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RAHEL LEVIN VARNHAGEN:
HARNESSING THE ABILITY TO 

BECOME

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BY 
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Rahel Levin Varnhagen:
Influence of a Jewess on German Romanticism

Life is not always a box of chocolates, especially if one is part of a marginalized race, religion or gender. Since all three apply to Rahel Levin Varnhagen, one can easily imply that she did not live an easy life. She was raised as a Jewess in a time when Jews were welcome in society but not yet fully integrated into it. As a woman she was limited to a particular lifestyle as well, and yet she took advantage of her surroundings to make a place for herself in the formation of German Romanticism. Due to her self-education emphasizing enlightenment thinking, her non-partiality and the salons she hosted, Rahel Varnhagen proved to be an essential element of the German Romantic movement in Berlin.

Although she was born into a marginalized group, Rahel's family was fortunate enough to be among the wealthier and more protected Jews in Berlin in the late 1800's. After the Thirty Year's War of the previous century, population was sparse as was the supply merchants. Because of this demand for people and trade, exiles and Jews were welcomed into Berlin more so than ever before, exiles to work the land and Jews to regulate the cash flow (Hertz 25). At the time, both Jews and gentiles lived under a system of hierarchy, a type of informal feudalism toward the rulers. Unlike their neighbors, however, even the highest class of Jews could not become citizens, own land, or receive
many of the basic rights that even the menial Gentile classes were granted. Classifications among the Jews ranked them from “protected” with a “general privilege” of citizenship to “tolerated” in the eyes of the Prussian rulers, but no Jews were full-fledged citizens (41). Due to some business dealings with King Frederick II during the Seven Years’ War, Rahel’s father, Markus Levin, was awarded the highest level of protection, which “permitted him and his entire family to reside in Berlin. This position therefore was about as secure and legitimate as it could be for Jews at the time” (Tewarson RLV 20). As a banker and jeweler, Levin was wealthy as well, dealing mostly with members of the upper class and Nobility. Consequently, although she was marginalized as a Jew, Rahel stemmed from one of the most fortunate types of Jewish families of her time.

Because of her family’s wealth, Rahel was afforded many opportunities unique to affluence. One of these fortunes circumstances was that Levin would frequently combine business with pleasure, inviting customers to the home to deal business as well as enjoy comfortable conversation. The effect was that

hier hatten die Beziehungen der reichen Juden zur deutschen Aristokratie und zum Künstlertum ihren Ursprung. Das Geschäftliche wurde mit dem Geselligen verbunden und führte bei den Juden zu einer Lockergung der orthodoxen Lebensweise und bei den Adligen zum Abbau ihrer Vorurteile. (Tewarson RV 14)

Thus from an early age, Rahel engaged in conversation with people of all social classes and became familiar with the notion of intermingled societal groups. These informal gatherings hosted by her father were the forerunners of Rahel’s own future salons.
Another opportunity afforded her because of her family's position was the privilege of obtaining a decent education. Standard studies for Jewish women at this time consisted of the study of religion, reading a minimal amount of Yiddish literature and learning the household necessities. This may have appeased some women, but as Rahel "was considered a girl of extraordinary intelligence, clever as the sun, and kindhearted at the same time; thoroughly original," this minimal level of education could not appease her (Tewarson RLU 35). For this reason, she independently studied all that was made available to her. As she explained to a friend in her twenty-second year,

Ich lern' jetzt Englisch (bald kann ich lesen), die andre Woche fang ich Violine an; und bin ich im Englischen auf einen Grünen Zweig, so lern' ich Deutsch. Mit Französisch fang ich von morgen an mich diesen Winter selbst weiter zu placken. (Kemp 22)

Beyond this, she employed tutors to teach her mathematics and read books by contemporary artists such as Lessing, Fichte, Wieland and Goethe. Although this was a completely informal education in comparison to those of her Gentile peers, for which she forever considered herself "ein abscheulicher Ignorant" (22), yet it introduced her to the thoughts and movements that would later dominate her perspectives.

