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Renate Rubinstein: an Introduction

Of the numerous Dutch books I borrowed and read during my six months of dissertation research in Amsterdam in 1979, two by Renate Rubinstein were so memorable that eight years later I feel compelled to investigate the reasons for the impact of her writing. In retrospect, it seems that both place and time were conducive to my receptivity. Certainly my room in Amsterdam Oost, right across from the Tropenmuseum, its windows filled with plants and lace curtains, my black Dutch bicycle, the market down the street, my borrower's card to the city library and my desk at the P.J. Meertens Instituut, my two housemates who studied at the Gemeente Universiteit, and the fleas of the otherwise lovely resident cat, all gave me an insider's empathy for Rubinstein's world that I could not have had in Canada. More importantly, perhaps, and again in retrospect, I was emotionally receptive: I wanted to experience modern Dutch culture as intensely as I had experienced the small-town rural Calvinist Holland of the 1930s and 1940s, via my immigrant parents and grandparents. Rubinstein's books provide a condensed form of such an experience: her general theme is modern Dutch culture, her style is personal and emotional. Yet time and place were not the only factors, for even now her work fascinates and delights me, and each new reading gives me greater appreciation of herself and her interpretation of modern Western society.

The two books I read in Amsterdam in 1979 were the controversial, just published *Hedendaags feminisme* and the slightly earlier *Niets te verliezen en toch bang*. Particularly this latter book, which documents Rubinstein's thoughts and feelings about her painful separation and divorce in the early 1970s, may serve as a good introduction to the compelling images in her writing, and to her ability to provide a uniquely Dutch perspective while preserving universal human validity. In the book she alternates between spontaneous emotional reactions to events during the separation and divorce process, and incisive analysis from the distance afforded by looking back after some time has passed. It is, to quote Aad Nuis from the *Haagse Post*,

> ...een bericht uit een zelfgesponnen hel, waar het inzicht dat je alle proporties uit het oog verloren hebt, helemaal niet lijkt te helpen bij het terugvinden van die proporties. 'Een kroniekschrijfster van de onwijsheid' noemt ze zichzelf ergens in het boek. Je kunt ook zeggen dat het haar beste reisverslag is, van de moeilijkste reis die ze heeft gemaakt (Rubinstein: *Ieder*, p.195).

In her unabashed honesty Rubinstein expresses feelings, particularly the desire for revenge on the partner who has left for someone new, which are taboo for most members of Western societies. In almost no moral system in our Western world is the desire for revenge now acceptable: it is considered primitive, uncivilized, unchristian and certainly, after the open marriage philosophy of the late 1960s, very repressed and bourgeois. Rubinstein has no compunctions about admitting that she wanted, and took, revenge: in one of the most memorable images in her writing, she

describes how one day she just "happens" to be bicycling down the street in which her estranged husband's "nieuwe vriendin" lives, how the sight of her husband's bicycle leaning against the railing brings all the anger she thought she had dealt with maturely rushing to the surface once again, and how she — already over forty at that time — takes revenge as only a Dutchwoman could and would, by letting the air out of both his tires.

Who is Renate Rubinstein? Despite the fact that in 1979 she was awarded the Multatuli prize for literature, and that since 1964 she has published at least 18 books, she is virtually unknown outside of the Netherlands, and certainly unknown on the North American continent. A thorough search in the average Canadian university library (in this case the University of Calgary) yielded almost nothing at all: she is not listed in any sort of international bibliography or encyclopedia, she has not been mentioned by the *New York Times*, her books published between 1978 and 1982 are not listed in the *National Union Catalog* for those years (after 1983 the NUC makes up for lost time by listing titles from as far back as 1979, but is still not comprehensive), and she is not mentioned in *Delta, a Review of Arts, Life and Thought in the Netherlands* (issues from 1958 to 1973). Only the *Humanities and Social Sciences Review* yielded one, very meager, review (Nichols). In Holland, in contrast, Rubinstein is a well-known public persona; her work is reviewed in a variety of Dutch newspapers such as *NRC Handelsblad, De Groene Amsterdammer, De Volkskrant* and the *Haagse Post*; she is a regular guest on talk shows, forums and panel discussions; and even my Calvinist relatives, who faithfully read *Trouw*, know something about her ideas. Unfortunately I have not yet been able to locate what seems to be a biography of sorts by Ischa Meijer, referred to as "een geschreven portret" on the cover of one of her books (*Ieder*). The following biographical sketch is based largely on the information she gives about herself in her writings and on her interview with Jan Brokken in the *Haagse Post* in 1985.

