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Rinnes Rijke's *Niet de Schuld, Wel de Straf* as a Social Phenomenon: An attempt to come to terms with a tragic past

This essay discusses the problem of how to evaluate a book widely accepted as concerning itself with an issue which needs badly to be addressed, so that its author is praised for his courage in speaking up, but which does not deliver. The problem is particularly acute if the book is perhaps entertaining, but not particularly good.

If one accepts at all the view that knowledge is "a social product, a matter of dialogue between different versions of the world," (Mitchell 1986: 38) it is incumbent upon a conscientious reader to engage in that dialogue, to examine a given construct of our understanding of "our" realities, past and present, and how they are reflected and molded by our modes of representation. In his lecture for the 1985 conference which commemorated the fortieth anniversary of the end of the Second World War in The Netherlands, A.G.H. Anbeek van der Meijden names three Dutch literary works published in 1982 which are about collaboration, and Harry Mulisch's *The Assault* is not even one of them![1] (Anbeek van der Meijden 1985: 84). He goes on to mention that this interest in fictional approaches to the problem of collaboration is accompanied by the emergence of a nonfictional genre which he describes as "getuigenisboeken," testimonial books. Van der Meijden mentions Rinnes Rijke's testimonial book *Niet de schuld, wel de straf. Herinneringen van een NSB-kind* (roughly: "It wasn't my fault, but I was punished. Memories of the child of a member of the N.S.B.") as an example of this nonfictional genre published in the same year as the three fictional works he speaks of.

Although Rijke's book is presented as non-fiction, the reader cannot but view it as a fictionalized memoir having approximately the same epistemological status as an historical novel - except that the author and publisher explicitly expressed the desire that the book be read as memoir. *Niet de schuld* purports to be the memories of Piet van Weelden, the son of a collaborator who describes his experience of the end of the German occupation and the period immediately following. However, I propose that we consider this book to be at least partially fictional, an otherwise historical narrative which is substantially fictionalized by the inclusion of fabulations by its narrator/author. The reader may in any case be likely to question the accuracy of narrative detail such as descriptions of the interior of a building which Rijke visited only once. A few paragraphs on the back cover of the book sum up its agenda:

> After his wanderings through the German Reich and the front lines, little Rinnes proved to be an outcast and marked for life upon his return to liberated Rotterdam in 1945. Not only because of his father's membership in the N.S.B., but also because Rinnes had been a member of a Dutch division of the Hitler Jugend during his stay in Germany. ...Rinnes Rijke informs the reader of the terrors of a child refugee of war in a very direct style and with an incredibly clear memory. The misunderstanding and disappointments, the loneliness, hardships and humiliations which the child had to endure prove repeatedly that reality is stranger than fiction.[2]

The reader, thus prepared to be outraged at a society which makes a child culpable for the political mistakes made by his father, is frustrated in her good intentions. She appreciates that the memories being narrated are lively and colorful (and possibly partially invented or embellished) and that the text is lent an air of verisimilitude by the editorial decision, explicitly stated in a postscript to the book, not to standardize the obviously rustic working-class markers in the author's Dutch. But most of the unpleasant memories of experiences outside the home in Rijke's text are simply the daily dilemmas of any person attempting to survive in the temporary hardship of postwar times. Additionally, the narrator is only forced once or twice to face the fact that his father's political commitments were the subject of intense disapproval. But what makes this text problematic is neither the narrator's undercutting of his "testimony" by embellished recall nor the unconvincing litany of unique, personal hardship. It is rather the fact that the real cruel treatment of the narrator occurs in the home,

usually at the hands of his stepmother or other foster parents whose presence is brought about by his mother's untimely death during the war. If Rijke intended his memoir to show a relationship of cause and effect between his abuse and his characters' political commitments, he fails to make this either clear or convincing to this reader.[3]

In addition, Rijke further undercuts the testimony of his mistreatment by repeatedly showing himself eating well and enjoying at least some of his adventures during his sojourn in Germany, long after his non-collaborating peers in The Netherlands are deprived of regular meals.

