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Rahel Levin Varnhagen's Philosophical Reflections on Moral Character, *Bildung*, and Sociability

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ABSTRACT

The main focus of this article is to recover some of the philosophical ideas of one of the most important writers and thinkers of German Romanticism: Rahel Levin Varnhagen. Neglected for a long time, this article considers Varnhagen's education, life experiences, and involvement in German cultural life at the end of the 18th and start of the 19th century. After this brief reconstruction of her life and writings, one of the main objectives of this text is to understand the manner in which Varnhagen develops her original and crucial philosophical ideas relating to *Bildung* or education, the moral character of human beings, ethical community life, and sociability.

Key Words: Rahel Levin Varnhagen, Philosophy, Ethics, *Bildung*, Character, Sociability, Community

RESUME

L'objectif de cet article est de mettre en lumière l'intérêt philosophique de certaines des idées avancées par une des écrivaines et penseuses longtemps négligée du romantisme allemand : Rahel Levin Varnhagen. L'article retrace l'histoire personnelle de Varnhagen, son éducation et son implication dans la vie culturelle allemande de la fin du XVIII^e et du début du XIX^e siècles. Après un bref aperçu de sa vie et de ses écrits, il s'attache à analyser comment Varnhagen développe des vues philosophiques originales et décisives sur les notions de culture (*Bildung*), de caractère moral de l'être humain, de vie communautaire éthique et de sociabilité.

Mots clés : Rahel Levin Varnhagen, philosophie, éthique, *Bildung*, caractère, sociabilité, communauté

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1. Introduction

Four years after her death, in 1837, in a publication called *Revue des Deux Mondes de Paris*, Astolphe de Custine described his lifelong friend Rahel Levin Varnhagen von Ense (1771-1833) in the following manner: “she had the head of a sage and the heart of an apostle, and in spite of that, she was a child and a woman as much as anyone can be. [...] For a person who lived her life as Rahel did, nothing is impossible.”¹

This testimony illustrates just how uniquely Rahel Levin Varnhagen was viewed by many of her peers during her lifetime, not to mention the extent to which she was appreciated and admired by her friends even after her death. She lived and wrote her ideas during the highpoint of German Romanticism, and was close friends with some of the principal thinkers of philosophical romanticism and German idealism. These included: Friedrich Schleiermacher, Friedrich Schlegel, Wilhelm von Humboldt, Novalis, Henrich Heine, J.G. Fichte, Hegel, Schelling, and others. And not least, she personally knew many of the other celebrated women writers of the time, such as Madame de Staël, Dorothea Veit, Caroline Schlegel-Schelling, and Bettina von Arnim. Due to her position within this nexus of relationships, Georg Brandes designated Rahel as among “the most important”² figures of her time.

However, Heidi Thomann Tewarson, one of the leading researchers on the thought of Rahel Varnhagen, claims that she shares more affinity with enlightened humanism than with German romanticism, for she often criticized the latter.³ Notwithstanding, in the present article I maintain that Rahel Varnhagen should be considered as a significant figure in the German romantic tradition, precisely on account of her interest in the ideal of *Bildung*, and her original epistolary style and friendships with the main romantic thinkers, as well as her commitment to adhering to the ideals of romanticism.

Steeped in literature, philosophy and education, I argue that Rahel’s work contributed to the development of culture and to a change in the mentality and traditions of her time. Nevertheless, until only a few years ago, she was long considered an *outsider* in the cultural fields of the epoch. Her ideas now continue to be reassessed and represent a valuable contribution to the cultural and philosophical thought of the period. Considered by many of

¹ Cited in Thomas Carlyle, *Critical and Miscellaneous Essays*, vol. 4 (London: Chapman and Hall, 1899), 110. Cf. Heidi Thomann Tewarson, *Rahel Levin Varnhagen. The Life and Work of a German Jewish Intellectual* (Lincoln & London: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), 1.

² Georg Brandes, “Young Germany,” in *Main Currents in Nineteenth Century Literature*, trans. Mary Morison, Vol. 6 (London: William Heinemann, 1906), 409.

³ See H.T. Tewarson, *Rahel Levin Varnhagen*, 134.

her contemporaries to be a woman of unusual intelligence and sensitivity and with a capacity for dialogue, Rahel Levin Varnhagen, despite not writing any systematic treatise on philosophy, could still be understood as a ‘philosopher with a poet’s heart.’ Tewarson stresses that “Rahel’s attitude toward philosophy was highly personal.”⁴ Indeed, for Rahel, philosophy did not represent some kind of an abstract realm; rather, philosophy was a form of literature and art that had to be related to our manner of being and existence. She places an emphasis on truth and authenticity, revealing how crucial an ethical approach is for an understanding of life. In her writings – the majority of which are letters – she develops ideas on education, women’s emancipation in society, moral character, friendship, community, and sociability. All these topics underscore the extent to which Rahel was a woman with incredibly strong and modern convictions.

