

Soul speaks to soul

One of the main points of my doctoral thesis on Boutens' poetry (1971) was that 1907 was a crucial year. This was the year when he published both *Stemmen* and, in a very limited edition, *Verzamelde Sonnetten*, republished as *Sonnetten* in 1920 and erroneously regarded as a later collection, despite the fact that the sonnets first appeared in periodicals from 1899-1907.

The most striking fact about *Verzamelde Sonnetten* is that although systematic modification on a large scale has taken place the collection consists of sonnets that, in their first printed form, lack cohesion. The individual nature of the sonnets as first published is indicated by the fact that eleven originally had a title and a further three used the opening lines of the first line as their title. That Boutens did not conceive of the poems as a collection – or even a unity – is indicated by the publication in *De Gids* of *Vergeten Verzen* containing poems destined for the two different collections. Most of the eleven titled poems are simple descriptions of nature; only in one or two of them do the pronouns *Gij* or *gij* occur. It is clear that Boutens sought to integrate suitable poems into the *Verzamelde Sonnetten* of 1907, since he removed all titles except in one instance.

In the remaining sonnets Boutens felt it necessary to introduce widespread modification of his usage of small and capital letters, especially of *Gij* and *gij*.

These modifications must not be dated later than March 1907, since all such changes are already present in the 1907 edition. It is possible, I think, to be even more precise in fixing the date of Boutens' alterations. For the poet allowed sonnet no. 27 to be published in *De Gids* in October 1906 in a form which he was to consider unsuitable for inclusion in the collection of the following spring. This places the alterations in the period autumn 1906 – spring 1907.

The collection as published has a new unifying theme, that of the transcending power of *Eros* (the *Gij* of the collection). This is clear from the outset, for there is a Greek motto preceding the sonnets, a motto that Boutens translates into Dutch for the 1920 edition:

*'Daarom is het dan dat ik beweer dat een ieder man
EROOS behoort te eeren, en ik zelf hem eer en mij bij
voorkeur in zijn onderwijs oefen en de anderen
daartoe aanspoor en zoo nu als altijd de macht en
manmoedigheid van EROOS loof voor-zoo-ver ik bij
machte ben.'*

SOKRATES in Platoons Drinkgelag

Boutens conceives Eros as being the supreme unifying force in the universe, and as in Plato the ultimate goal is the love between two souls:

*'Eros is de hereeniger der oorspronkelijke natuur en
beproeft uit twee een te maken en de menselijke
natuur te heelen.'*

Boutens was about to meet his 'soul mate' at approximately this time in his life. For, from 1908 onwards, he lives together with Cornelis van Duyvenbode, who is always referred to as his 'man-servant', the then means of avoiding scandal.

In september 1908 maakt hij kennis met Cornelis van Duyvenbode (geboren 25 november 1888), op wie hij direct verliefd wordt. Deze gevoelens blijken wederzijds: 'broer Cor', gediplomeerd timmerman, en in 1908 gedetacheerd als dienstplichtig militair, wordt kort daarna Boutens' huisknecht'.

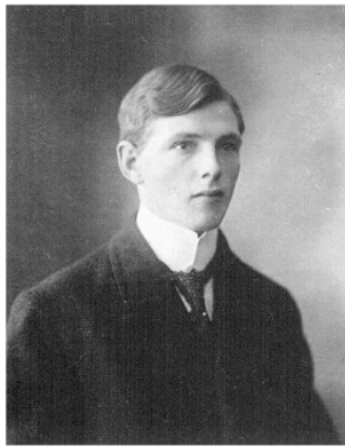
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The next collection to appear after Boutens and Van Duyvenbode moved in together is *Vergeten Liedjes*, which appeared in 1909, when Boutens was 39 years old. It is strikingly different from all other collections before or after in the frequency of the word *ziel*. The frequency is, for example, twice that of *Stemmen* and *Verzamelde Sonnetten*. The word *hemel* shows the same peak. It is clear that Boutens is stressing the Platonic progression towards the union of souls in this collection.



P.C. Boutens, ± 1910.