> After we rode the train for about an hour, it began to get dark. We had stopped a few times along the way to let people on or off the train. During the trip I let my mind wander. I wished my friends could see me here! It would certainly make them envious. (69)

The narrative begins on "Dolle Dinsdag," the fifth of September 1944, when a mistaken report in a Radio Orange broadcast that the English had liberated Breda sent many collaborators fleeing the country in panic and in fear for their lives (fearing the arrival of the "bijltjesdag"). Little Rinnes is roused early in the morning by his father, who tells him they will be taking an unexpected journey. The reader is stunned to discover that Rinnes' and his father's hegira seems marked everywhere along the way not so much by peril, but by helpful women and young people (members of the Hitler Youth organization) who help Rinnes and his father by feeding and caring for the children. The fleeing collaborators and their families seem threatened mostly by late and crowded trains offering them transportation to expected safety in Germany, and by occasional bombing raids. Any Dutch reader with her head full of stories about the fate of the children of average Dutch families at this time would find it difficult to have such a tale of terror and woe elicit much sympathy. Rather than being faced with the notion of the culpability of children with respect to the deeds of those in power over them, as she expected to be on opening this book, she reads the testimony of little Rinnes' forced trip into a foreign country where he is well-fed, fairly warm, and relatively safe. Such a tale hardly seems pitiful in comparison with the tales of privation, starvation, life in hiding and forced conscription by the Nazis which have defined the reality of that time for the Dutch of recent generations.

Rijke's book continues with the story of his education and indoctrination as a pupil in a Hitler Youth training camp. His suffering here consists of being separated from his family at the age of nine and forced to adhere to military school rules. This material is certainly of interest as a (semi-) historical document which provides some colorful detail from times and places which are relatively unknown. But again, the reader, in light of her knowledge of the starvation of children of similar ages refused the barest ration of food by the German occupiers because their parents were *not* collaborators, is likely to be skeptical of the exemplary magnitude of Rijke's suffering.

Perhaps the real meat of his testimony lies in his experiences *after* the war. Little Rinnes' real suffering only begins upon his return to Rotterdam after experiencing many adventures along the way. Since his father has been sentenced to a work camp, Rinnes is initially placed in the custody of the woman whom his father married during Rinnes' sojourn in Germany. It is soon made evident that his father's new wife has a boyfriend besides her husband, and that her children are treated fairly well, while Rinnes becomes the stereotypical stepchild of the fairytale. The couple abuse him by withholding proper nourishment, keeping him out of school, and forcing him to work instead. Rinnes sneaks into his father's work camp in hopes that his father will defend him against his stepmother's cruel treatment, but is not offered any support. The father even goes so far as to side with the evil stepmother, claiming that "If she punishes you, you must have deserved it" (199). Life is clearly unfair. However, this segment of the book fails to demonstrate to the reader that this abuse is causally related to his father's collaboration, thus missing a prime opportunity to fulfill the stated goal of the book, namely provide an incisive critique of a society willing to hold children responsible for the political sins of their parents.

In short, the promised sad tale of punishment for collaboration is never told, and indeed seems undercut at nearly every point along the way. Rinnes' stepmother abused him and his father was unable or unwilling to protect him, but how is his tale political? Why wasn't the book advertised as a book about child abuse in a Dutch family?

Yet the fact is that both Rijke's testimony and his book were commercially successful in The Netherlands. Rijke wrote a sequel, published in 1985; as its foreword and back cover suggest, he did so after receiving hundreds of letters from readers who wished to know how the story continued. The relative success of a book which seems widely accepted as an example of a testimonial, but which, in nearly every respect, fails to make its moral argument, seems to me to raise an

uncomfortable question: to what extent might the apparently uncritical acceptance of this book imply the existence of a reading public which has failed to confront its own communal experience of collaboration?

In attempting to understand the reasons for Rijke's success with his readership, one must view this work as reflecting a particular social construction of past and present. We have seen that there is no political or historical analysis; the book does not differentiate between the hardships due to Rinnes' particular circumstances, those due to the exigencies of life in wartime and the immediate postwar period shared by the populace as a whole, and those troubles arising in *any* period, to which *all* human beings are subject. Add the "common speech" of the text and obvious references to Rijke's working-class background, and the testimony's odd narrative voice, which alternately speaks a childish language and suddenly reverts to the perspective of the adult Rijke, and the best model I can conceive for the social function of this tale, and as an explanation of its success, is that of the fairy tale. This supposedly factual book replaces the difficult analyses and complex moral questions of dominance, and the whole moral stage of the Second World War, with evil stepmothers and journeys into darkness undertaken with the aid of kind strangers. Seen in this way, one might view Rijke's text and its reception in the light of Bruno Bettelheim's analysis of the function of such fairy tales, as he describes it in *The Uses of Enchantment*. Such tales, Bettelheim says, allow children at various stages of cognitive development to come to terms with their subconscious fears, at whatever level they can. As he states in his "Introduction":

> As with all great art, the fairy tale's deepest meaning will be different for each person, and different for the same person at various moments in his life. The child will extract different meanings from the fairy tale, depending on his interests and needs of the moment. When given the chance, he will return to the same tale when he is ready to enlarge on old meanings, or replace them with new ones. (12)

The fairy tale does not analyze, describe motives or consider sociohistorical factors; it describes the occurrences and perhaps the protagonist's feelings. This seems an entirely adequate description of Rijke's text, and of some of its recent uses. To borrow an image from a fairy tale, we have taken an axe to the wicked wolf and split him open, and liberated the hapless victims who were the wolf's last meal, none the worse for wear.

