

## HENRIETTE ROLAND HOLST-VAN DER SCHALK (1869-1952)

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**Henriette Roland Holst-van der Schalk**, born in 1869 near Leiden, became a well-known Dutch figure in international European Socialism. She wrote some prose and drama, as well as biographies of prominent figures, but is known primarily as a poet. Her poems reflect her passionate involvement with the difficulties of reconciling the ideal and the real, particularly as this pertains to the social movement of her time.

Henriette van der Schalk was born in 1869 in a well-to-do lawyer's family in Noordwijk (near Leiden). Educated somewhat better than the average girl of her time—a boarding school and a winter in the "big town" of Liege to improve her languages and study music—in later years she lamented her lack of training in the sciences, biology, mathematics, and especially economics and world history. In 1889 she returned home to Noordwijk and the superficial life of an aristocratic young woman waiting to be married.

Although she wrote some poetry as a child, she discovered poetry as a focus for her passionate nature and what she herself calls "the world of the beautiful dream," on the occasion of a visit to the studio of the painter Jan Toorop. Within a few days she wrote a sonnet cycle. Toorop forwarded the poems to the well-known poet Albert Verwey, who became a mentor. In 1891, through Albert and Kitty Verwey, she met the poet Herman Gorter and the painter Richard Nicolaas Roland Holst, himself a major artist of his time. Gorter remained a life-long friend, and Roland Holst and she were married in 1896. Thus began a close partnership in their art, and their vision of the world and of humanity.

Vividly touched by the death, in 1896, of William Morris, whom R. N. Roland Holst had met in England, they re-read Morris' essays on art and society. "Apparently I had, in those years, matured to an understanding," she recollects the impact fifty years later.

It was as if the scales fell from my eyes, as if I saw society, the life around me, in a new,

clear light. Capitalism had not only condemned the masses to a life of joyless toil, to ignorance and degeneration, it had also made the world ugly, murdered the beauty of nature as well as that of the old cities, and it had killed the spirit of community without which art cannot exist. It had condemned the artist, the architect and the poet to loneliness and hopeless individualism. The struggle for Socialism, for the new community, in which all labor would be respected, all people could develop their talents and live together as brothers—that was the only ideal that could fill the years with strength and joy (*Het vuur brandde voort* 96-97).

Around the same time, Gorter recommended that they should read Marx' *Das Kapital* as "the key to understanding society" (97). Her own recollection of these events makes it clear that, as Stuiveling puts it in his introduction to her *Verzen*, "she came to it [Socialism] not through Marx, but through Morris, in other words: not by way of society and economics, but by way of humanity and art" (18). These readings had a powerful influence for the rest of their lives. In the spring of 1897 Gorter and Henriette and Richard Roland Holst attended the pre-election congress of the SDAP (Sociaal Democratische Arbeiders Partij) and joined the party. That same year three Socialists were elected to Parliament.

It is perhaps difficult for us, today, to imagine the excitement, for a passionate and passionately committed person, of the world as it looked in 1897. Nationally, social movements displayed a great deal of activity. Many social provisions (child protection laws, housing standards, compulsory education and protection of the

workers against accidents) date from this period, and constitutional amendments brought general suffrage for men in 1917, for women in 1922. Culturally, the poetic movement of the 1880s (*Beweging van Tachtig*) signified an end to the traditional dominance of the ministers in Dutch literature. Two of the original members of *Tachtig* were socialists. Although Henriette Roland Holst was never part of *Tachtig* she was touched and excited by the renewal it brought. Outside Holland, too, the world was in frequent turmoil, leading, among many things, to World War I and the revolution in Russia. Even outside Europe this period saw both the strengthening of national imperialism and the first beginnings of resistance against it.