Many anthologies on women writers often only briefly describe her as a German writer and nothing else, mostly completely ignoring Rahel’s ideas and philosophical views. The present article treats her as much more than a writer: Rahel should be seen as a genuine thinker. To be clear, there already exist countless studies acknowledging her significance in the fields of culture and literature.⁵ However, it is her contribution to philosophical thought that is still either unknown or undervalued. The difficulty of recovering Rahel Levin Varnhagen’s philosophical thought for the 21st century is greatly increased because for some researchers she is to be understood merely as a minor figure in the intellectual field of the late eighteenth and early

⁴ Ibid., 210.

⁵ For instance, see the following studies (predominantly in the German and English languages), highlighting the fundamental role of Rahel Varnhagen in the development of the culture of her time. In German: Otto Berdrow, *Rahel Varnhagen: Ein Lebens und Zeitbild* (1902); Carola Stem, *Der Text meines Herzens: Das Leben der Rahel Varnhagen* (1994); Emma Graf, *Rahel Varnhagen und die Romantik* (2014); Barbara Hahn, *Begegnungen mit Rahel Varnhagen* (2015). In English, see the writings of Ellen Key, *Rahel Varnhagen. A Portrait* (1913); and the interesting text of Hannah Arendt, *Rahel Varnhagen. The Life of a Jewess* (1957); the valuable reflections of Georg Brandes in his book, *Young Germany*; also Jennings Vaughan’s book, *Rahel: Her Life and Letters* (1876); Bertha Meyer, *Salon Sketches. Biographical Studies of Berlin Salons of the Emancipation* (1938); Heidi Thomann Tewarson, *Rahel Levin Varnhagen. The Life and Work of a German Jewish Intellectual* (1998). Tewarson’s emphasizes the burgeoning interest in the ideas of Rahel Varnhagen, but more in the field of literature. In French, see Georges Solovief’s book, *Rahel Varnhagen: une révoltée féministe à l’époque romantique* (2000). In addition, there are a number of specialized articles: Kay Goodman, “Poesis and Praxis in Rahel Varnhagen’s Letters,” *New German Critique. An Interdisciplinary Journal of German Studies* 27 (1982): 123-139; Natalie Naimark-Goldberg, “Reading and Modernization: The Experience of Jewish Women in Berlin Around 1800,” *Nashim: Journal of Jewish Women’s Studies and Gender Issue* 15 (Spring 2008): 58-87; Goldstein J. David, “Hannah Arendt’s Shared Destiny with Rahel Varnhagen,” *Women in Judaism: A Multidisciplinary Journal* 6, no. 1 (2009).

nineteenth century. For other scholars, she is above all a woman who simply wrote “love letters”; while for others still, her thought has to be primarily understood from the perspective of her relation to Judaism.

The central aim of this article is to try and rehabilitate a number of Rahel’s key philosophical ideas, laying the foundation for her genuine ethical reflections on *Bildung*, moral character, person, sociability and community. I consider that her education, life experience and involvement in German cultural life at the turning point of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries cannot be separated from the development of her philosophical reflections. From this standpoint, Rahel Levin Varnhagen is not simply an epistolary writer, but an independent philosophical thinker who both inspired other important philosophers of the period, and who can be understood as a pioneer in the creation of what in the twentieth century is called: the philosophy of community or dialogical philosophy.⁶

2. Rahel Varnhagen’s Singular Life and Writings

Rahel Federike Antonie Levin Varnhagen was born in Berlin on 19 May 1771. She was the first daughter of the marriage between Markus and Chaie Levin, a Jewish family which could trace its roots back to families that were brought to Berlin from Vienna by King Frederick Wilhelm I in order to bolster the city’s economy. Her father was 48 years old when she was born. He was widely respected and was among the few Jewish men under the protection of the King. However, Markus Levin was also a rather authoritarian father, a fact that caused Rahel a great deal of suffering. He became a famous banker and jeweller, and Rahel was able to enjoy a good education from her early childhood onwards, and sometimes even had the fortune of being present at the intellectual meetings that were organized in the family home. Influenced by the Jewish philosopher Moses Mendelssohn, her father decided to open up his home and transform it into a focal point of social and cultural encounters. Despite her father’s many flaws, there is no doubt that this idea inspired and was beneficial to Rahel’s future life. Although her father was extremely tyrannical, as a teenager she managed to take refuge in her world, books and sanctuary, or as she called it: *her room*, a private space where she taught herself to be stronger and to control her emotions by reading Goethe and discovering in his works her own inner strength.

⁶ Represented in particular by philosophers such as Martin Buber, Emmanuel Mounier, and Emanuel Levinas.

