

## RENATE RUBINSTEIN (1929- )

Manfred Wolf  
San Francisco State University  
San Francisco, USA

Renate Rubinstein was born in Germany in 1929 but moved to the Netherlands in the 1930s. She has been writing columns for *Vrij Nederland* for almost thirty years; her first collection of these columns in book form appeared in 1964 (*Namens Tamar*). She has published numerous other books since then, and was awarded the Multatuli prize for literature in 1979.<sup>1</sup>

Renate Rubinstein's columns have appeared in the weekly *Vrij Nederland* since 1962. Most of her twenty books are collections of these, though she has also brought out volumes of essays on such subjects as divorce, feminism and illness (she has had multiple sclerosis for the last twelve years). Since her book on that subject is the only one available in English, I will draw on it heavily.

To call her a columnist is somewhat misleading for the English-speaking reader. She has written on a great diversity of topics, from the Dutch peace and disarmament movement to literary translation, from Israel and the Arabs to the differences between men and women. Evidently she is granted far more freedom in subject matter than her English or American counterparts. It is difficult to picture Ellen Goodman or Meg Greenfield or Anthony Lewis or David Broder writing about the manner in which nineteenth-century novels rendered love, as contrasted with the way modern novels do, or offering a critique of total honesty in relationships--this latter one might expect, and indeed has had, from Tom Wolfe, but he does not have a regular slot in a weekly publication. It seems that Renate Rubinstein's singular talents as a personal essayist are aided and abetted by some very enlightened editorial policies as well as by a devoted, close-knit (though often quarrelsome) literary community in the Netherlands, which takes the trouble to write her, polemicize with her, in short, stimulate her.

Another way in which this freedom has been beneficial to her is in encouraging an intense flexibility of literary form. Though her work falls roughly in the category of

non-fiction (her one short story by conventional definition is "De man uit Singapore"), the columns range from imaginary dialogue ("Theoretisch") to parable ("Leven") to interior monologue ("Doen Alsof") to a zany surrealism ("Huwelijk") to an almost Chekhovian sketch ("Zielig") to a vignette ("Verwijt") to a Katherine Mansfield-like story ("Some Untidy Spot") (*Namens Tamar*). The last three pieces are constructed like short fiction, with "Some Untidy Spot" recording how a woman on the day of her divorce remembers getting lost in a foreign hospital once and stumbling on a "lijkschouw;" in general, a very good case can be made for not calling some of her columns non-fiction at all.

And if the genres are versatile, the style, so readable, so elegant, so immediate, is also amazingly flexible. The description in "Comparitie" of the dreary, cheerless place where the divorcing couple meets one final time as a couple, highlights the feeling of loss (*Niets te verliezen* 78-80). After discussing how women who invest more feeling usually attribute a mystique to the men who have made them suffer, she asserts the similarity between all jilted lovers by ending with a marvelous adaptation of Shylock in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*: "Als ze gestoken worden, bloeden ze niet? Als ze gekieteld worden, lachen ze niet? Als ze vergiftigd worden, sterven ze niet? En als ze kwaad gedaan wordt, wreken ze zich niet?" ("Waar blijft het raadsel?" *Twee eendjes* 104).

She can sum up an argument vividly, directly, compactly. This latter quality gives her best writing an aphoristic ring: "Mannen willen geen aanstoot geven, geen last

veroorzaken, ze laten zich liever manipuleren door de maatschappij dan door hun vrouw" ("Rechtvaardigheidsgevoel," *Ieder* 188-189). On the same subject of the psychology of men: "Als je even geen aandacht schenkt aan het kwart woord waarin zij hun hele lijdensverhaal leggen, gaan ze naar het café, of hun vriendin of ze slaan met deuren, of erger" ("Het zeuren," *Ieder* 180). In one sentence she is able to render the inexpressiveness, the need for attention, and the emotionality of men. Lest the reader think that Rubinstein is writing about the flaws of men only, "Het Zeuren" is about a serious flaw, as she sees it, of women.

