

THE POETRY OF P.C. BOUTENS

Boutens (1870-1943) is not a widely read poet, but he wrote some very fine poetry. Maybe some readers have been put off by the labels critics have attached to him, others possibly find his choice of subject-matter restricted, many find him obscure. The first two hurdles are difficult to remove, but perhaps something can be done about the third.

The obscurity of Boutens' poetry is not so much linked to new coinages in language but rather to the complex patterns of imagery which result from the poet's use of everyday words. There certainly are early 'Gorteresque' compound words in profusion, but most are pre-1907. There is a small proportion of startling new mintages throughout, but these rarely contribute to the obscurity of the verse. More important is a restricted group of everyday words, returned to incessantly by Boutens in a multiplicity of contexts, which create myriad clusters of suggestive but elusive meanings; words such as: heart, soul, day, night, blossom, flower, tree, pain, joy, tears, laughter, desire, love, earth, heaven, life, death, dark, light, reality, dream, silver, gold, sun, moon. By way of example I propose to explore some of the possible uses of the last-named pair: sun and moon.

The sun can be seen as the life-giving force of the universe, revealing in its light the inner nature of all aspects of creation. For this reason it can be linked with the ratio, that faculty for grasping the true nature of the outside world. It can symbolize the Absolute (SUN), or indicate the metaphysical (Sun). For a Platonist it is a fruitful image - the Sun can rule over a world of Form-copies residing in phenomena, and the Form-copies can remind the soul of its true origin in a World of Forms. For a Christian the Sun can symbolize God, with an attendant series of vertical images such as clouds or mountain-tops to indicate the soul's dual nature. Should the poet become over-confident, then the Sun can be the Shelleyan Soul within the soul, ruling over a world of inner jewels impervious to the transitions of the world outside.

All such possibilities use the word sun in a positive way - that which enables us to recall our divine origins, that which grants us an inner 'world', safe from the cycles of growth and decay in the world without. Should such cycles be felt to be threatening, then the patterns of imagery which result show negative use of literal language (day—evening—night—dawn—day...), whereas there is positive use of metaphorical language ('day', 'life', 'sun', 'world'... - indicated by use of the capital letter in Boutens' early poetry, viz. Day, Life, Sun, World, and addressed as *thou*). Should the Absolute be glimpsed through direct symbols (SUN), then Boutens uses *Thou* in the early poetry. Patterns of vertical images tend to be asymmetrical, since one realm of existence is irreconcilably greater than the other, and the 'in-betweenness' of clouds, stars, waterfalls and similar images can be a source of either joy or pain. 'In-betweenness' within the cyclical patterns of images for the inexorably turning world on the other hand may well be positive - the 'still points' of dawn, evening and twilight figure strongly throughout the verse.

Turning from a pro-Enlightenment to a pro-Romantic view of reality, closing our golden eye, gazing into time, and opening our silver eye, gazing out into infinity, we find other patterns emerging. God is replaced by a Goddess, the conscious by the unconscious, time-bound sun-reality by time-liberated moon-dream. An overtly pro-moon vocabulary is

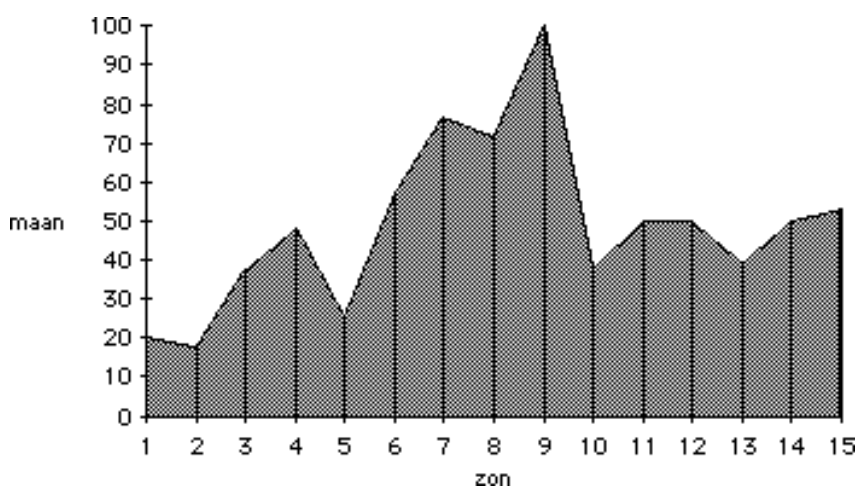
only found in Boutens when he talks of the 'innocents', i.e. those in a childlike, unconscious state of blessedness, those who live in a constancy of vision. This is reflected in words connected with birth and new life, such as dawn, spring, and most of all with the dream. For those who have fallen from this blessed state there are two possibilities. They can betray their origins, become static 'worldlings', or they can strive, strengthened by moments of vision, to gain a higher state of being, they become dynamic 'fledglings'. The fleeting moments of vision are often illustrated by such images as the chase, the interplay of apparent opposites, the ascending path which is formed by glimpsing totalities, experiencing synthetically. For these fledglings there is a rich vocabulary, for they too are 'in-between', between blossom and fruition, between spring and harvest, in an internal 'winter' waiting for 're-birth'. Is it chance that two of the collections are called *Lente-maan* (Spring-moon) and *Zomerwolken* (Summer-clouds)?! Such a pro-moon view does not exclude asymmetrical patterns of images, but they tend to be horizontal, stretching from time-and-land-locked earth out to the sea-shore, with the infinity of the sea beyond. Place the Romantic poet at the sea-shore on an autumn evening, his/her gaze fixed on the far horizon (or beyond) - and vision is guaranteed. This is a frivolous comment, but I make it because it illustrates something important - inner states can very often find their best objective correlative in clusters of such images - they are the resources available within language and language is the poet's working material. The inherent danger is that the clusters are used without being based on experience - word-power degenerates into word-play.