Hannah Arendt has described Rahel in the following manner: “She had great originality, ingenuity, and was exaggeratedly curious.”⁷ It was precisely this intellectual curiosity that helped her over time develop several skills that would later serve her when opening the doors of one of the most famous salon societies of the time. Another quality, revealed by her contemporaries and biographers, was her ability to “read” people, to immediately know what kind of person her interlocutor was. This quality would subsequently serve her well when she developed the ability to create an authentic manner that brought people together.

But her real vocation and main task in life had always been to search for the truth and a certain wisdom of the heart. Her inspiration for pursuing this goal were Goethe’s reflections on *self-education*. In this regard, her life’s vocation was to develop her own character with the primary propose of serving others by means of understanding, tolerance, love, and the truth. To create this ideal of self-education, Rahel had to undergo this process in relation to the limitations of her own social and moral circumstances. As a woman, and also as a Jewish woman, it was impossible for her to have access to an educational institution and so she was excluded from having a profession. As numerous sources relate, she was a woman of profound sensitivity, inclined towards poetry, nature, and the arts. She had an internal curiosity that led her to expand the horizons of her studies and interests in order to forge a cultivated spirit. She was undoubtedly an artistic soul: a piano virtuoso and admirer of painting, with Rembrandt and Dürer among her favourites. At the same time, as a lover of writing she became a connoisseur of older and contemporary German and European literature, especially the works of Novalis, Friedrich Schiller, Homer, Dante, Shakespeare, Hume, Diderot, Rousseau, Montaigne; and not least, as mentioned, of Goethe, who became her idol as it were, the mirror ultimately containing the reflections of her own most trying and lonely moments. It is hard to overstate just how much Goethe meant to her: he was both an inspiration and her most faithful literary companion. She constantly refers to him in her letters, even dreaming about his characters, and she was extremely passionate about his poetry. She read the master with an almost religious devotion and he became her central intellectual touchstone.⁸

⁷ H. Arendt, *Rahel Varnhagen. The Life of a Jewess* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins, 1997), 109.

⁸ She read all of Goethe’s works, with *Wilhelm Meister*, *Faust*, and *Iphigenia* having a lasting impact on her.

Due to her well-known and unconditional admiration of Goethe, she was responsible for transmitting this passion to her friends and to the entire romantic generation. Georg Brandes states in this regard:

Rahel owes her literary distinction to the fact that she was the first in the literary circles of Berlin to comprehend and proclaim Goethe's real greatness. [...] Long before the criticism of the brothers Schlegel established his position beyond dispute, Rahel had introduced the cult of the great, uncomprehended, misjudged genius in her circle in Berlin, had everywhere proclaimed the praises of his illuminating word, and declared his name to be a holy, a consecrated name.⁹

She was convinced that Goethe represented the spirit of the epoch. Varnhagen finds countless answers in Goethe's writings connected with her status as a woman, as well as in relation to the ideas that she herself later developed.

In 1807, she met Johann Gottlieb Fichte, who at that time frequented Henriette Herz's salon.¹⁰ Rahel also read his philosophical writings, and according to Mary Hargrave: "no one absorbed Fichte's philosophy on the realization of the ego"¹¹ better than her. She attended Fichte's lectures, and the *Wissenschaftslehre* (Doctrine of Science) had a strong impact on her. In a letter to a friend, she wrote concerning the philosopher:

To invent a [philosophical] system can mean nothing else but to investigate, name, [and] classify the possibilities of the human spirit, and to assign it the laws according to which it must act, including all the ideas (or inspirations) it may have. This is what Fichte does.¹²

All her life Rahel viewed Fichte as an apostle of freedom and spoke of him with unbounded admiration and affection, as though he had been her teacher. This is why much later, just after Fichte's death, she wrote to her husband in February 1814:

⁹ G. Brandes, "Young Germany," in *Main Currents in Nineteenth Century Literature*, 286.

¹⁰ Henriette Herz was another famous woman in Berlin at the end of 18th century who created a reading circle (salon) called the *Tugendbund* (*The Association of Virtue*). Bertha Meyer writes: "The reading circles, however, encouraged the study of literature in the language of the originals". They studied Shakespeare, Dante, and also read Greek and Latin texts. Cf. B. Meyer, *Salon Sketches. Biographical Studies of Berlin Salons of the Emancipation* (New York: Bloch Publishing Company, 1938), 142.

¹¹ M. Hargrave, *Some German Women and Their Salons* (New York: Brentano, 1912), 107.

¹² R. Varnhagen, *Gesammelte Werke*, ed. Konrad Feilchenfeldt, Uwe Schweikert and Rachel E. Steiner (Munich: Matthes & Seitz, 1983), Vols. 1-10 (= GW), GW 3:313. English translation cited in: H.T. Tewarson, *Rahel Levin Varnhagen*, 94.