Generalizations abound in these essays, yet they are constantly supported by detailed observations or personal experiences. It is this combination that makes her writing so reminiscent of the English eighteenth-century essayists. Like them, she is fascinated with defining our natures and with charting the twists and turns of the human experience. Like them, she values human emotions but views these as inherently dangerous. A rationalist, she understands that love, in our otherwise safe world, has become the one area where we remain maddeningly vulnerable. In contemporary life we taste danger only in passion.

Having suffered much from it, she is sympathetic to its imperatives. But she is as critical of the restlessness that drives people as Dr. Johnson is of the "hunger of imagination," which fills us with illusions and dooms us to disappointment. Relationships are best when certain limitations obtain and when "mensen vaak niet thuis zijn, op reis, hun telefoon stuk, hun adres onzeker, zodat ze niet beschikbaar zijn om duidelijk uitgelegd te krijgen hoezeer en waarom ze ongelijk hebben. Menig huwelijk is op die dagelijkse beschikbaarheid gestrand. . ." ("Het zeuren," *Ieder* 183). The present-day ideal of a perfect sincerity, a frankness that will bring the lovers closer, strikes her as

unworkable.

She is in fact a neo-classicist. Even her titles, e.g. "Over de gewoontevorming" (*Ieder* 191-193), indicate as much, and this classicism, this rationalism, is not at all gainsaid by a keen sense of vulnerability and emotionality. In "Tuttel & Co." she takes no joy in having to announce the grim law "dat vrijheid, de echte hemelse vrijheid ons op aarde alleen in uurtjes toegemeten is. Voor de rest van de tijd heersen ijzeren wetten en als je je tanden niet poetst verlies je ze" (*Twee eendjes* 40). Among these iron-clad laws is the one that forms the theme of *Niets te verliezen en toch bang*, the book about her own divorce from her second husband, the psychologist Jaap van Heerden: that any great investment of feeling is hazardous. The anguish of loss results from the fear of abandonment we all experienced as children but learned to distrust; now in adulthood it proves itself nightmarishly real, the chaos we never thought could happen. Again, it is the one who doesn't want the divorce, i.e., the one who is more heavily invested in feeling, who suffers the punishment.

She admits to this same emotional dimension in the book about her illness, *Nee heb je* (1985), which appeared in English in 1989 as *Take it and Leave it: Aspects of Being Ill*. When she fails to get hopeful results from her doctor, she turns to the magic of alternative medicine. "I have loved and love the rational, but if that so flagrantly fails I reach for the alternative, and if need be the miraculous--only the religious I draw the line at" (22).

With the classicist's love of truth-telling and objectivity, she observes herself in her illness. Yet as a person she is most whole when she dwells on what is outside of herself, that is to say, when she concentrates. "People who are concentrating are never pathetic." And too, the preciousness of time allows her to emphasize what is truly valuable: "Time is our inexorable master. All you can do as an individual is to make your own choice, let

go of the secondary issues and deal only with the important ones. The main thing is concentration. The rest you send away with the garbage" (87). She is learning to take life—and leave it.

What is it like to be seriously ill? First of all, there is the feeling of shame. One feels somehow responsible, even if one is not. Then there is the shame induced by any calamity. Even concentration camp victims, or rather, especially such victims, feel profound shame. And finally there is the exclusion from normalcy, which again brings with it shame. What she pleads for eloquently is that disabled people become more visible and are shown as being able to occupy themselves with ordinary human concerns:

... the invalid as someone who just happens to be sitting, perhaps confined to a wheelchair, one who talks about mathematics or about humour, that you don't see on your screen. . . . The disabled person who is interesting for something other than his sad fate is rarely seen in public life here (66).

