Salutary Reading: Conversion and Calvinist Humanism in Constantijn Huygens’ Ooghentroost

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As secretary to the stadtholder and influential diplomat, the political importance of Constantijn Huygens (1596–1687) in the Dutch Republic of the seventeenth century can hardly be overstated. As a poet and patron to the arts, neither can his cultural importance. Because of his long life, spanning nearly the entire seventeenth century, his interesting social position, and his large literary production, Huygens’ life and work has been subject to much scholarly research. Recently the poet’s work has been studied as an interesting testimony to Stephen Greenblatt’s conception of the Renaissance phenomenon of self-fashioning. While that line of study yields interesting results, I would, however, like to place one of Huygens’ longer poems in the intellectual framework William Bouwsma has provided for the Renaissance in his famous text “The Two Faces of Humanism. Stoicism and Augustinianism in Renaissance Thought” and show how the confrontation of humanism’s two faces in a single text can shed a new and interesting light on the early-modern self as well.

In 1646, Huygens started writing a long consolatory poem (1002 lines) for his dear friend Lucretia van Trello who was steadily going blind due to cataract. It had been a rather disastrous professional year for the diplomat and poet who was elbowed aside in his position as secretary of prince Frederik Hendrik probably by agency of his wife princess Amalia herself. Both the prince and princess expressed

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their displeasure with the secretary on several occasions throughout the year. The feeling of melancholy and bitter disappointment that must have followed this grievous experience can be felt throughout the poem, the last lines of which were written on January 5, 1647. At the end of his *annus horribilis* Huygens had sought refuge and consolation in his library and what he had read there is mulled over and deeply felt in the poem. When he started to write, Huygens conceived of *Oogentroost* as a *consolatio caecitatis*, a consolatory poem for the blind. The result of his efforts, however, is much more than that. The poem can be read as a consolatory letter but also as a satire, a commonplace book, a literary autobiography and a highly personal meditation on Huygens’ reading of different philosophers. Huygens-biographer Jacob Smit is kind about the poem. He calls it a general moralization that is beautifully converted into mild skepticism and praises its deepening of the personal religious life. Other readers have taken a more critical approach to the poem. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the Dutch literary historian Kalff wrote:

One can hardly discern another scheme to *Oogentroost* than that emerging from lines 131–132: ‘My maelt een lange lijst van blinden in het hoofd. / Sy moeten d’er eens uyt’. Indeed, the poem does not yield anything but a list of the blind even if it is true that a lot of entries on that list have some merit; but here again it is apparent that Huygens’ [poetical] strength lies in analysis rather than synthesis.

The poem’s literary quality is indeed a bit uneven, to put it mildly, but while the enumeration of blind people in the middle (the ‘list of the blind’ that Kalff is referring to) is overwrought at best and at times even dreary, there is in fact more to the poem than a simple long ‘list of the blind’. The poem is a strange mix of a *consolatio caecitatis* and a satire. Its peculiarity rests not only on the seemingly opposed ends of the two genres but also on the abruptness with which the genres appear to have been thrown together. The poem never seems

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5 ‘In *Oogentroost* kan men bezwaarlijk een ander plan ontdekken dan wat daarvan blijken mag uit vs. 131–132: “Mij maelt een lange lijst van blinden in het hoofd. / Sy moeten d’er eens uyt”. Inderdaad, iets anders dan een lijst van blinden geeft dat gedicht ons niet, al is het waar dat vele posten op die lijst verdienstelijk mogen heeten; maar ook hier blijkt dat Huygens’ kracht meer ligt in de ontdeling dan in de samenstelling’. Kalff G., *Constantijn Huygens* (Haarlem: 1901) 159 [my translation].