Tekening op karton door W.A. van Konijnenburg, 50 × 48.



Cor van Duyvenbode, ± 1910. In 1944 schrijft Van Duyvenbode, 'broer Cor' zoals Boutens hem tegenover intimi placht aan te duiden, aan baron Schimmelpenninck van der Oye: 'Vijfendertig jaren zat ik met Boutens aan een en dezelfde tafel aan. Alles wat er in zijn leven gebeurde, vertelde hij me.'

Foto C.J.L. Vermeulen, Den Haag-Utrecht-Rotterdam.

One of the most famous poems in the collection is *Nacht-stilte*. It is one of the first cluster of poems destined for the collection. They appeared in *De Gids* in December 1907. Further poems continue to appear in *De Gids* in 1908 and 1909, the remainder first being published in *Elseviers geïllustreerde maanschrift* or *XXste Eeuw*.

I met the poem for the first time in late-autumn 1962. It was included in the Ooievaar paperback anthology *Mijn hart wou nergens tieren*, published by Uitgeverij Bert Bakker. It took me ages to work out the connection between *spreekt* and *God*, since I only had a few months of Dutch under my belt. So I missed the point of the poem. But not its beauty. So beautiful was it that, when asked to recite a Dutch poem in order to become a member of the Leiden literary group *Aisopos*, I chose this one. The *zonder smet van taal of teeken* I found, and still find, exceptionally moving. You can't fault Boutens as a craftsman.

Workshop

NACHT-STILTE

Stil, wees stil: op zilvren voeten
Schrijdt de stilte door den nacht,
Stilte die der goden groeten
Overbrengt naar lage wacht...
Wat niet ziel tot ziel kon spreken
Door der dagen ijl gegons,
Spreekt uit overluchtsche streken,
Klaar als ster in licht zoû breken,
Zonder smet van taal of teeken
God in elk van ons.

FIRST DRAFT

I was asked by a friend if I had translated this poem. The answer was no, since I regarded it as untranslatable. Nevertheless, I couldn't resist having a try. The problems I ran into are evident from this first draft:

NIGHT-SILENCE

Hush now, hush: on feet of silver
Through the night see silence go,
Silence that from gods delivers
Greetings to the watch below...
What 'twixt souls remains unspoken
Through the daytime's empty buzz,
Like a star in light unbroken*
Without taint of tongue or token**
Will be spoken by the woken***
God in each of us.

The comments I got back were concise and to the point:

** dit staat er toch niet?*

*** niet zo mooi*

**** niet mooi & staat er niet (waar zijn de overluchtse streken?)*

SECOND DRAFT

As the above comments indicate, the real problem is in the second section of the poem. So it is important to try and pin down what exactly is happening in this section and why it causes such problems for anyone trying to translate the poem into English.

Boutens has written a poem that, if two lines are removed, changes in character completely. If the poem had been ...

NACHT-STILTE

Stil, wees stil : op zilvren voeten
Schrijdt de stilte door den nacht,
Stilte die der goden groeten
Overbrengt naar lage wacht...

Wat niet ziel tot ziel kon spreken
Door der dagen ijl gegons,
Spreekt uit overluchtsche streken
God in elk van ons.

... it would have been a passable poem by Boutens' standards. We would have had an ABAB CDCD poem of 8787 8785 syllables, with alternating feminine and masculine rhymes, where we set out in the first line of each couplet and return home in the second line.

But Boutens did something unexpected. The second section is complex enough in terms of grammar. We start with the OBJECT (*Wat niet ziel tot ziel kon spreken*) followed by three adverbial modifiers indicating CAUSALITY (*door der dagen ijl gegons*). Then comes the verb *spreekt* DIRECTION (*uit overluchtsche streken*) and QUALITY (*Klaar als ster in licht zoû breken; Zonder smet van taal of teeken*) + SUBJECT (*God*) + WHERE (*in elk van ons*). The rhyme scheme of this section is now CDCCCD, i.e. there is a strong build up of feminine rhymes, taking us further and further away from home, and then the great release of the return home, with the strong emphasis on *God*, the subject we have been waiting for for so long. The two basic problems when translating into English are that we have no satisfactory way of retaining this word order, since English syntax simply doesn't work like Dutch. The repetition *spreken/Spreekt...* followed by an 'eternal' wait for the word *God* will not work in English. The second problem is finding four convincing C rhymes in six lines of verse.

