Overgave en verzet. De levens- en wereldbeschouwing van Carry van Bruggen
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Summary

SURRENDER AND RESISTANCE
THE PHILOSOPHY OF CARRY VAN BRUGGEN

The work of Carry van Bruggen (1881-1932) consists mainly of contemplative and narrative prose. In it the author first and foremost seeks to discover a personal, coherent and all-embracing perspective on life. Though Carry van Bruggen’s writings are still widely read and discussed today, her philosophy has received little serious attention.

The first aim of this study is to discuss systematically Carry van Bruggen’s outlook on life and the world, to interpret it and to some extent to offer an appreciation. The biographical and socio-cultural context of her work is treated next. This increases insight into what she tried to express, while it also helps identify some of the factors whose interplay determined the development of her philosophy. Finally, the collected material is used to show how Carry van Bruggen applied her basic philosophical principles to diverse areas. Taken together the chapters of this study argue that after consideration of her philosophy the unequal and unbalanced work of this intriguing writer can be shown to be a close-knit whole.

The first chapter is an analysis of Carry van Bruggen’s basic philosophical principles. By way of introduction it sketches how around 1895 there was a reaction to the innovations originally introduced by the ‘Beweging van Tachtig’ (Movement of the Eighties). This reaction sought a more spiritual form of art together with a synthetic philosophy contrasting with contemporary materialist and positivist ideas. Carry van Bruggen’s novel Heleen (1913) fits in with this development and it contains the first outlines of the philosophy that she unfolded in her works between 1913 and 1918. Although the basic principles and assumptions of her thought, as summarized both in her lengthy essay Prometheus (1919) and in various other major essays deriving from it, are part of the revival of Hegelianism, they have clearly personal features as well. She presents her work as an invariably temporal and subjective result of her personal search for insight into herself and into all aspects of life, which cannot be separated from the dialectical process in which Unity or the One or All-One (Al-Ene) unfolds itself.

Central to Carry van Bruggen’s philosophy is the problem how the idea that everything is one can be reconciled with the obviously contrasting particularities of our experience. How the relationship between the One and the Many should ultimately be seen, she expresses in this statement: ‘Everything is One. And everything in Contrast. Our world, then, is a world of separate particularities,
broken loose and fallen away from Unity, a world of dis-integrated things, contrasts, through which Unity, as it breaks, becomes conscious of itself in man; and as it becomes self-conscious it also becomes conscious of its brokenness and yearns back to restoration and perfection of itself. Clearly we experience how this Unity, which is constantly breaking itself up and which becomes conscious of itself in its own contrasts, craves to return to itself. Brokenness wishes to be healed, that which has been rejected yearns for its origin. This all comes down to an eternal and necessary dialectical process in which the antithesis, which follows the thesis, is always followed by a synthesis, which in its turn becomes a thesis again.

The All-One's conflict with itself is always and everywhere accompanied by both an impulse to self-preservation and an impulse to self-annihilation; there is a correspondence here with urge to self-distinction and life in marked contrast with a desire for unity and wish of death. Through this discord man feels he is a being that is divided against itself. At the same time, however, some people are more ruled by the one impulse and others by the other. And to complicate things further, the succession of periods in history also rests on this same opposition.

It is especially important to note that Carry van Bruggen sees the impulse of Self-preservation of Unity reflected in human herd behaviour, that is to say in forms of collectivism. Certain individuals banding together in a group attempt to distinguish themselves from other groups so that they can counteract the force of self-annihilation. In the eyes of the writer of Promethes, the individualist is a person who opposes collectivism and the urge toward uniformity, which are both always accompanied by all kinds of dogmatism and conservatism. From this individualist position, attacks are constantly mounted against the phenomena that accompany essentially irrational and absurd herd behaviour. A sense of wonder then replaces unfounded belief in entrenched ideas; in the long run, established institutions and secure truths are undermined by doubts and relativism. Finally the reasonable insight manifests itself, that in last analysis all distinctions should be 'lifted'. But fear of death so closely linked to lust for life resists this.

Regarded from the process of Unity, the opposites that are universally active are equally necessary and as such essentially equal in value. However, things inspired by the lust for life - especially materialism and egoism - are generally considered base and evil, while the impulse to Unity - especially idealism and altruism - is thought of as noble and good. Through the phenomenon of Self-disguise (Zelfvermomming), however, baseness and evilness, which are also irrational and absurd, present themselves in misleading guises. Thus, even people with good intentions are persuaded to pursue goals that are essentially wrong. It would seem to be a fine and noble ideal to serve one's nation, church or political party and if necessary even give up everything for them. Yet in fact,
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this only serves to perpetuate a collective, which – being uniform – is nothing but a parody of Unity because Unity can manifest itself only through variety. Ever-relative distinctions ultimately necessarily require their elimination. According to Carry van Bruggen, even Hegelianism has not always drawn the far-reaching conclusions from this supposition.