Rubinstein was born in Germany in 1929 (the interview, p.41, says 1930); her father had a coat factory in Berlin and her mother's family lived there as well (*Tamar,* p.233, 236). When she was five her family moved, first to the Netherlands, after two years to England, then in 1939 back to the Netherlands again. Her father was a Jew, her mother was not; the children were not raised in any particular religion and Rubinstein has only recently begun to feel Jewish, something she qualifies vaguely uneasily as "een ouderdomsverschijnsel" (Interview, p.41). Her first reaction, as a child, to the invasion by the Germans in 1940 was that she would have a day off school. One month later, "op de ochtend van de tiende juni 1940," her father was taken away by the "Gruene Polizei" who promised: "Jullie vader komt gauw weer terug" (*Ieder,* p.100). Her father died in Auschwitz (Interview, p.37), and indeed none of her father's family survived Nazi Germany, except for one sister, unhappily married to a drunkard who was fortunately a Gentile (*Ieder*, p.65). She once calls Germany "mijn moordende land van herkomst" (*Tamar*, p.226) and remarks "Moffen zijn heel enge mensen" (*Wantrouwen*, p.54), but in general she rarely refers to modern Germany.

During her studies in the 1950s at the Gemeente Universiteit in Amsterdam, Rubinstein was on the editorial staff of the student weekly *Propria Cures* (*Wantrouwen*, p.44), a newspaper which seems to have been the first public forum for a number of prominent Dutch writers during their student days (e.g., Aad Nuis, Jan Donkers). Rubinstein mentions her work on the paper only incidentally, in a column of political

comment ("Hongarije 1956 en Nederland 1981," *Wantrouwen* p.42-49), but this column is a good example of the intricate web of cultural comment she weaves into her work. The issue of *Propria Cures* which she describes was a response to the crushing of the Hungarian revolt by the Russians in 1956, and to Dutch reaction to this event. The pro-Moscow Dutch communist party supported the Russians, but this support enraged a population which remembered its own recent foreign oppression and triggered serious rioting against the communist party and its buildings in Amsterdam. Most recently these events have been compellingly portrayed in the award-winning Dutch film *De aanslag* (Academy Award for best foreign film 1987).

In 1964 Rubinstein published the first collection of her columns, a book entitled *Namens Tamar*, Tamar being the pseudonym under which she writes in the intellectually left-liberal *Vrij Nederland*. Most of her books are similar collections; because each column is dated, the reader, and especially the foreign reader, can trace a thread of significant events and personalities in recent Dutch history. A few of her books were not written as columns but as books around a select topic; her "thema-boeken" (*Nee*, inside front cover) include the previously mentioned *Niets te verliezen en toch bang* (about divorce), *Liefst verliefd* (about love), and her most recent *Nee heb je, notities over ziek zijn*. This last book is a moving account of an individual's struggle to come to terms with illness and death. As is usual with her writings, the book is rooted in personal experience: in 1977 Rubinstein was diagnosed as having multiple sclerosis. "Een progressieve ziekte," she calls it wryly, commenting:

> een progressieve ziekte is niet wat je op het eerste gezicht zou denken, een ziekte die beter wordt, maar integendeel een ziekte die erger wordt. De meeste ernstige ziekten zijn progressief want als ze dat niet waren waren ze niet ernstig. Het supreme voorbeeld is natuurlijk het leven zelf waaraan ze immers sterft. Als je maar oud genoeg wordt takel je voordien af en verlies je een voor een je functies. Alleen duurt het meestal langer voordat het zover is (*Nee*, p.21).