Although two of your letters lie before me that I long waited for with restless impatience until they arrived the day before yesterday ... let us first speak of our revered teacher and friend, into whose hand I would have placed my honour and life without a moment's hesitation; a thought I expressed a thousand times with my eyes but never said, and which I now *severely* regret, because one noble thinking being cannot conceive another one any higher, and which, miserably, I never had the courage to say! Let us speak of *Fichte!* – Germany has closed one of its eyes; like the cyclops, I now tremble for the other one!¹³

With regard to the philosopher Hegel, Varnhagen found some of his philosophy to be rooted in Fichte, but read and loved his *Encyclopedia*:

Excellent. Almost every line [is] an irrefutable definition. I underline and write on the side. I find Fichte. What else? He who traced the outline of the human spirit ... must find it again in each new depiction. All thinking and investigating is a rediscovery of a method. ... [I am] one of the students who loves and understands it best: or rather understands and loves it.¹⁴

Schiller's *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man* also represented a decisive text for Rahel. From Schiller, she grasped that beauty is no stranger to the moral nobility of human nature. This work showed her that human beings are capable of sculpting their inner being, and by abandoning the realm of needs and choosing freedom, they may recreate, ennoble and render their own human character more beautiful.

In this regard, Ellen Key has argued that the

Germanic race and culture, in the midst of which Rahel grew up, undoubtedly contributed to deepen her nature, to give it greater diversity. But the invincibility of its individuality, the indestructibility of its fire, the lightning rapidity of its clear-sightedness, the profundity of its meditation, the keenness of its analysis, the wildness of its despair, the jubilation of its gratitude – all these are as Eastern as the Psalms and Ecclesiastes.¹⁵

Ellen Key is here referring to the eastern roots of Rahel's personality: a deep and warm disposition, combined with a sense of reality and mysticism.

¹³ German original in: H. Arendt, *Rahel Varnhagen, Lebensgeschichte einer deutschen Jüdin aus der Romantik* (Munich: Piper, 2020), 277. (English translation by David W. Wood). Cf. J. Vaughan, *Rahel: Her Life and Letters* (London: Henrys King & Co.1876), 135.

¹⁴ From a letter to Ludwig Robert, quoted in: H.T. Tewarson, *Rahel Levin Varnhagen*, 211.

¹⁵ E. Key, *Rahel Varnhagen. A Portrait*, 23-24.

Rahel Varnhagen was an extremely cultivated woman. Heidi T. Tewarson underscores that “she was a thorough and actively engaged reader who considered literature and philosophy as nothing less than guides to life and self-knowledge.”¹⁶ The works she read were not common for a young woman¹⁷; they reveal a special interest in topics as diverse as literature and politics, art, education and philosophy. Although she never assumed she was a philosopher, she still lived a life dedicated to philosophical reflection.

This is demonstrated by Rahel Varnhagen’s interest in creating and hosting two salons, which were considered Berlin’s most important salons at that time. These salons were typically open-minded spaces for the cultivation of lofty ideas. She created her first salon when she was just 19 years old. It was open from 1790 until 1806, upstairs in her home in the Jägerstraße, where she received numerous representatives of intellectual Berlin. The salon was a small mixed community, free of prejudices, and outside rules and conventions. The originality, wit, and vivacity of Rahel’s spirit¹⁸ is what made these gatherings possible. Many of the most important figures of the time participated in this salon, including: members of the Royal Family, especially Prince Luis Ferdinand and his sister, Karl Gustav von Brinkman (a Swedish poet and ambassador), the Humboldt brothers, Friedrich Gentz, Friedrich Schleiermacher, Friedrich Schlegel, Ludwig and Friedrich Tieck, Clemens Brentano, Friedrich August Wolf and Jean Paul (Richter), and Johann Gottlieb Fichte. A few women friends also attended, like Henriette Herz or Dorothea Mendelssohn-Veit. Jennings Vaughan claims that this salon was a kind of “miniature Renaissance,”¹⁹ since art, philosophy, literature, theology, and humanism in general, were all topics of discussion.

It was only after she had suffered a number of profound life experiences, and after she had become Mrs. Varnhagen von Ense (on account of her marriage to Karl Varnhagen), and after Berlin had been shaken by Napoleon’s war against Prussia, that Rahel Varnhagen decided to summon all her forces, in 1827, to open up once again the doors of her home in Berlin,

¹⁶ H.T. Tewarson, *Rahel Levin Varnhagen*, 30.

¹⁷ It is well-known that the role of women in society at that time was a very restricted one. Like Rahel Levin, women were educated in dance, music, French, *belles-lettres*, and came from the upper-middle class. Many of these women were not educated in schools nor accepted into universities, but rather received instruction from their parents or private tutors, and their models were the intellectuals of the Enlightenment. Rahel was an exception, insofar as she not only wished to be educated, but furthermore to develop her personality; here she not only read fiction, but also philosophical texts that were considered inappropriate for women. She especially read Spinoza, Rousseau, Greek literature, Shakespeare, Dante, and of course, as mentioned, German literature and German philosophy.