The end of the first chapter demonstrates how Carry van Bruggen’s views on philosophy, ethics and literature are bound up with these principles. Against positivism she always postulates a speculative, idealistic philosophy. Subsequently she emphasizes that individual human beings can find their values and moral codes only within themselves and that general, eternal and uniform codes of conduct are untenable. In literature, finally she advocates an ‘art of the thought’ (ideënkunst), which far transcends fashionable forms of contemporary realism and naturalism. Her views on these issues clearly show that in talent and calling she thought of herself first and foremost as an individualist, even if she admits that she cannot at times escape the ‘seductive whispers’ of lust for life and that, like other thinkers, she has a tendency to turn her hard-won insights into ‘dogmas’. The history of the reception of her work shows that in the long run her readers have become more interested in her non-conformist views on the relationship between individuals and society than in her Hegelian philosophy of Unity. Especially Menno ter Braak (1902-1940) contributed to this re-evaluation.

To cast more light on the close emotional and personal involvement of Carry van Bruggen with the topics of her work, chapter two explores the circumstances of her life. She was strongly influenced by her childhood in an orthodox Jewish milieu, in which empty formalism had replaced the original inspiration. She became disappointed in her own idealism, and she thought that Judaism was doomed despite and because of its cramped reactionary attitudes. Her character and upbringing led her to different forms of individualism and with her sharp mind she soon uncovered the weak spots in opinions which were brought forward as uncontested truths. This made her particularly vulnerable to being identified outright as a member of a specific group on grounds of ingrained prejudice, whether they be stereotyped as Jews, women or autodidacts. It is a striking feature of her position that she remained sensitive to collectivistic traits in movements such as Zionism and feminism, which themselves combated prejudice; her earlier sympathy for socialism soon became very critical.

In the description of her education during the various phases of her life, this chapter devotes especial attention to the significance for Carry van Bruggen of her introduction to Frans Coenen (1866-1936) and his circle. It was Coenen in particular who introduced her to the revival of Hegelianism in the Netherlands inspired by G.J.P.J. Bolland (1854-1922) and others. These new ideas gave Carry van Bruggen and others something to go by in their attempts to justify their
scepticism. In a separate section it is argued that erotic problems also played a not unimportant role in Carry van Bruggen's life. The special feelings or sensations which she describes in her books always relate to a desire for communion and fusion at different levels; sometimes these feelings are a source of anxiety as well.

The third chapter of this study deals with the ways in which Carry van Bruggen applied her basic principles. She attempted to show that in cultural and literary history periods of collectivism alternate with those of individualism. As a focal point she used the diverging ways in which opposition figures (like Prometheus) have been appreciated. Her approach and the development of her argument cannot escape criticism, but many of her original opinions remain fascinating, especially when she comes to describe the moral conflicts that have come to haunt modern man. Even though the modern Prometheus knows that his actions are a mere 'function' within a larger whole and that every successful revolution transforms an idealistic Prometheus into a tyrannical Zeus, this must not draw him back from his duty.

Carry van Bruggen found many examples of both small and large nationalism when she tried to expose the true nature of collectivism in contemporary ideas about state, society, race and nation. At a relatively early stage, she began to combat the kind of pseudo-scientific theories that would prove to be factors in the rise of nationalism and fascism. She also rightly saw a link between ideas of 'national character' and 'mother tongue', which in her opinion could not hold out under critical evaluation. Besides, she felt that, following the 'Beweging van Tachtig', too many fables had been told about the 'beauty of language'. Her provoking ideas about translating and translations had caused people to reproach her for her own lack of Greek and Latin.

Many aspects of Carry van Bruggen's life and work appear to come together in her novel *Eva* (1927), which is the main topic of the last chapter of this study. In many spheres of life she was driven by a desire for unification but she was aware at the same time of the forces in herself which resisted. Her philosophy taught her to see this as a manifestation of the dialectic process of the All-One to which she too was subjected. All this is eloquently expressed in the following quotation from *Eva*: 'the formula for complete abandon is that... for which I have sought my entire life and which I have shunned all my life, and have praised and detested in one and the same breath of my being.' An account of Carry van Bruggen's last years, which were marked by a nervous breakdown, concludes this study. Extensive bibliographies of her own work and of material consulted for this study have been appended.

[Translation: Paul Hulsman /dr. A.J. Vanderjagt]