Rubinstein is the oldest of three children: her sister lives in London, England, her brother in the Netherlands. Both are married and have children (*Tamar*, p.233), and she writes fondly that she relies on "een technisch begaafd neefje" to keep her version of the wheelchair, "het 20km autootje," in running condition (*Nee*, p.108-109). Rubinstein herself lives in Amsterdam; as befits typical Amsterdammers, at least in foreign eyes, she has a cat, a Siamese named Tiepje, who occasionally merits an entire column of her own.

Given Rubinstein's prominence in Dutch intellectual circles, it is surprising that so little is known about her abroad. Without a doubt one major reason for her international obscurity is that her works are not available in translation. This in turn could be attributed to two factors, cultural and linguistic: because her work is so rooted in modern Dutch culture, often referrring to people and events (e.g. TV shows or peace marches) which are not known to outsiders, translations would be meaningless without extensive explanations. At the same time such explanations would contradict the spontaneous conversational style which is so characteristic of her work, a style which makes optimum use of all the "untranslatable" features of the Dutch language, particularly idioms, intensifiers and qualifiers.

These two factors do not explain, however, why her work has never been discussed by foreign *Neerlandici*. For them the perception that her writing is "journalism" rather than "literature" (Nichols) may be the major

deterrent, as she is a columnist for the weekly literary periodical *Vrij Nederland* (circulation circa 112,000, *Willing's,* p.759), and her books are usualy collections of these columns. But for the Netherlands in general and Rubinstein in particular, the distinction "journalism/literature" is not really valid. Instead, her articles belong to the feuilleton, the catch-all category for precisely those newspaper articles which are not journalism. The feuilleton concerns itself with cultural comment in the broadest sense, and depends on intelligent witty personalities who provide such comment in a personal subjective enjoyable style. Every country has its famous feuilleton writers, such as Mark Twain and Hemingway in the USA, Balzac and Baudelaire in France, and in smaller countries such as Austria and the Netherlands, feuilleton personalities have given the genre a distinct flavour.

Along with other Dutch columnists, of whom Simon Carmiggelt is one of the best known, Rubinstein has developed the feuilleton into a game of autobiographical fact and fiction in which the author is the main character and develops that character bit by bit in every new weekly column. In comparison with Carmiggelt's pieces, Rubinstein's are more directly autobiograpical and deal with broader Dutch society in a less refracted way — at least, one would hope that Carmiggelt does not really spend as much time in seedy Amsterdam bars as his columns would indicate. Nevertheless, Rubinstein's curious mixture of situational descriptions, autobiography, philosophy, conversation with the reader and cultural comment, all centered around and emanating from one individual, give the impression that her books are chapters in a longer novel telling the story of an observant, thoughtful, lively, always critical woman's life in twentieth-century Holland.

It is impossible, when reading Rubinstein's writings, to miss the fact that she is "not wholly in sympathy" (Nichols) with much of what is going on around her, and the title "Onze Lieve Vrouw van de Eeuwigdurende Tegenstand" (Interview, p.39) bestowed upon her by one of her compatriots, is more than just an honorary one. Nevertheless, her scathing attacks against all that annoys her must be seen within the context of what she is passionately fighting for, namely Western democracy with all its frailties, foibles and faults. Consequently she is a Liberal with a capital L, dedicated to intellectual freedom, inimical to any sort of dogmatism encouraging or demanding blind adherence rather than critical analysis — and these dogmatisms include communism, feminism, socialism, the peace movement, and occasionally, organized religion. The positive side of this anti-dogmatic coin is the affirmation of the individual: in her writings individual ideas and emotions are always championed against a larger moral system which claims authority at the expense of human beings. Needless to say, with this principle Rubinstein steps on many ideological toes, and her columns are sometimes a running dialogue with detractors of various stripes (e.g. *Wantrouwen*, p.7, 23, 39). Frequently her readers focus on the specifics of what she writes and miss her real point: her opponents on the left dismiss her ideas as "right wing" (Interview, p.35), her opponents on the right misread her as supporting their favourite reactionary stance (Nuis 1984). Both of these positions fail to understand her polemics in the context of her "dogmatically undogmatic" stance.