One intriguing example of the possibilities in interpreting *Niet de schuld* in the light of Bettelheim's theory of the function of fairy tales is the figure of the mother, or rather the evil stepmother. To quote him again:

> So the typical fairy-tale splitting of the mother into a good (usually dead) mother and an evil stepmother serves the child well. It is not only a means of preserving an internal all-good mother when the real mother is not all good, but it also permits anger at this bad "stepmother" without endangering the goodwill of the true mother, who is viewed as a different person. (69)

This analysis of the role of the mother adds an interesting dimension to Rinnes Rijke's postwar difficulties, with the caveat that Bettelheim's description of the evil stepmother/dead good mother dichotomy is the description of a fantasy, whereas in Rijke's case his biological mother, who is of course favorably compared to his stepmother, is in fact deceased.

> I relived it all again. If only mama were still alive. I looked up at heaven. That's where she is now. (185)

Such an analysis suggests an important question. Does the positive reception of a book such as Rijke's suggest that significant segments of the Dutch reading public are troubled by subconscious fears or feelings of guilt related to the postwar treatment of the children of collaborators, and wish to atone for their collective history by sympathizing with this child? Such an approach not only relies heavily on the widespread view of the "innocence" of children, it also permits discussion of the equally touchy subject of child abuse by blaming it on the universally vilified collaborator, rather than locating the cause elsewhere, such as in patriarchy, or the conditions prevailing in a certain society or subculture at a certain time. And since fairy tales exist outside and entirely apart from our chronology and geography (the space-time continuum), one also avoids the uncomfortable questions implied by the existence of child abuse in that context: if social conditions in The Netherlands in the 1940's encouraged it, have these conditions been sufficiently altered to relieve the problem? What are the causes of child abuse in the first place?

And on the question of the war and collaboration, given that fairy tales are of use to adults and children, are or were Dutch readers still at a relatively childlike stage in processing their wartime experiences, only capable of expressing an indubitably appropriate sympathy for the victims, without engaging in the historical analysis necessary to prevent such crimes against humanity from occurring again?

Perhaps it is all simply a matter of timing. Perhaps Rijke's story merely serves the function of preparing an audience for the more reflective, more analytical, in some case more academic studies of the children of collaborators in The Netherlands which have been published since then, such as Inge Spruit's *Onder de vleugels van de partij. Kind van de Führer* (1983), Hanna Visser's *Het verleden voorbij* (1989), and Duke Blaauwendraad-Doorduijn's *Niemandsland* (1989).

It seems unlikely, however, that Rijke was consciously preparing the ground. For example, most of Rijke's worst sufferings were brought upon him by his stepmother with the blessing of an emasculated father whose sole authority seems, ironically, to reside in his ability to bluster about the appropriateness of punishment. It seems unlikely that Rijke himself was attempting to make the point that collaborators and their spouses tended to be authoritarian personalities who would abuse their children, thus showing Nazism to be an inhumane system. Little evidence for such an interpretation is provided in the text. The stepmother's lover does refer to the father's political alliance in the midst of an altercation, but it is clear that he is simply taking advantage of the opportunity to threaten the child; nowhere does he exhibit any political scruples himself.

> He got involved too, and said: "I'm warning you, filthy N.S.B. member, or else I'll pin you to the wall with a knife." He punched me in the chest. I had a hard time breathing. They walked off, laughing. I whispered to myself: "Jerks!" (188)

To my surprise, such a suggestion seems to find support from Bruno Bettelheim, who was imprisoned in Germany in 1938-1939 but released before the war, in the essay "Unconscious Contributions to One's Undoing," (Bettelheim 1952, 241-245). He mentions two types of situations in which he recognizes the possibility of complicity in one's own suffering: the Holocaust and child abuse. Although one must emphatically deny that there is any justice in accusing Holocaust survivors of having contributed to their own suffering, and although one must likewise deal sternly with the analyses of child abuse which blame the victim, Bettelheim's comments on the process which leads to healing prove interesting. In his essay, Bettelheim argues that "integration of a truly important experience requires both that we deal constructively with *what it did to us* as an inner experience, and also that *we do something about it* in our actions relating to it." (Bettelheim 1952, 241). He gives an autobiographical example: he wrote the essay "Individual and Mass Behavior in Extreme Situations" as a way of doing something *about* his experience, in the sense that his essay brought the existence of the camps to the attention of others, and also as a way of doing something *with* it, in that the act of writing was "an attempt to lay my experience to rest by distancing myself from it and gaining intellectual mastery over it ... Trying to understand why something of far-reaching importance happened to one is often a significant development in attempts at integrating the experience and its consequences." (243)