The terms sun and moon are used in at least two other ways in Boutens' poetry. Not only do they tend to occur within the same poem, they also are usually found in close proximity to each other. This brings me to consider them as a word-pair (sun/moon), whose components must be given equal weight. The patterns of imagery are now symmetrical. Rather than being opposites, the complement each other and together make up one whole. The moon is dependent on the sun's light, but the sun only gains fulfilment from being able to transmit its gentlest light to the moon. The possibilities for love-poetry using such pairs of images are obvious. Further, the outer and the inner worlds can move in a counterpoint of literal and metaphorical language for the lovers - only at night can there be 'day', where morning comes there is the loss of 'sun' at 'evening', throughout the day there is 'night'. Each term has its mirror-image.

Should the word-pair be dependent on a noun, e.g. *liefdes zon en maan* (love's sun and moon), *'t spel van zon en maan* (the interplay of sun and moon), then their lexical meaning pales before the composite image of two phases, two pulses, opposite and/or complementary, of a combined process, which can exist in its own right, or can be used as a metaphor for the soul's gradual ascent through phases of dying and rebirth towards the source of its being. This last-named possibility explains why statistical investigations of terminology such as sun and moon are of limited value. Even so, I would like as a curiosity to add a list of the incidence of the term moon as a percentage of that of sun, a list per collection of poems based on the chronology of their first dates of publication, including the verses purported to have been written by Andries de Hoghe in brackets:

<u>Verzen</u>	20.34
<u>Naenia</u>	17.65
<u>Praeludiën</u>	37.26
<u>Stemmen</u>	48.15
<u>Sonnetten</u>	25.42

<u>Vergeten Liedjes</u>	56.67
<u>Carmina</u>	76.92
<u>Liederen van Isoude</u>	71.43
<u>Lente-maan</u>	100.00
<u>[Andries de Hoghe</u>	38.46]
<u>Zomerwolken</u>	50.00
<u>18 Verzen</u>	50.00
<u>Bezonnen Verzen</u>	39.47
<u>Honderd Hollandsche Kw.</u>	50.00
<u>Tusschenspelen</u>	52.88



The terms I have examined are well-represented in the six poems I have translated. Their first dates of publication span Boutens' production: 1894—1899-1910—1916—1924—1938. For their invaluable help and constructive suggestions I would like to thank Ronald Spoor and - yet again - Peter King. For those readers who might want a less cryptic introduction to Boutens' poetry, I refer them to the virginal copy of my doctoral thesis *The development of imagery in the poetry of P.C. Boutens* in Cambridge University Library. For those readers who understand Dutch I would advise them to ignore the translations. For others less fortunate, to read the translations with forbearing.

Translated poems:

VII (Voor D.): Published only in *XXV Verzen*, Middelburg 1894.

Mysterieuze bloemplamp der maan: Printed in *De Gids*, 1899, p.367, not subsequently collected with the other sonnets of *Verzamelde Sonnetten* of 1907.

HOE is mijn lief: First published in *De Nieuwe Gids Gedenkboek 1910*, p.32; subsequently published in *Liederen van Isoude* (1921).

KOMT gij nader: First published in *De Gids*, January 1916, p.77; subsequently published in *Lente-maan* (1916).