For Rubinstein the touchstone for any sort of dogmatism is always Germany from 1933 to 1945, and it is both a strength and a weakness of her thinking that her ultimate reference point in dealing with life today, regardless of the topic, is Nazi Germany and the ideas and events which led up to it. This is most

immediately obvious in her formulation of any sort of biographical detail. So she writes about a boy on whom she had a crush at the time when her father was taken away: "Hij heette Kurt, maar ondanks die stoere naam werd hij later gewoon, met zijn hele familie, gedeporteerd. Ik ben daarna niet meer verliefd geworden op een joodse jongen, ik denk dat ik mijn les geleerd had" (*Tamar*, p.228). Later, reflecting about her multiple sclerosis and God, she writes:

> ...woede op mijn ziekte heb ik niet gekend. Ik weet niet op wie ik kwaad zou kunnen zijn, het was niemands schuld of opzet, in God geloof ik niet. Trouwens, als ik wel in hem geloofde zou ik hem allang zoveel hebben moeten vergeven want ik was al zevenenveertig toen ik hoorde dat ik ziek was, maar mijn vader was pas vijfenveertig toen hij, in een daartoe aangelegd kamp, vernietigd werd (*Nee*, p.81).

But Nazi Germany is above all her political and ideological yardstick, her antenna for the type of mentality in which group feeling eradicates individual common sense. This is the backdrop for her fundamental mistrust of peace marches, such as the one organized by the IKV on November 21, 1981 in Amsterdam (*Wantrouwen*, p.22). Rubinstein has in the past participated in demonstrations herself: the back cover of *Tamar kolommen* shows a picture of her with a sign bearing the name "Sinjavski," a sign which she carried when she and six others demonstrated for the freedom of Russian authors in front of an unreceptive Russian embassy. She comments: "Demonstreren helpt zelden en ik doe het niet eens met plezier. Liever schrijf ik stukjes. Die halen ook niets uit, maar ik schrijf ze graag." In her remarks about the 1981 peace march, it becomes clear that her intuitive aversion to such marches does not come chiefly from her political criticism (Western peace marches concentrate only on American nuclear weapons and ignore Soviet ones), but rather from her ingrained fear of mindlessly ideological crowds. "En natuurlijk doen de joden niet mee," she writes. "Een rilling van herkenning loopt over hun ruggen als ze horen dat Mient Jan Faber de honderdduizenden oproept voor een Nieuw Europa" (*Wantrouwen*, p.28). Such a comparison automatically draws vehement protests, but it is not as far-fetched as one might at first suppose. One protesting reader later withdraws his objections:

> Hij heeft intussen een foto gezien die ik u zal beschrijven. Plaats: Museumplein. Datum 27 juni 1941. Het plein is tjokvol mensen, alleen stonden ze toen met hun gezicht naar het Rijksmuseum en hun rug naar het Concertgebouw. Ze demonstreren. Over de hele breedte van het Concertgebouw hangt een spandoek: Mit Adolf Hitler in ein Neues Europa. De demonstratie is georganiseerd door de NSB. Duitsland is een week tevoren Rusland binnengevallen. Een heel andere aanleiding dus en een andere mentaliteit. Maar toch, veertig jaar later wordt onder ovaties opnieuw op het Museumplein om een Nieuw Europa geroepen, en een "rilling van herkenning" is dan onvermijdelijk (*Wantrouwen*, p.40).