The first draft showed how I had to twist the poem out of all recognition to try to ignore the first problem. I did all the things I say one should not do as a translator: remove material, add material, change the sense, use odd words. A drastic decision to cut one's losses has to be made – the English sentence cannot delay the subject – it must delay the verb instead. In that way it is still possible to build up the tension and write a sentence that makes sense and keeps fairly close to the original.

NIGHT-SILENCE

Hush now, hush: on feet of silver
Through the night see silence go,
Silence that from gods delivers
Greetings to the watch below...
What 'twixt souls could not be spoken
In the daytime's empty buzz
God from realms of peace unbroken
Clear as stars that light has woken
Sullied by no word or token
Speaks in each of us.

Received comment:

The Boutens line about the star is difficult to understand, but it almost certainly does not mean 'Clear as stars that light has woken', whatever that means!

Since I could not understand 'zoû breken', I chose – in line with other images in Boutens – to take a line that for me meant 'Clear as stars (souls) that light (vision)

had woken', since Boutens sees the souls as becoming stars in the heavens after death (e.g. Kind der Aarde, Bij een Doode – both from *Vergeten Liedjes*).

The suggestion made to me was that the Dutch line meant something like:

'Zo helder als een ster in licht uiteen (open) zou breken'

THIRD DRAFT

There is a website (http://nl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Artistieke_vrijheid) that deals with precisely these lines, I discovered. It backs up such an interpretation:

Grammaticale en lexicale vrijheid

De versregel van J.H. Leopold, "Om mijn oud woonhuis peppels staan", veroorlooft zich vrijheden met de woordvolgorde. Een andere doorbreking van het grammaticaal gewone valt veelvuldig op bij [P.C. Boutens](#). Als voorbeeld kan een fragment uit zijn "Nacht-stilte" dienen:

. . . Wat niet ziel tot ziel kon spreken
Door der dagen ijl gegons,
Spreekt uit overluchtsche streken,
Klaar als ster in licht zou breken. . .

In de eerste versregel zijn diverse structurelementen weggelaten; de standaardtaal zou wellicht hebben: "Wat de ene ziel niet tot de andere (ziel) kon spreken". De tweede regels valt te duiden als: "Vanwege het ijl(e) gegons der dagen", en hier onderkennen we, behalve het opnieuw weglaten van de e (net als bij Leopold) ook een zinsbouw die sinds het Vroegmodernnederlands in onbruik is geraakt: in plaats van "der dagen gegons" zeggen wij tegenwoordig "het gegons der dagen". De derde regel komt hieronder ter sprake. In de vierde versregel zijn opnieuw structurelementen weggelaten: "Zo klaar als een ster in het licht zou uiteenbreken". Door deze weglatingen krijgt het vers een samengebalde concentratie die met de zinsbouw van alledag niet te bereiken zou zijn; en die (in dit geval) van de lezer overigens door haar ongewoonheid en beknoptheid een extra inspanning vergt.

Lexicale vrijheid valt het meest op in de derde versregel, waar het ongebruikelijke "overluchtse streken" speciale interpretatie behoeft. De uitdrukking valt te duiden als "regionen boven de lucht", "daar waar de (sterren)hemel is". Een geringer vrijheid veroorlooft de dichter zich met "Klaar" in plaats van "helder"; een ongebruikelijker, maar bestaand woord.

My problem now is that there are only four words in the English language that end in -OKEN (if we exclude *oaken*, *Hoboken* and *ryoken* [Japanese inn]), and I have used all four of them. Replacing the middle two by -AKEN in the CDCOOD sequence, so that I get CDEECD completely destroys the build-up of tension I mentioned earlier, so my only chance is yet again to shuffle the four cards in the pack.