Of all the things she studied, the independent readings were the greatest influence on her education, as from these she adopted the Enlightenment philosophy of self-thinking. Reading Lessing, she discovered this idea of 'self-thinking', or the notion that "anyone can engage in alone and of his own accord,
the supreme capacities of man," (Arendt 8). Here reason was of
greater significance than history, and the ability to think, not
the ability to receive a formal education, raised an individual
to their maximum capacity of intelligence. Rahel interpreted
this to mean that despite her limited education, through
diligence she too could make something of her intelligence. For
this reason, as she confided in a friend,

Ich werde so fleißig sein, als es für mich angeht,
soviel ich können werde, werde ich gelernt haben, und
über das übrige, was ich nicht werde lernen können,
werd ich mich, wie ehedem, meiner Sorglosigkeit
graziöse in die Arme werfen. (Kemp 25)

Social limitations could not hold her back, for through diligence
and determination, she transcended the standards of education for
a Jewess and expanded to the full potential of her intelligence
as a self-thinker.

This philosophy that "im Grunde-muß man alles von selbst
sein," also imbued in Rahel the necessity to accept others freely
and openly (Kemp 100). As Wägenbaur describes this,

Aus Not nahm [Rahel] Zuflucht zu dem, was die
Reformpädagogik als Erziehungsziel formulierte: das
Selbstdenkenlernen. Ihre Eigenständigkeit im Urteilen
und Unabhängigkeit von gängigen Vorurteilsstrukturen
rühren daher. (196)

Recognizing her own inadequacies and the necessity for each
individual to think for themselves, she reserved judgment of
others in acceptance of their potential to become.

In ascribing to the philosophy of self-thinking while
understanding the necessity of allowing others to develop and
become, Rahel transformed ideas of the Enlightenment into notions
of Romanticism. Enlightenment thought emphasized the role of reason and logic, for "it was a fundamental principle of the Aufklärung that individuals should think for themselves, that they should accept a belief only when it agrees with their own critical reason" (Beiser 4). Furthermore, as Schlegel describes Romantic poetry, "das ist ihr eigentliches Wesen, dass sie ewig nur werden, nie vollendet sein kann." (Schlegel 80) which is this same concept as the ever-developing, self-thinking individual. Here we begin to understand the role Rahel would play as a salon hostess, for her self-education taught her to value reason, while her understanding of thinking caused her to realize that each individual could potentially become something incredible and should be treated accordingly.

This enlightened education had its drawbacks as well as its advantages, though, for the process of thinking for herself also confirmed her belief that she was being disadvantaged as a Jewess. Despite her initiative to learn and the progressive thoughts she was developing, she hadn't yet learned how to effectively share this with others. In writing to her friend David Veit, she thus lamented:

Wenn meine Mutter gutmütig und hart genug gewesen wäre, und sie hätte nur ahnen können, wie ich würde, so hätte sie mich bei meinem ersten Schrei in heissem Staub erstickten sollen. Ein ohnmächtiges Wesen, dem es für nichts gerechnet wird, nun so zu Haus zu sitzen, und das Himmel und Erde, Menschen und Vieh wider sich hätte, wenn es weg wollte (und das Gedanken hat wie ein anderer Mensch), und richtig zu Haus bleiben muss, und das, wenn 's movements macht, die merklief sind, Vorwiege aller Art verschlucken muss, die man ihm mit raison macht; weil es wirklich nicht raison ist zu schüttlen; denn fallen die Gläser, die Spinnrocken,
die Flore, die Nähzeuge weg, so haut alles ein. (Kemp 19)

Rahel wanted more of life than to remain at home with a domestic lifestyle while movements of revolution filled the nation, yet she had not yet discovered how her ideas could be efficiently shared with others. She recognized that

ich bin nicht umsonst auf der Welt, nicht nur darum da, um den Zucker mit konsumieren zu helfen und die Sechser in Umlauf zu bringen, und meine individuellen Eigenschaften dienen, einen Menschen nützlich und seine Talente geltend zu machen, (32)

yet her upbringing as a Jewess, „falschgeboren,“ (115) and as an outsider of mainstream society, prevented her from taking part of the action surrounding her, much to her chagrin.