Now, Rijke's book would certainly seem to do something with his experience, but its reception suggests that it does something about that experience, and I believe that a careful reading will not support this second claim. In addition, it is important to note that, however useful Bettelheim's distinction between doing something with and doing something about one's experience may be in the current context, his analysis of camp survivors has by no means been received uncritically by his colleagues. As Aaron Hass describes the phenomenon of much psychological analysis of camp survivors: "Unfortunately, subsequent professionals in contact with survivors readily accepted the notions of early observers. These assumptions were repeated as gospel, and later theories were based on previous, shaky theoretical foundations." (18) He proceeds to cite Bettelheim's *The Informed Heart* as an example of this error.

I submit that it is more fruitful to view the phenomenon of Rijke's book and its popularity from a different point of view: that, given the prevailing social reality at the time of its publication, Rijke would be more likely to gain an audience for stories about child abuse if they were couched in the mythology of the child of the collaborator abused by a vengeful society than if he had attempted to advertise his book as a study (however informal) of the causation and consequences of child abuse. Dutch society must face both the history of the postwar treatment of collaborators and their children and the problem of child abuse. However, the likelihood that each will be dealt with adequately would increase if each complex of problems could be considered on its own merits and in its own sociohistorical context(s). Where the two complexes of problems intersect, as they undoubtedly do, the dynamics involved should be carefully articulated. One is sobered by the example of Bettelheim, who recognized the valuable functions that fairy tales may perform, yet who is himself dogged by reports of disciplinary abuse.

In his lecture to the 1985 conference which Anbeek van der Meijden also spoke at, Willem Frederik Hermans argues somewhat petulantly that a time once existed when war was strictly a matter for professionals, i.e. those in power who declared them, and those soldiers

hired to fight them, and that a concern for loyalty and political rectitude among the population in general, and among writers in particular - such as has occurred in The Netherlands with respect to World War Two - was not necessarily an improvement. He refers to this phenomenon as the "increasing tendency to involve everyone in everything." (88)

Ian Hacking, in "The Making and Molding of Child Abuse," argues that the current concept of the meaning of child abuse is a recent phenomenon: "...it comes as a surprise that the very idea of child abuse has been in constant flux for the past thirty years. Previously our present conception of abusing a child did not even exist." (253) He shows that this historical development has important implications:

> ... as we evolve an idea about a kind of person or of human behavior, people change, behaviors change. Children experience their hurt differently. [...] Likewise the abusers' own sense of what they are doing, how they do it, and even what they do is just not the same now as it was thirty years ago. New kinds of people come into being that don't fit the wisdom just acquired, less because the recent knowledge was wrong than because of a feedback effect. There is not strictly a truth of the matter that, once discovered, will remain the truth, for once it is counted as true and becomes common knowledge, it will change the very individuals - abusers and children - about whom it was supposed to be the truth. (254)

The popularity of Rijke's book suggests that an opportunity exists to engage some serious concerns in Dutch society. The publication of books such as *Niet de schuld*, and their success, is an indication that the issues surrounding the postwar treatment of collaborators and their children have recently been of concern to a significant segment of the Dutch population. However, if, as Hacking shows, additional "information" and discussion of concepts such as child abuse, or collaboration, modify the descriptions and classifications of the social problems being discussed, then a book such as *Niet de schuld*, and the dialogues surrounding it, are more than just interesting. The stakes may well be high, both in terms of their literary and their social implications. If the discourse of literature is to provide any valuable contributions to the debate, whether about political issues or familial piety, the reading public must demand books of integrity and receive them critically.

NOTES

1 / He mentions *Montyn* by D.A. Kooiman, *Lemmingen* by Ten Hooven, and *Hoor mijn lied, Violetta* by Louis Ferron.

2 / All translations from the Dutch are mine.

3 / For a good substantial study of the historical realities of the treatment of collaborators in the decade following the end of the war, cf. Peter Romijn (in References below). For a fascinating psychological study of the children of Nazi perpetrators, which does not dodge issues of guilt and its consequences, cf. Dan Bar-On (in References below).

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