¹⁸ Cf. H. Arendt, *Rahel Varnhagen*, 126.

¹⁹ J. Vaughan, *Rahel: Her Life and Letters*, 3.

this time in the Französische Straße, in order create with the unconditional support of her husband what would become known as the second salon society. This second salon was therefore the joint project of both Rahel and Karl Varnhagen. After many difficult years of suffering, war, and loneliness, Rahel endeavoured to keep her mind fresh and her spirit alive, to retain her unconventional manner and ability to adapt to the new challenges of the times. Hosting a salon was something novel for Karl Varnhagen; for Rahel, it was a natural continuation of her first salon, which had been “based on her humanistic ideas and egalitarian principles.”²⁰

Rahel Varnhagen’s goal was not just to “have” a salon, or to exhibit an interest in literature, art and culture in general; her special endeavour was to understand the human being, to uncover the interests and authenticity of each personality. Many people testify to her talent and intuition for glimpsing the true soul of others. Karl Varnhagen von Ense confessed in his *Memoirs*:

None denied her extraordinary gifts; it was conceded that she was endowed with remarkable powers of mind, wit, and humour. [...] Few could understand her noble aspirations, her generous impulses, her sacred love of truth.²¹

Possessed of this generous nature, her house quickly became the cradle of anyone interested in cultivating the spirit. Old friends, such as Henriette Herz, Bettina von Arnim, Alexander von Humboldt, and Schleiermacher, all accompanied the Varnhagen family in this renewed project of a second salon. New members joined, all pursuing the same ideal under Rahel’s warm sociability. They included, among others: Hegel, Eduard Gans (Hegel’s student), Leopold Ranke, the young Karl Marx, Henrik Steffens, Henrich Heine. Thanks to these personalities, the Varnhagen household became the heart of a cultural life whose central focus was to spread intellectual values far beyond Berlin.²²

The fame of this second salon did indeed spread throughout Germany. Like with the first salon, the second one consisted of a mixed society: it welcomed men and women, people of Christian and Jewish faith, old friends, but also many young people. Expanding the interests of the “newest generation” was a significant goal of this second salon. In this manner, Rahel herself not only had access to the latest ideas, but she sought to give valuable

²⁰ Ibid., 182.

²¹ Alexander Duff Gordon (ed.), *Sketches of German Life and Scenes from the War of Liberation in Germany. Selected and translated from the Memoirs of Varnhagen von Ense* (London: John Murray, 1861), 52.

²² Cf. E. Key, *Rahel Varnhagen. A Portrait*, 234.

guidance to the younger generation. And she managed to achieve this by means of her inspiring dialogues with the young members, learning in turn about the latest topics related to culture and science. For instance, she debated political issues with the young Karl Marx. As Bertha Meyer recounts:

She was constantly living in a world of ideas, all the big movements of the day were familiar to her, and in more than one instance it was in her salon that statesman, scientists and *littérateurs* met and openly discussed the trends of the time.²³

After all the upheavals in society, and after everything that she herself had experienced as a Jewish woman, Rahel Varnhagen was more and more convinced that no true human relationship is possible without freedom. Freedom became the essence of any dialogue for her through which the communication could realize its objective as a means of attaining the ideals of humanity.

Undoubtedly, the disciplines of literature and philosophy formed the most crucial foundations in the development of her initial ideas with regard to the education of the human being, which sought to rise to the level of the ideas of Friedrich Schiller, Friedrich Schleiermacher, or Wilhelm von Humboldt. These ideas were not merely restricted to the conversations of her salon but became reflected in her correspondence. The intellectual genius of this woman is embodied in more than ten thousand letters,²⁴ aphorisms, and a number of essays that she left to posterity. In 1812, Karl Varnhagen encouraged Rahel to publish, under the pseudonym “G”, an essay on Goethe. It was titled: *Über Goethe: Bruchstücke aus Briefen* (On Goethe: Fragments from Letters).²⁵ After Rahel’s death in 1834 her husband revealed her identity as the “author” of these letters. This was not the only piece of writing that Rahel published during her lifetime. Among others, in 1816 she published *Bruchstücke aus Briefe und Denkblättern* (Fragments from Letters and

²³ B. Meyer, *Salon Sketches. Biographical Studies of Berlin Salons of the Emancipation*, 88.

²⁴ Cf. *The Place to Be. Salons als Orte der Emanzipation/ Salons-Places of Emancipation* (Bilingual Edition), ed. Werner Hanak, Astrid Peterle and Danielle Spera (Viena: Jüdisches Museum Wien, 2018), 18. In Rahel’s time, writing letters was not only a social duty but also an art. Letters were considered as a supplement to the newspaper, and valued means of communication.