This despairing situation changed, though, when, armed with a substantial education and the desire to do something with the ideas she upheld, Rahel continued the tradition after her father’s death of opening her home to visitors for conversational and entertainment purposes, albeit this time without the business element. Bars and nightclubs were not locals suited for the eighteenth century upper class, so if acquaintances desired to gather in informal settings, the home was their best option (Hertz 98). Over time, informal gatherings developed into what would later be classified as Romantic Salons, or “Tee bei mir” as Rahel described these gatherings (Kemp 114). The term ‘salon’ refers to the “social gathering organized by the lady of the house, who orchestrated the intellectual discourses that characterized salon socializing” typical of European houses in the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries (Hertz 14). Salons
provided a comfortable atmosphere conducive to conversation and the exchange of ideas, and as such, they were a welcome alternative to other forms of entertainment for High Society.

Rahel had several reasons for wanting to open her home to others. As aforementioned, she desired a take part in the movements around her and saw this as her opportunity to reach beyond the walls of her home to share her learning with others. As an unwed Jewess, employment had not been an option, since women of her social status were not a part of the workforce, and especially not Jews. Another motive behind her creating the salon environment was that she knew firsthand the pains of isolation and alienation, due to her Jewish heritage. Despite strong ties to the outside world, Rahel always felt that her Jewish heritage prevented her from being a part of mainstream society, that she was separated and ostracized from her peers. Her account of the following dream, wherein she is conversing with two of her close Gentile friends, illustrates the alienation and loneliness she felt as a result of her religion:

We were the maids of the earth and no longer living...our business on this bed...was to ask each other what we had suffered—a kind of confessional! "Do you know mortification?" we asked each other, for instance. And if we had ever felt this particular form of suffering in our lives, we said: "Yes that I know," with a loud cry of grief, and the particular form of suffering we were speaking of was rent from the heart, the pain multiplied a hundredfold: but then we were rid of it forever and felt wholly sound and light. The Mother of God was quiet all the while, only said Yes! To each question, and also wept. Bettina asked: "Do you know the suffering of love?" Whimpering and almost howling, I exclaimed, while the tears streamed and I held a handkerchief over my face, a long, long Yes! "Do you know mortification?" Yes! again yes.
"Do you know murdered youth?" Yes! I whimper again in a long-drawn-out tone, dissolving in tears. We were finished, our hearts pure, but mine was still filled with the heavy burden of earth; I sit up, look excitedly at the other women, and want my burden taken from me; in words spoken thickly, but with extreme distinctness, because I want to receive the answer Yes to this question too, I ask: "Do you know—disgrace?" Both shrink away from me as if in horror, though with still something like pity in their gesture; they glance rapidly at one another and try, in spite of the confined space, to move away from me. In a state bordering on madness I scream: "I have not done anything. It’s nothing I have done. I have not done anything. I am innocent!" The women believe me; I see that by the rigid way they lie still, no longer unwillingly, but they no longer understand me. "Woe," I cry out, weeping as if my heart were threatening to melt away, "they do not understand me either. Never, then! This burden I must keep; I knew that. Forever! Merciful God! Woe!" (Tewarson, RLW 120-21)

Rahel knew all too well what it was like to be alone. As a Jewess she was not considered part of mainstream society, and furthermore, those who had the ability to let her into their world abhorred the idea and only watched Rahel’s suffering from a distance. Anguishing so from alienation, in conjunction with her belief that all have the ability as self-thinkers to become, she desired instead to create an environment where social integration would be promoted. As she simply believed, "In Gesellschaft muss keine Rangordnung sein" (Arendt 196).