Wanting peace is, of course, "een andere mentaliteit." But uncomfortable though Rubinstein's comparisons may be, her fundamental objections to the dynamics of crowds and ideology bear careful consideration. They cannot be dismissed, as Rubinstein's detractors have sometimes done, by calling them the result of "een oorlogstrauma." Rubinstein herself is quick to defend her comparisons with Nazi Germany. "Hoezo trauma?" she retorts. "Het vermogen van een ervaring te leren, is dat een trauma?" (Interview, p.35). The question here is perhaps not so much whether people can or do ever learn from history, but rather Rubinstein's basic thesis that experience does and should shape theory. World War II and all it stands for is Rubinstein's most fundamental

experience; it is not invalid simply because it is shared by fewer and fewer people in Western society.

Probably more disappointing to the thoughtful reader open to her criticism of "the left" is what Aad Nuis has called her "vriendelijke onverschilligheid tegenover rechts." He continues:

> Gedeeltelijk komt dat, denk ik, doordat ze onderschat wat het Nederlandse conservatisme voor kwaad kan, maar zelfs die onderschatting komt weer voort uit het feit dat rechtse opinies voor haar niet echt meetellen, of ze nu met de hare overeenstemmen of niet. Waarom zou ze zich druk maken? Het is te saai om op te noemen (Nuis 1984).

Without sharing Nuis' concerns about "het Nederlandse conservatisme," which after all is remarkably liberal when seen in a global perspective, we may find it puzzling that the otherwise wide-ranging Rubinstein so consistently manages to leave non-communist dictatorships out of her writing. Of the works I have read, only "Onze onpartijdigheid," a column from 1982 (*Wantrouwen*, p.67-74), addresses this discrepancy directly: there is already a lot of public criticism of rightist dictatorships (inherent in the anti-American sentiment currently prevailing in the Netherlands); geographically she feels a lot closer to the communist dangers in Eastern Europe than to the rightist dangers in Latin America and Africa; emotionally she can identify much better with the struggles of the Eastern Europeans who, after all, had some sort of a democratic tradition before the Russians took over; Latin America is more of an American than a European concern; and, historically, communist dictatorships need more opposition, for "rechtse dictaturen houden eerder op dan linkse" (p.69). Readers who consider the explosive situation in Latin America, such as the effect of its staggering debt on the world economy, to be of worldwide importance, and who had expected the usual provocatively honest comment from a Rubinstein who did not hesitate to voice her opinions on China and Vietnam, will find these excuses disappointingly hollow.

Whether or not one agrees with Rubinstein's political comments, however, it would be a mistake to concentrate solely on them in an effort to come to terms with her writing. More important than her views, she has a style which induces readers to read her columns (or her books) faithfully even if they do not agree with her analysis. In the jury report for the Multatuli prize in 1979, Rubinstein was praised for the "volstrekt persoonlijke toon en een doeltreffende woordkeuze" which constitute the major characteristics of a "door haar zelf gecreëerd precair personalistisch genre" (*Wantrouwen*, back cover). While "persoonlijke toon" and "doeltreffende woordkeuze" seem quite clear, "personalistisch genre" is not a common literary term and merits further discussion. Generally, of course, the feuilleton is characterised by a personal tone, and subjectivity is a distinct stylistic feature. Renate Rubinstein's "personalistisch genre" bears the stamp of her "dogmatically undogmatic" stance: it is characterized by constant interaction between a rationally confessed doctrine and a completely opposite emotional response. Equal weight is given to both rational doctrine and emotional response, and this usually leads to a contradiction or paradox with no easy solutions. Such contradictions are inherent in life; most of us manage to avoid them by avoiding either the doctrine or the emotions. In her writing Renate Rubinstein avoids neither. Every higher moral order is tested for its effect on human beings; every spontaneous human emotion is checked for its effect on the community.