²⁵ In: *Morgenblatt für gebildete Stände*, nos. 161, 162, 164, 169, 176 (6 July 1812–23 July 1812). Reprinted in: Rahel Varnhagen von Ense, *“Ich will noch leben wenn man’s liest.” Journalistische Beiträge aus den Jahren 1812-1829*, ed. Lieselotte Kinskofer (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2001), 9–22. Cf. L. French, *German Women as Letters Writers (1750-1850)* (London: Associated University Press, 1996), 35.

Memorabilia) in Troxler's *Schweizerisches Museum*²⁶; and in August 1821 she wrote an article on Goethe's novel *Wilhelm Meisters Wanderjahre* that appeared in the *Der Gesellschafter*.²⁷ This essay provided the opportunity for Rahel to return to her earlier enthusiasm for Goethe, and to reflect further on several issues that particularly concerned her, especially the problems of morality and truth. Finally, in 1826 she published an essay "From the Papers of a Contemporary Woman", while in 1829 she penned the text entitled "From the Memoirs of a Berlin Woman."²⁸

Rahel's ideas are particularly rooted in Enlightenment philosophy; but on account of her work, interest, and openness, her thought furthered expanded towards new horizons. From the intellectual point of view, all of these elements helped her to develop into one of the most emancipated women of the time. Georg Brandes declares:

She was one of those rare beings whose inexhaustible vigor and freshness of mind enabled her to understand everything and everyone, to sympathise with the most dissimilar individuals and tendencies, to penetrate to the core of things.²⁹

This underscores the striking intelligence of Rahel Varnhagen that was highly appreciated, among others, by Schleiermacher, Friedrich Schlegel, and Schelling. After this brief overview of her life, education and writings, let us now examine in more detail her philosophical ideas relating to moral character, the ideal of *Bildung* or education, ethical community and sociability.

3. Moral Character and the Ideal of *Bildung*

Rahel Varnhagen's deepest concern was to understand the essence and character of the human being. In her letters, she raises questions about what it means to be human. She was convinced that the moral vocation of the human being is to come into the world in order to pose intelligent questions and then to actively but humbly await the answers. The source of all human error, therefore, is to refrain from asking these intelligent questions or to simply reply with flattering and self-deceptive answers.³⁰ In other words, Rahel was preoccupied with the problem of human vocation and destiny, about the duration of human life in this world, and how human beings may

²⁶ In: *Schweizerisches Museum* (1816): 212-242, 329-375.

²⁷ Cf. M. Daley, *Women Letters* (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 1998), 52-53.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 52-53.

²⁹ G. Brandes, "Young Germany", 692.

³⁰ Cf. M. Hargrave, *Some German Women and Their Salons*, 145.

best cultivate their intellectual and spiritual growth. The primary focus of Rahel's critique was to strive for an equal society – as the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard would say – in which the majority of people should learn to raise these issues and no longer be content to continue living in terms of fawning replies and prejudices. As mentioned earlier, her main weapon was her own intelligence (demonstrated in both her writings and manner of life and being), but also a unique social sensitivity that not only concerned the problem of the Jewish people living in Prussia at that time, but extended to universal human problems.

Even though she openly confessed that “daily life is the subject matter of my art (writing),”³¹ it must be noted that Rahel's letters are replete with innovative ideas reflecting the fact that her thinking was oriented toward the future. She constantly repeated that the present is the future and was fully aware that the world was continually moving forward. She exhibited a constant concern for how human beings need to make enormous efforts in order to educate their own character and consciously participate in their own destiny. She writes in a letter from December 1816:

Our destiny is really nothing more than our character; and our character but the result of our active and passive being, the sum, the combination of all our capacities and gifts. This is in its deepest sense oneself. [...] I am put into this life with all my faculties, and through them I feel after the deepest enjoyment of outward things, after intimate knowledge of existence, of the world – a world which is still given to me of God, just as time is also eternity and already a future.³²

By participating in their destiny, human beings implicitly participate in the destiny of their community. Varnhagen endeavoured to convey to others the value of the education of moral character. Without an awareness of how vital this education is, it would be impossible to make decisions and to relate to one another, or to conceive of a truly ethical attitude towards life itself. Hence, the sole duty of the human being is to carry out the right course of action. Naturally, this leads to the question: what exactly does “carrying out the right course of action” mean? For Varnhagen, the answer is above all to “be faithful to yourself”; that is to say, this attitude involves a type of faithfulness to not betray one's own inner nature through lies, hypocrisy, or a false sense of duty; it signifies an ability to overcome all the deceit, erroneous and inauthentic images with which we envelop ourselves. On the other hand, loyalty to one's self is a quality that is only attained by cultivating

³¹ R. Varnhagen, GW 2:410-11.