Rahel recognized that "der den andern ausschließen wollte, schließt nur sich aus," and for this reason, her salon accepted visitors from a variety of social classes (Kemp 83). During the earliest phases of her salons, the majority of her guests consisted of family members and Jewish friends. Actors and singers that were familiar with her father’s meetings continued
to frequent the home, and members of the lower nobility that Rahel met on her excursions to Bohemian health spas began to visit as well. With time, even Prince Louis Ferdinand, nephew to the king, learned about these gatherings and found pleasure in this mixed company. Authors and poets joined the throng, and on occasion Rahel’s maid Line would add her sentiments on a topic when she deemed it appropriate (Tewarson 40). Thus Rahel did not limit her visitors to those of a particular class or creed, but opened her doors to all “uninvited” friends as well as those “being introduced” (Hertz 98). Additionally, she allowed her guests to discuss whatever conversations suited them, which did not always follow orthodox social customs. Clemens Brentano described Rahel and her gatherings in this manner:

She is without pretension, permits the conversation to take any turn, even to the point of uncivility, to which she reacts with merely a smile, she herself is extremely kind and yet strikingly witty. That Prince Louis Ferdinand and Prince Radziwill visit her causes much envy, but she doesn’t care any more than if they were lieutenants or students, if these had as much spirit and talent as those, they would be equally welcome to her. (Tewarson, RLV 37)

She did not send formal invitations or expect particular guests, rather she opened her home to people of all classes for a warm glass of tea and a little “Dachstuben-Wahrheit” (Kemp 103). This created a casual, gemütlich environment conducive to discussion, which was precisely the type of society Rahel favored.

Because of its unique ability to integrate social classes, Rahel’s salons were among the most successful in Berlin. For the lower classes, it provided an opportunity to fraternize with
those that had been above and beyond them for so long. For the noble class, it was a glimpse into the "exotic lifestyle" of the Jewish class, a means for them to observe and take part in Jewish society without being compelled to formally allow Jews into their own class. For the Jews, it was a taste of life not on the outside, rather solely from the inner circle of activity (Hertz 101). Thus all in attendance benefited from this mixed society, regardless of the socially rebellious spirit it fostered.

Through her salons, Rahel finally had the medium to express her ideas on the capacity of the individual to become through self-thinking and the social unity such a force of thinkers would create. She firmly believed that "menschen zu ergründen, und ihre Möglichkeiten, die sie in sich tragen, bleibt doch die größte Wonne," which created of her an individual that was clearly no respecter of persons (Kemp 144). She attempted to assist all people. In her own words:

Nie fällt's mir ein, und ist mein Vergnügen gar nicht, jemand zum Narren zu halten... aber wenn mir so einer (wie sie denn manchmal unwiderstehlich tun) ins Garn läuft, dann geschieht's mir wohl, dass ich ihn, der Unglaublichkeit wegen, noch ein bisschen besser umwinde; auch dünkt's mich immer ebenso unhöflich, ihn zurückführen. (Kemp 47)

She required the same of all people, that they enjoy themselves while in her home and that they think for themselves. "Sie nahm in Sinne Lessings das Selbstdenken als menschliches Grundrecht für sich in Anspruch und forderte ein gleiches Verhalten von jedem, dem sie das Recht auf menschliche Eigenständigkeit zuerkennen sollte" (Scurla 52). She expected her home to be the
neutral meeting place where people could gather and openly converse ideas and movements, theatres and plays, and especially literature.

