that reason he highlighted the aspects rhythm and sound in poetry. By means of these wordless and invisible aspects, the poet is able to approach (partly) the unsayable and unseeable in language. At the same time, the poet realizes that in this he would never succeed completely. At the most, the poet can make 'tangible' in his language the metaphysical secret. In Boutens' poem 'Valkenisse' (the name of a Zealand village), he wrote about 'een vertastbaard visioen' (a vision made tangible), and this is not the only place in his poetry where Boutens wrote about 'reaching' for the invisible. Perhaps Boutens' poems can best be characterized as visions that are made 'tangible' in language.