³² Cf. K. Vaughan Jennings, *Rahel: Her Life and Letters*, 180-181.

one's moral character. This is synonymous with what the Greeks called *ethos*, the highest ethical duty obtained through education, refinement, and the acquiring of wisdom.

Aristotle taught that character is the foundation of an ethical life. If ethics were merely a memorized set of norms, then a person's life would not only be devoid of meaning, but a mechanical repetition of acts without love. Rather, Greek thought instructs us that an ethical life commences with consciousness. If we are aware of the acts we carry out and our character becomes further developed in each single action, then we are called upon to learn and appreciate their true value. To be sure, Varnhagen did not carry out a systematic investigation of ethics, but through repeated readings of the classics in the history of philosophy, essentially Spinoza, Kant, and Schleiermacher, as well as the works of Goethe and Schiller, she came to the understanding that no ethical life is possible if it does not lead to real choices with regard to the inner transformation of our moral character. However, the question then becomes: how to transform oneself towards the highest good? This is an issue tackled by Schiller in his *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man*, a decisive work for Varnhagen. Schiller argues that every human being is animated by an ideal, and bears within himself or herself an ideal human being to whom they aspire. Our task is to strive and remain in harmony with this ideal, to elevate and beautify our spirit. This requires both moral beauty – which is reflected in our character – and aesthetic beauty – which is reflected in how a beautiful character or soul is able to create a work of art through freedom. This all depends on a particular life-style or manner of living, and it is only in this way that the temporal human being ennobles and approaches the inner *ideal* human being.³³

This transformation of our inner moral character is connected in turn with our outer physical character and body – a topic and interrelationship keenly debated at the time. In his book *Becoming Human: Romantic Anthropology and the Embodiment of Freedom*, Chad Wellmon relates how in 1796 the German doctor Christoph Wilhelm Hufeland wrote to Kant about the art of prolonging human life.³⁴ Hufeland's patients included, among others, Goethe, Schiller and Herder. The letter to Kant was accompanied by a copy of Hufeland's latest book *The Art of Prolonging Life (Die Kunst das menschliche Leben zu verlängern)* in which he argued that health is the main life

³³ Cf. F. Schiller, *Kallias. Cartas sobre la educación estética del hombre* (Barcelona: Anthropos, 1999).

³⁴ Hufeland to Kant, Letter 1728 (AA, 12-136), cited in C. Wellmon, *Becoming Human. Romantic Anthropology and the Embodiment of Freedom* (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010), 49.

force of human beings, and that disease does not exist to be cured, but should be prevented by a specific diet – from the Greek *δαιτα*, ‘way of living’ – which refers to a strict regime and certain behavioural practices. In Hufeland’s sense, therefore, the goal of medicine is not only to extend life, but to establish a particular lifestyle in the patient, to cultivate both the medical and ethical health of the human being.³⁵

In this same letter, Hufeland asks Kant for his own opinion on this matter. Hufeland considered that moral culture was indispensable for the ethical and physical perfection of the human being. In reply, Kant not only expressed an admiration for Hufeland’s work, but wrote an essay referring to the idea of the power of the mind over the diseased bodily sensations, laying the foundations for his own theory of “dietetics”. Acknowledging the Greek etymology of dietetics as a “way of living”, both Kant and Hufeland maintained that the proper relationship between the mind and body is not simply given but must be cultivated and developed. For Kant, this is the practice of philosophy as *dietetics* (just as was for the stoics);³⁶ it is the relationship between reason and feeling, and cultivating the power of reason over the inner feelings or the body.³⁷ I would argue that dietetics represents the starting point in the attempt to understand the human being as a relational or dialogical being. For the Greeks, dietetics was *paideia*, it was a way to cultivate virtue and restore the health of the soul and body. This practice of *arête* or virtue represented the foundation for a healthy “manner of living” in an ethical and physical sense.

As mentioned, according to Aristotle, character must be morally educated. Intelligence needs to be translated into the development of a skill or practice resulting in virtue; i.e. to be good means to practice goodness, or to be honest means to carry out honesty in practice. A person with character has the ability to keep their passions in check, for the passions represent the extremes of any action, as Aristotle points out in his *Nicomachean Ethics*.³⁸ Rahel, on the contrary, was a passionate woman, and her dietetics revealed her inner nature. To have character for her meant the embodiment of a certain form of inner moral courage, since this develops our mind and sets our other abilities in motion towards their goal.³⁹

³⁵ Cf. *Ibid*, 49.

³⁶ Cf. I. Kant, *Anthropology, History and Education* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

³⁷ Cf. Hufeland to Kant, Letter 1728 (AA, 12-136), cited in: C. Wellmon, *Becoming Human. Romantic Anthropology and the Embodiment of Freedom*, 50.