Perelaar: First published in *Elseviers geïllustreerde maandschrift*, 1925, I. Boutens wrote to Herman Robbers 28.xi.1924, including six poems to which he had given the title 'Bezonnen Liedjes'. Robbers, who

was then editor of *Elseviers geïllustreerde maandschrift*, included them in the 1925, I edition, p.31 ff. Perelaar was one of these six poems. All were subsequently included in *Bezonnen Verzen* (1931). Ontmanteld met het donkerend getij: First published in *Helikon* 1938, p.49; subsequently published in *Tusschenspelen* (1942).

VII

Voor D.

Maar de goede dingen die we weten,
Zullen wij in eeuwigheid niet vergeten:
Ze zullen in onze harten zijn
Juweelen mooi in dichte schrijn.

We zullen ze niet dragen in 't woelen
Van de wereld op straten en wegen;
We zullen ze veilig voelen,
Diep in ons gelegen.

Die zullen ons wel troost geven
Vandaag en morgen,
Al de dagen van ons leven:
Stil-bezeten schat, goed-geborgen.

VII

For D.

But the good things which may be known for sure
Are subject to recall for evermore:
Our hearts will keep them locked away,
Hoard of fine jewels, from light of day.

We will not wear nor publicly display
Them in the bustle of the world outside;
Deep in our inner chamber they
In safety will abide.

Today, tomorrow, a sure source
Of consolation,
And while our life's days run their course:
Quietly stowed treasure, safe possession.

MYSTERIEUZE BLOEMELAMP DER MAAN

Mysterieuze bloemelamp der maan,
Zilveren iris, die de oneindigheid
Der nachten bevend tegen openspreidt
Uw hart zoo licht van liefde niet verstaan,-

De ruimte is vol van uw helle eenzaamheid,
En blind verlangen vliedt in lichte laan
Tot zon, uw bruijom, in wien te vergaan,
Bleek beeld in 't blauw, uw bidden bloeien beidt...

Zoo bloeien zielen in den stillen nacht
Tot zilvren kelken uit haar zwaarrood goud,
Totdat heur duister blank van bloesem staat,
Witte verrukking, die zon tegensmacht,
Maar, rasse rijp, voor liefdes dag vergaat,
Als al wat teêr en godlijk is en koud.

MYSTERIOUS FLOWER-LANTERN OF THE MOON

Mysterious flower-lantern of the moon,
A silver iris, opening quiveringly
Your heart towards the nights' infinity
A heart so light with love perceived by none,-

All space is filled by your lone clarity,
And blind desire, whose fleeing, gleaming rays run
To the sun, your bridegroom, absorbed by whom
Your blossom, sky-pale image, waits to be...

Thus do souls blossom in the silent night
To silver calices from crimson gold,
Until their dark is held in blossom's sway,
White rapture, yearning for the sun's clear light,
But, ripe too soon, they fade before love's day
Like all that's delicate, divine and cold.

HOE is mijn lief van puren goude,
Hoe zilvren ben ik hem!:
Wanneer hij zingt 'Isoude',
Teêr-blank beslaat zijn stem.
Ik ken geen manelichter lied
Dan dat zijn straal naar mij verschiet!

Die met hem in den dag verkeerren,
Prijzen wel schoon
Mijn vogels gouden veêren,
Maar niemand weet zijn hartetoon.
In schemerkleurlooze avondzaal
Zingt mij alleen mijn nachtegaal...

Hoe kan hij schat van zangen
Bewaren tot het avond is -
Zoo trouw als ik mijn arm verlangen,
Die rijkste droefenis?
Ontzegelt dan mijn kus alleen
Die helle wel van vreugdgeween?

Zoo schijnt de goudgedegen
Zon al den dag de wereld licht,
Maar waart zijn teêrstgenegen
Blik achter oogen dicht,
En in den nacht als geen hem ziet,
Ruischt naar de maan dat zilvren lied.

My love is nought to me but golden,
I to him silver sheen!:
Whene'er he sings 'Isolde'
His voice is shroudlike gleam.
No song I know so lunar-bright
As his projected shaft of light!

Those who by day may share his image
Can but extol
My bird's gold-gleaming plumage,
To none though does his heart unfold.
In colour-faded twilight-hall
Sings but to me my nightingale...

How can that treasure-hoard of
Songs be kept till the evening-hour -
As I poor yearning loyally store, a
Wealth of sadness held as dower?
Must then release come from my kiss
For that bright spring of tearful bliss?

So does the native-golden
Sun give light to all the days,
Yet its closed eyes keep hidden
Its fondest gentle gaze,
And unseen murmurs all night long
Out to the moon that silver song.