But contradictions can also have a humorous

side. Again and again, Rubinstein saves herself from lofty moralization or dejected resignation by her ability to see, and to convey to the reader, the humour inherent in life's many contradictions. A few examples: in one of her columns, "Opgepikt" (*Ieder*, p.45-48), Rubinstein tests the liberal dictum of racial equality. This dictum denies that race makes any difference at all, a laudable position which seems impossible to maintain in practice, as Rubinstein discovers:

> Het was in Den Haag en ik stond om een uur of negen in de avond onder het neon van de halte te wachten op de tram naar het station. Een Volkswagen rijdt langs, stopt aan de overkant van de straat en iemand vraagt: "Zoek je vervoer?" "Ik moet naar het station." "Stap maar in, we rijden je wel." De automobilist was een neger en ik dacht dat er een vrouw naast hem zat, maar kon dat niet goed zien en liep al maar naar ze toe. Het waren twee zwarte jongens.

Not many of Rubinstein's readers would have gotten themselves into such a situation — they would have stayed under the neon lights of the tram stop or, if things had gotten this far, would have refused politely and beaten a hasty retreat. Rubinstein anticipates this response:

> Op dat moment had ik natuurlijk nog kunnen, en in veler ogen moeten zeggen: "Sorry, ik wacht toch maar liever op de tram," maar ik stapte in. Omdat het toch een beetje lullig is en truttig en beledigend om zoiets te weigeren als het negers zijn. Omdat ze dan denken dat je bang voor ze bent omdat ze zwart zijn en je al die verhalen hebt gehoord, terwijl je in werkelijkheid zonder meer zou weigeren als het twee witte binken waren. Moeilijk weigeren dus. Het is tenslotte een vriendelijk aanbod, nietwaar? Je hebt geen been om op te staan als je dat afslaat. Wie goed doet, goed ontmoet, en omgekeerd. Tenminste, dat hoopte ik, terwijl de bijzitter uitstapte, zijn stoel opklapte en ik instapte en achterin ging zitten met gemengde gedachten, waarvan de voornaamste waren: "Mijn portemonnee maar daar zit niet viel in" en "die jongens denken dat ze het voor mekaar hebben, maar dat zal ze lelijk tegenvallen want ze krijgen toevallig wel met mij te maken." Groot vertoon van luchtigheid dus (p.45-46).

After veiled proposals for other activities, the boys do eventually bring her to the train station, where she invites them to the "stations restauratie": "daar zaten we dan: twee aspirant-zware jongens ieder achter hun pilsje en ik, als tante met haar neefjes, achter een kopje koffie" (p.47). Through an impossible situation the moral "wie goed doet, goed ontmoet" has been tested and proven sound, but it is clear that the entire episode took place only because the boys were black and Rubinstein held to liberal denials of race perception, in reality a reverse sort of race discrimination. Rubinstein has no solution to this sort of contradiction, as she states in a typically anti-authoritarian conclusion:

> En wat de moraal van dit verhaal is weet ik ook niet. Dat het aardige mensen zijn, Surinamers, net als wij, maar toch vreemdelingen, want ze zijn hier vaak pas kort en hebben daarom meer sympathie nodig dan de ingezetenen (p.48).

On the other hand, in one of my favourite columns, "Rood lichtje" (*Ieder*, p.68-70), experience does not question but rather affirms principle. The situation is familiar to most of us:

> Op weg naar de kapper reed ik vanmiddag door het rode licht. Er was ogenblikkelijk een auto van links, maar ik kwam met de schrik vrij. Met die schrik zit ik bij de kapper en stamp het erin: denk erom, nooit meer door rood, wat er ook gebeurt, nooit door rood, nooit door rood, gewoon niet doen, nooit door rood. Want je moet het er bij mij instampen. Kennelijk. Gewoon, normaal, automatisch stoppen voor rood doe ik niet. Dat wist ik niet, maar dat blijkt nu (p.68).