Henriette Roland Holst witnessed all these developments, was a part of many of the movements. It seems emblematic that her translation of the International anthem is still used by the Socialists in Holland today. Immediately after joining the party she was asked to serve in many functions. This was understandable, for there were few women with her abilities and soon she was traveling all over the country to address meetings. Her writing talent served many editorial boards and the list of her publications demonstrates her wide range of interests. Until recently she was known primarily as a poet, but lately interest in her prose writings has grown. All of her work testifies to her passionate interest in the events she participated in: the international socialist conference in Zimmerwald in 1915; the congress of the Comintern in Moscow in 1921; lectures on colonialism taught, together with Mohammed Hatta, at an international women's conference in 1926; her personal friendships with Rosa Luxemburg, Karl Kautsky, Leon Trotsky and many others. A generous anthology of her prose writings was published in 1984 under the title *Het leed der mensheid laat mij vaak niet slapen* (Man's sorrow often will not let me sleep<sup>1</sup>). She wrote many plays, especially for amateur drama groups, as well as biographies of Rousseau, Tolstoy,

Rosa Luxemburg, Gandhi, Romain Rolland and Käthe Kollwitz.

All her interests, however, come together most personally in the poetry. To the poetry she turns to express her enthusiasms and the many disappointments encountered in national and international socialism, and in the world events of her times--the frequent disagreements among Dutch socialists, the Russian revolution's failure to live up to its promise and her high expectations, the two terrible wars. Even in the first flush of enthusiasm, and in spite of her life-long solidarity with the masses, she can confess, in a poem, her need to escape into quietness:

Wel ben ik soms zo moe van uw geluiden  
 en van uw razen zo gekromd  
 ('t Is true I'm sometimes tired of your noises  
 and of your raging so bent down)  
 (*De Nieuwe Geboort*, 1903).

After the divisive party congress in 1908 she expresses her identification with Dante, poet and politician in exile, in the collection *De vrouw in het woud* ("The woman in the forest," 1912).

Most characteristic of the poetry is, on the one hand, her use of the classic forms: the sonnet and the *terza rima* (throughout her life she felt close to Dante), and, on the other hand, her very personal use of these forms, which sets this poetry apart from any school or poetic movement. Noting the many variations in rhythm, the enjambments and deviations from the formal sonnet rhyme scheme, van Praag wonders whether one can still justifiably speak of sonnets, when only the fourteen-line form remains (58). Yet these are surely also sonnets in spirit, lyric and personal, with often a clear turn between the octave and the sestet. Several studies center on the rhythm, at once the most personal aspect of this poetry and often its most moving force. It seems to me this is also, or at least partly, what Annie Romein-Verschoor refers to in *Silt and Sky*: "The most striking quality in her poetry is the tone, sometimes hesitant

and irregular, but always unmistakably her own, holding the reader as her speaking voice, hoarse and unresonant, holds a large audience in breathless suspense by its restrained passion" (18). Many of these qualities come together in one of her most famous and beloved poems:

Holland gij hebt zwellende wolken-stoeten  
uit verre hemel-velden aangevlogen,  
gij hebt horizonnen, zacht omgebogen  
van oost naar west zonder eenmaal te  
[ontmoeten  
lijn die ze snijdt; en wijd-gespannen bogen  
van stranden en van zeeën om ze henen  
gaand tot waar zij met heemlen zich  
[vereenen  
die uw schijn van oneindigheid verhoogden.

De lijnen van uw land en van uw water  
wekken in ons onpeilbare gedachten,  
verlengen zich tot eindeloos begeeren.  
Onze oogen proeve' iets groots en daarvan  
[gaat er  
een trek van grootheid door ons geestes-  
[trachten

en zijn wij thuis in grenzeloze sferen.

(Holland, you have troops of clouds all  
[fleeting,  
Flown to us here from the far fields of  
[heaven,  
You have horizons lying soft and even  
From east to west, without one instant  
[meeting  
A line that cuts them; curves of sea and  
[beaches  
Widely spread and to the sky extended  
To where they seem as with the heavens  
[blended  
Create the illusion of unending reaches.

The tracings of your water and your land  
Awaken in us thoughts that have no limit,  
And endless longing in our sense appears.  
Our eyes perceive the infinite and grand,  
And a touch of greatness thus informs our  
[spirit  
And then we are at home in boundless  
[spheres.)  
(*De nieuwe geboort*, 1903; tr. Warnke 189-90).

#### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> The title (here with Weever's translation) is taken from a poem in *Tusschen Tijd en Eeuwigheid* (1934).

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