KOMT gij nader naar mij neigen
Om te heimlijker te ontglijden
Door het onverbroken zwijgen
Van dit afscheidlooze scheiden?...

En ik kan niet anders kiezen
En ik neem u in mijn armen
Of ik met u mij verliezen
Mocht in dit gereede erbarmen,

Deze rust wier donkre vlooden
Nauwlijks naakt om weêr te vlieden
Van de onoverkoomlijk moeden
Die als ik den slaap verrieden,

Die den glimp van doove zonnen
Speuren in zijn jonge manen,
Die door 't water zijner bronnen
Proeven 't zilt van oude tranen,

Voor wie wondre dageraden
Rijzen uit het hart der nachten,
En zij willen geen genade
Voor hun zaligend versmachten...

Door het onverbroken zwijgen
Van dit afscheidlooze scheiden
Komt gij nader naar mij neigen
Om te heimlijker te ontglijden.

You come and bend yet closer still
To glide mysteriously away
Through the unbroken silence will
You without parting go your way?

And I must choose this and nought else
And I must take you in my arms
As if I thus might lose myself
With you in this awaiting balm,

This quietness whose each dark tide
Scarce reaches ere it ebbs away
From those to who sleep's self-denied
Who just as I did her betray,

Who sense in her young moons the gleam,
The glimmer of suns yet unclear,
Who in her springs' clear waters seem
To taste the salt of former tears,

Who from the heart of nights can see
Wonderful dawns emerge and rise,
And who for mercy do not plea
From languishing which sanctifies...

Through the unbroken silence will
You without parting go your way
You come and bend yet closer still
To glide mysteriously away.

PERELAAR

De bloesemwitte perelaar
Laait uit de dunne schemering
In vlamme verheerlijking,
Geen boom in bloei meer, maar

Een naakte stofontstegen hulk
Omhuifd en overstraald
Met vuren sneeuw ontdaald
Aan blankbestervende avondwolk -

Herkent ge uzelf weêrspiegeld, ziel,
Die staat in aardsch geluk ontdaan,
Uw bloed in bloesem opgegaan
Tot dauw die uit den hemel viel?

Nog aardewortlend aardevrij,
O glimlach lach- en tranenblind,
Die liefdes wegen open wint
Aan leven en aan dood voorbij...

Stil, achter dooven spiegelbrand
Vangt ijmker nacht den dagverloren zwerm
Der sterrebijen aan den hemelberm
In de gekorfde schaduw van zijn hand.

PEAR-TREE

Through the approaching evening shade
Blazes a pear-tree, blossom-white,
Transfigured in its flaring light,
A tree no more, remade

A vessel whose ethereal shroud
And hood is sequin-cloaked
With fiery snow invoked
From banks of fading evening cloud -

Is this a mirror to your eye,
Soul, unconcealed in earthly bliss,
Your blood in rising blossom-mist
As dew returning from on high?

Despite its roots yet almost free,
Smile that is blind from tears and joy,
Gaining an entrance to love's ways
Past life and death's extremities...

Calmly, behind the gutting mirror-brand,
Does night the keeper hold at heaven's verge
The swarm of star-bees, lost to daytime search,
Cupped in the hivelike shadow of his hand.

SONNET

Ontmanteld met het donkerend getij,
Tot op het hart, tot op de ziel ontbloot,
Staan eerlijk ongeschonden, eenzaam groot
Wij winterboomen in ons star gewei...

Naar onze bloei de hemelen beschoot,
Wortelden dieper wij door zand en klei:
De haast der wereld schimt aan ons voorbij,
Die onbekommerd wachten lente of dood...

Nog houdt onze eerste lente en al haar droomen
Ons stille binnenleven ingenomen...
Dan breekt de oneindigheid in lichternis...

Verheerlijkt slaan wij de oogen open in de
Doorzichte alziendheid van de zalig-blinden
Wien nog op aarde God verschenen is.

SONNET

The darkening tide of time has stripped us down -
Bared to the heart, the very soul, we stand
Truly inviolate, alone and grand,
Stark winter trees with rigid antler-crown...

The more our blossom blazed into the sky,
The deeper strove our roots through sand and earth:
For us who, free from care, face spring or death,
The hastening shadows of the world swirl by...

And still our first-known spring and all its dreaming
Holds charmed our inner life with tender meaning...
And then infinity bursts into light...

Our eyes in exultation gain the timeless
Transcending vision of those blessed with blindness,
For whom, while still on earth, God came in sight.