Her ideal is human normalcy, not the politicized agitation of minority groups. This is frequently regarded as conservatism, but for Rubinstein it is common sense. And it is this same experiential common sense that allows her to attack any number of commonly held ideas, for example, that uncertainty makes life harder for the seriously ill person. On the contrary, she argues, uncertainty is precisely what gives hope. And such hope is not kindled by the modern notion that the patient must know the awful truth. The psyche produces illusions to protect the victim. Can anyone say that these are not useful?

She debunks, too, the idea that it is better not to be alone when you are ill. You need all your strength to do what you have to do—that is, take care of yourself—without expending emotional energy on someone else. There are two unforgettable portraits in this book, one of the Dutch author and chess grand master Hein Donner, felled by

a stroke, and the other of the ninety-two-year-old German cultural historian Norbert Elias, almost completely blind and deaf. Both are studies in solitary courage.

Just this rejection of popular ideas along with a warm-hearted embracing of experience marks the narrator of *De man uit Singapore*. Reluctant to succumb to the Eastern mysticism clichés of the self-styled Yoga teacher she meets, she still gives herself to the experience—and is happily surprised by his love-making, which he has firmly pronounced not to be sex.<sup>2</sup> At the end of the story the narrator is again happily surprised, this time by Mr. Jacob's passion for the downtrodden. The story is hilarious and moving, a combination I find almost everywhere in Renate Rubinstein's best work.

In conclusion, a few of the many aphorisms scattered throughout her writing<sup>3</sup>:

Verliefde ogen zijn niet blind—integendeel, ze zien veel beter dan onverschillige—ze leggen alleen anders uit ("Verliefd," *Namens Tamar*).

Het geluk zelf verplicht maken, daar ben ik tegen ("Voorlichting," *Namens Tamar*).

Leuk is de jaloezie nooit geweest, maar tegenwoordig is het een dubbele ellende: eenmaal om zichzelf en dan nog een keer omdat je het niet mag voelen ("Grenzen bedenken," *Ieder*).

Hokken is geen waarborg en eerlijk vertellen voldoet niet, op het gebied van het huwelijksgeluk heeft de wetenschap nog niets kunnen bedenken dat opweegt tegen de oude combinatie van monogamie en een vroege dood. Wat een benijdenswaardige eenvoud krijgt dat samenvallen van lot en gebod (God) achteraf ("Grenzen bedenken," *Ieder*).

Het surrealisme leeft in de harten en huiskamers der mensen ("De droom der bruid," *Tamarkolommen*).

De behoefte aan drama is een echte behoefte ("Comparities," *Ieder*).

Alleen de lege hoofden en de tjokvolle vervelen zich nooit, de rest van ons moet het monster verveling te lijf gaan ("Over de gewoontevorming," *Ieder*).

Wat is vrijheid? Vrij zijn om de gewoonten te kiezen die je aan banden leggen ("Over de gewoontevorming," *Ieder*).

#### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> See also Joldersma.

<sup>2</sup> "Still, in Holland we call this sex," I said, to keep our country's honor high. But Jacob really had to laugh about that. "Sex, how could this be sex?" (unpublished translation by Manfred Wolf).

<sup>3</sup> All of these quotes can also be found in *Liefst verliefd*, an anthology of those columns which Rubinstein considers some of her best.

#### Works by Renate Rubinstein

*Een man uit Singapore*. Amsterdam, 1979.

*Ieder woelt hier om verandering*. Amsterdam, 1979.

*Namens Tamar*. Amsterdam, 1964.

*Nee heb je*. Amsterdam, 1985.

*Niets te verliezen en toch bang*. Amsterdam, 1978.

*Take it and Leave it: Aspects of Being III*. Tr. Karin Fierke and Aad Janssen. London and New York, 1989.

*Tamarkolommen en andere berichten*. Amsterdam, 1973.

*Twee eendjes en wat brood*. Amsterdam, 1981.

#### Secondary Literature

Joldersma, Hermina. "Renate Rubinstein: An Introduction." *Canadian Journal of Netherlandic Studies* 8,1 (Spring 1988): 40-51.