She had the usual good reasons for running the red light as she did:

> Waarom reed ik eigenlijk door? Ik was geprovoceerd. Vóór mij zat een klootzak die mij had gesneden en mij daardoor in mijn vaart belemmerd had en die reed door het oranje heen. Ik wou dat niet op mij laten zitten. Een ander snijden en daar nog voordeel van hebben ook! Dat zou onrecht zijn. Ik reed dus achter hem aan met een diep gevoel van innerlijk gelijk. Door rood. Dat is wat ik bedoel: het mag niet, maar ik vond dat ik mocht (p.68).

She continues: "Ik lees op het ogenblik een verschrikkelijk goed boek over Hitler." The reader stops in amazement. What connection could there possibly be between Renate Rubinstein running a red light and Hitler? But there is: "die man dacht voortdurend dat hij gelijk had, dat hij boven de wet stond, dat hij zelf uitmaakte wat de wet was. Zo'n monster schuilt ook in mij. Kijk maar." Again humor saves from melodrama: "je kunt niet van mij zeggen dat ik de omvang van het probleem onderschat. Het is imponerend hoe diep ik mijzelf verafschuw en ik vertel het aan de kapper: 'Ik ben door het rode licht gereden.' De kapper schiet in de lach..."

However, she does not let a sympathetic hairdresser alleviate her awareness of the severity of her crime and instead underscores the importance of a general moral order:

> Geen afleidingsmanoeuvres: rood licht is niet misleidend. Het betekent stoppen, stilstaan, afblijven, bek houden. Dat weet je best... En daar ben ik het gloeiend mee eens. Ik vind niet dat niemand zich van het rode licht iets aan moet trekken, of dat iemand daar weleens een uitzondering op mag maken. Ik ben daar juist heel streng over: de maatschappij moet door wetten geregeld worden, sonst wordt het een janboel (p.69).

In her conclusion, however, personal experience still triumphs over the abstract moral order, since even moral behaviour reinforced by the knowledge that it is in a person's best interests is not easy to maintain:

> Pff. Waarom komt de moraal niet vanzelf, zoals de liefde en de eetlust en het slapen, waarom gelukkig is de schrik echt? Daar ziet niets aangeleerds aan, die kun je dus vertrouwen. Met plechtige geestdrift verklaar ik het: ik zal nooit door het rode licht rijden. Wat een mooi gevoel is dat. Want het is in mijn eigenbelang en tevens ontzettend moreel. Zo'n gevoel maak ik niet vaak mee (p.70).

Both "Opgepikt" and "Rood licht" are good examples of the style which makes Rubinstein's columns so delightful. This style is first of all anti-authoritarian: it elicits the reader's emotional sympathy by appealing to an actual or possible common experience. It then proceeds to analyse that experience by isolating various aspects of it under a spotlight and innocently asking bothersome questions which eventually lead to a rethinking of the entire experience. "Een tot op de tanden met argeloosheid gewapende scribente," Ischa Meijer calls her, whose "stijl van schrijven steeds sterker bepaald wordt door een manier van vragen, die onontkoombaar leidt tot ontmytho-logisering..." (*Ieder*, front cover). Rubinstein herself theorizes little about her writing style, though in the interview with Brokken she mentions her preference for autobiography and "de korte vorm": "Ik ben niet goed in het verzinnen van dingen. Ik houd niet van een lange vorm. Mijn manier is een onderwerp als een rode draad te gebruiken en het dan van verschillende kanten te belichten. De verbindende stukken sla ik over" (p.41). Her ideals are expressed more clearly in her negative evaluation of Jung's style as characterized by "een plechtige toon, zonder humor en scepsis, cultureel zowel als sociaal gewichtig en met nooit een onverwachte zinswending of conclusie" (*Ieder*, p.177). Her own writing is precisely the opposite: even in her self-righteous moments she preserves a sense of humor and a tone of scepticism about herself, characterizing herself, for example, as "trots als een aap" for having delivered a particularly eloquent critique of the Dutch left

(*Wantrouwen*, p.34). Nichols has called her style feminine but not feminist: he is presumably thinking of the appeal to arguments and logic via experience and emotion, the asking of pointedly innocent questions, and the constant self-deprecation through humor and scepticism. Nevertheless, the debate on an identifiable feminine style is still raging (Schouten), and Rubinstein's relationship to the feminine and the feminist, whether in style or in ideas, is a subject for another study.