This forum for discussion of ordinary ideas was one of the notion behind Romanticism that Rahel greatly fostered. As Novalis explained, romanticizing "heisst: dem Gemeinen einen hohen Sinn, dem Gewöhnlichen ein geheimnisvolles Ansehen, dem Bekannten die Würde des Unbekannten, dem Endlichen einen unendlichen Schein geben" (Scurla 48). This was exactly the type of thing Rahel was know for creating, an elevation of ordinary objects into something more noble, as depicted in this fragment from a letter dated September 1795:

Es war nämlich vorigestern Illumination hier, und wir saßen an einem Ufer des Toichs, um sie am andern zu sehen. Ich aber, anstatt die Lampen anzusehen, sah fleißig ins Wasser und an den Himmel; und da stand oben ein heller schöner Stern, hoch und unbeweglich. Im Wasser war er auch schön, aber er rührte sich mit dem Winde, wechselte oft seine Form, und war manchen Augenblick trüb. Da fiel mir ein, so sei’s mit den Menschen; man beurteile sie weit von sich ab, in ihren Verhältnissen, da müssen sie sich regen und bewegen, haben keine Form, und scheinen trübe. Indes man sie eigentlich gar nicht sieht, die feststehen müssen wie der Stern; wir sehen nur immer ein windiges bewegtes Wasser, und heben den Kopf nicht in die Hoh. (Kemp 96)

Her noble ideas, though preserved only in the form of letters and journal entries, depict this Romantic style of hers, along with the depth of her character.

Her salons were successful not only for their integration of social variety and advancement of romantic ideals, but also due the profound nature of Rahel herself. She was adamantly fond of Goethe, believed all that he said and wrote, and even
admitted to idolizing him (Kemp 73). Among her "Dachstuben-
Wahrheiten" were comments such as "nun hab' ich noch dabei die
Idee, dass jedes und alle Dinge eigentlich zu etwas Gutem
geschehen—wenn es auch erst in Ewigkeiten dazu wird," (95) and
"natürlich sind die treuesten Menschen die suchendsten, denn die
wissen so recht, was sie wollen, und was alles nicht Treu ist;
denn Treu sucht Treue" (43). Beyond these types of truths being
shared, Count von Salm described some of the other topics
discussed at the salons:

Man sprach von Theater, von Fleck [dem
Schauspieler], von Righini, dessen Opern damals den
größten Beifall hatten, von Gesellschaftssachen, von
den Vorlesungen August Wilhelm Schlegel's, denen auch
Damen bewohnten. Die kühnsten Ideen, die schärfsten
Gedanken, der sinnreichste Witz, die launigsten Spiele
der Einbildungskraft wurden hier an dem einfachen
Faden zufälliger und gewöhnlicher Anlässe aufgereiht.
(Tewarson, RL 32-33)

Thus the style of her salons, with freedom of speech and a
positive attitude toward the potential of others, integrated the
reason of the Enlightenment with the personal application and
individualization characteristic of the Romantic Movement. The
effect, as Karoline Schlegel described Rahel's influence, was
that

So, wie in der Blütezeit Athens das Bild der Aspasia
vor uns auftaucht, die, selbst nichts schaffend, für
Perikles zur Beredsamkeit, für Sophokles zur Dichtung
und für Phidial zur Linienschönheit ward, so erblickt
man im Leben Berlins hinter Schleiermacher und
Humboldt, Fichte und Hegel, den Romantikern und
Jungdeutschland das Bild einer anderen Frau, die
dieselbe inspirierende Macht besass: das Bild Rahels.
(Scurla 64)
Many of the writers that emerged during the early nineteenth century knew Rahel, had visited her salons, and were familiar with her ideas of intellectual emancipation laced with Romantic overtones. Thus in hosting these salons, Rahel certainly influenced the literature and ideas of her contemporaries, including Gentz, who later explained to her, "Sie sind die Romantik selbst; Sie waren es, ehe das wort erfunden wurde" (Scultra 63).

Who would have imagined that a self-taught Jewish girl could have had so much influence on her peers? Rahel Levin Varnhagen's quest for knowledge and understanding motivated her to reach beyond her limits and create an environment that had seldom existed before. For over a decade, within the walls of her humble attic apartment, her dream of social unification and desire to fulfill a meaningful existence became a reality. Though the salons did not last indefinitely, their success and influence prove that one is not that which another defines them as, rather the object that they create of themselves.


Schlegel, Friedrich, from an incomplete handout that I don’t have the source on.