What would a translation be of *Zo klaar als een ster in het licht zou uiteenbreken*? Not even the Van Dale Groot Woordenboek lists *uiteenbreken*. Other dictionaries say that the word means 'to break up/off, to disintegrate', as it when talking of geographical features (het *uiteenbreken* van een supercontinent). I have found one website that uses the verb in connection with heavenly bodies:

Hoe oud zijn de ringen van Saturnus? Niemand die het met zekerheid kan zeggen. Eén mogelijkheid is, dat de ringen relatief recent in de geschiedenis van ons zonnestelsel werden gevormd, wellicht slechts zo'n 100 miljoen jaar

geleden, als gevolg van *het uiteenbreken van een hemellichaam* ter grootte van De Maan dat te dicht bij Saturnus in de buurt kwam.

Maybe, however, Boutens means a sudden burst of light in a star – that it flares up suddenly? (VD: **flare** geen meervoud (astronomie) **het (helder) opvlammen/flitsen** (van ster)). That would make better sense in the poem, for this flaring up would be able to symbolise a sudden vision of the divine. And I could suggest the subjunctive *zoû* by the use of *if* in English, i.e. *were* this to happen:

NIGHT-SILENCE

Hush now, hush: on feet of silver
Through the night see silence go,
Silence that from gods delivers
Greetings to the watch below...
What 'twixt souls could not be spoken
In the daytime's empty buzz
God from realms of peace unbroken
Clear as stars that flare if woken
Sullied by no word or token
Speaks in each of us.

Comment:

Boutens zegt in feite: Zoals een ster uit elkaar breekt in (=tot) licht, dwz zoals een ster uit elkaar breekt en in licht overgaat, licht wordt.

FOURTH DRAFT

So it really is time to shuffle the pack! 'broken' is the right word for such a star, not 'woken'. Which means I have to find as natural a use for 'woken' in the previous line. This is not an easy task. 'peace unwoken' sounds unmotivated to me.

But another word springs to mind, a word that Boutens used a greater deal when talking of a different, higher reality – or vision of such a state – 'droom'. Just to give one example:

*Daar is maar weinig wat wij wakker weten;
En dat houdt wijs bestier ons meest ontzeid.
Gij zijt mijn diepste werkelijkheid:
Ik heb u nooit geheel dan in den droom bezeten.
(Knoeisel)*

The poem, after all, deals with silence on feet of silver passes through the night. Night is contrasted with the empty buzz of life in the daytime. The night—silver—star—gods complex is the sort of vocabulary cluster where the dream has a natural place. So here is yet another draft, 'with a little help from my friend':

NIGHT-SILENCE

Hush now, hush: on feet of silver
Through the night see silence go,
Silence that from gods delivers
Greetings to the watch below...
What 'twixt souls could not be spoken
In the daytime's empty buzz
God from realms of dream unwoken
Clear as stars flare up when broken
Sullied by no word or token
Speaks in each of us.

Comment from another source:

In my opinion, it's wrong to generalise ('stars flare up when broken'). I have the distinct impression that Boutens refers to a single star which bursts into light (like a human can burst into laughter or singing: in lachen of in gezang uitbreken).

FIFTH DRAFT

I didn't mean to imply that all stars do this, just that (certain) stars are capable of this. I tried using 'Clear as star that flares when broken', but you simply can't do this in the singular without an indefinite article in English. I have had this problem before with Nijhoff's 'Het Uur U': Het was zomerdag. You simply cannot say 'It was summer day' or 'It was summer's day' in English. Furthermore, the use of a third person singular -S contaminates. The reader gets the impression that the 'speaks' of the last line must refer to the same subject, which ruins the whole thing. So i prefer to stick to the plural but use 'Clear as stars that flare when broken', for the use of that (or which) without a comma means that some do, some do not. We are specifying a subcategory of stars, i.e. supernovas.

NIGHT-SILENCE

Hush now, hush: on feet of silver
Through the night see silence go,
Silence that from gods delivers
Greetings to the watch below...
What 'twixt souls could not be spoken
In the daytime's empty buzz
God from realms of dream unwoken
Clear as stars that flare when broken
Sullied by no word or token
Speaks in each of us.