The most vivid impression left by her works, however, is the primary importance in her life of words and writing. Words are her weapons, her tools, her philosophical categories for dealing with an unpredictable world which is sometimes friendly, often hostile, but always fascinating and worth exploring. Certainly politically, in her crusade on behalf of Western democracy, words play a crucial role. Her most fundamental redefinition of "right" and "left" is based on the significance of words: "rechts is een maatschappijstructuur die gebaseerd is op geheimhouding... en rechts is een persoon die zijn uiterste best doet om wat hij doet of gedaan heeft geheim te houden... Links is een maatschappij die de communicatie tussen de mensen niet belemmert en links is een persoon die de waarheid zoekt en zegt of schrijft" (*Ieder*, p.83). But words are no less important in the personal realm. In the age-old debate amongst children about which sense (sight, hearing etc.) one would miss the most, she picks speech. "Niets zou mij zo belemmeren en stigmatiseren," she writes, "als niet meer in staat zijn mijn gedachten of grappen met mijn eigen mond te formuleren. Die handicap zou me niet meevallen" (*Nee*, p.86). With her illness, her physical ability to express her thoughts in written form, particularly under the deadline of a weekly column, is steadily diminishing. "Het wordt moeilijk," she said already a few years ago. "Iedere keer is het weer een overwinning als ik het stuk in het weekend af heb. Voor zo'n column moet je vrij veel lezen en veel opzoeken. Het wordt erg vermoeiend. Ik heb er de energie bijna niet meer voor" (Interview, p.36). Of course, even energy is a relative thing; without underestimating the effect of her illness on her ability to work, one must call nothing less than phenomenal all the energy which she has already invested in her lifelong contribution to Western culture as embodied in the Netherlands. The German writer Kurt Tucholsky, Rubinstein once wrote, was "de grootste satirische columnist van onze roteeuw" (*Wantrouwen*, p.66). She herself could make a strong claim for that title.

Postscript 1996.

"Opnieuw is de wereld weer een stukje leger geworden," wrote Annie M.G. Schmidt in *Vrij Nederland* of December 1, 1990, about Renate Rubinstein's death. Multiple sclerosis had finally taken its toll; in an interview with *Libelle* (July 9, 1993) her sister Gerda hints that Renate, fiercely independent to the last, did final battle with increasing incapacity and pain, inevitable hospitalization and institutional death, by choosing her own time to go.

Being Renate Rubinstein, however, she had the last word: the posthumous publication of her most controversial theme book, the lyrical account of her secret thirteen-year affair with the nationally revered writer Simon Carmiggelt. *Mijn beter ik* (Meulenhoff, 1991) is at one and the same time the most typically "Rubinsteinian" collection and an exaggeration of that style: the trademark subjectivity is concentrated entirely on the personal, on the minute details of the relationship between her and her lover, but in that concentration is captured the strength of love, irrationally insistent in spite of its evident flaunting of rules Rubinstein continued to affirm.

In a long letter of thanks she wrote me in the

summer of 1987, after I had sent her a copy of my article, she expressed her appreciation for my "reading" of the column "Rood licht." "Everything in that column happened as I describe it," she wrote, "but the poignancy has another origin. The sin I write about was that I had fallen in love with a married man, who after a while ended the liaison. I found the metaphor in the running through a red traffic light and I think that the column got its urgency from the hidden meaning" (in *Mijn beter ik*, p.30, she explains this to the world). How it must have delighted her to write, in that same letter, "Simon Carmiggelt, who was a very good friend of mine..."! Her death saddened me, in a way that few deaths of people I've ever actually met do: indeed, "de wereld is weer een stukje leger geworden."

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