³⁸ Cf., Aristóteles, *Ética Nicomaquea* (México: Universidad Nacional Autónoma, 1983).

³⁹ Cf. E. Key, *Rahel Varnhagen. A Portrait*, p. 68.

In this regard, it could be said that Rahel's entire life and worldview were devoted to and founded on the ideal of *Bildung*.⁴⁰ For her, it is impossible to cultivate one's ethical or moral character, or to create a genuine social community, without *Bildung* or education. For her, the ideal of cultivating a "beautiful soul" implied a virtuous character, a harmonious beauty attained by character-development (*Charakter-Bildung*), a central idea in the German Enlightenment and romanticism, and related to the ideal of "*Kultur*"⁴¹ in the Weimar classicism of Herder, Goethe and Schiller.⁴² As W. H. Bruford has remarked, this ideal concerns the individual's debt to the civilization into which they are born, a moral duty to further develop their mind and personality.⁴³

This idea of self-education or cultivation of the spirit was not confined to any particular social status or rank. Hence, genuine *Bildung* was understood as a sign of nobility, but a spiritual form of nobility, achieved through education and culture, the development of a new class of citizens known as the *intelligentsia*. Although in German culture the idea of *Bildung* is especially related to Goethe, Schiller, Herder, and Fichte, and with romantics like Friedrich Schlegel and Friedrich Schleiermacher, the concept was already familiar to Kant, who spoke of the cultivation of the talents and faculties, and of course, its origins are much older.⁴⁴ Starting from the root of the word culture that Cicero expressed as "cultura animi", and which arises from a rebirth of the Greek *paideia*. The original Greek concept of virtue and excellence was elevated and transformed by the German thinkers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries into the concept of *Bildung*, the ideal state of humanity that all human beings should pursue.

Indeed, Herder is one of the first thinkers to advocate that self-transformation and development is necessary for the progress of humanity.⁴⁵ He even identifies *Bildung* with philosophy itself, and the harmonious

⁴⁰ Michel Fabre notes, the concept of *Bildung* has its roots "in medieval mysticism according to which the human being carries in his soul the image (*Bild*) of God, from which he was created, and to which he must develop," M. Fabre, "Experiencia y formación: la *Bildung*," *Revista Educación y Pedagogía*, vol. 23, no. 59 (Colombia: Universidad de Antioquia, 2011), 215.

⁴¹ The existence of *salons* promoted a new type of education in German culture.

⁴² In Germany of the eighteenth century there was a unanimous desire to construct a civilization on the basis of the concept of culture, on the personal cultivation of the spirit, a culture not merely retained in the private inner memories of a person, but reflected in the outer actions of each human being.

⁴³ W.H. Bruford, *The German Tradition of Self-Cultivation. Bildung from Humboldt to Thomas Mann* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 71.

⁴⁴ See footnote 40 above.

⁴⁵ Johann Gottfried Herder's *Outline of Philosophy of the History of Humanity* (1784-1791) helped shape Varnhagen's worldview. Cf. Tewarson, *Rahel Levin Varnhagen*, 211.

development of the character, faculties, and capabilities of the human spirit.⁴⁶ One of the most well-known cultural manifestations of the time was the *Bildungsroman* – the so-called novel of education or development. Thus, Goethe, Novalis, Hölderlin, Schiller, Wilhelm von Humboldt, Scheleirmacher, or Friedrich Schlegel, all championed *Bildung*, because as Schlegel proclaimed: “it was the supreme good and the one thing that was needed.”⁴⁷

Laura Deiulio has underscored that with genuine *Bildung*, each human being is able to develop their own identity, and actively create an exemplary ethical image in which humanity attains this quality as the sum total of beauty and goodness. This was especially true for the women writers of philosophical romanticism like Rahel Varnhagen:

As opposed to a more narrowly defined formal education or career training, *Bildung* encompassed a developing identity that learners cultivated by means of the intellectual experiences they encountered throughout their lives. This broader, humanistic definition suggests that, although they were denied access to formal university education, women of the Romantic period, at least in theory, could be active producers and developers of *Bildung*.⁴⁸

A person with a cultivated character or *Bildung* not only acts to accomplish their moral obligations but will actively perfect and transform the moral standards with their own ethical life and manner of living. Here Rahel Varnhagen affirms:

An educated person is not one whom nature has treated lavishly; and educated person is one who uses the talents he has kindly, wisely, and properly and for the highest purpose...who can look firmly at where he is lacking, and realize what he is lacking. In my mind this is a duty and not a gift; and constitutes for me solely an educated human being.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Cf. J.G. Herder, *Ideas para la filosofía de la historia de la humanidad* (Madrid: Gredos, 2015).

⁴⁷ F. Schlegel, *Ideas* (España: Pretextos, 2011), 93.

⁴⁸ Deiulo continues: “In this essay, I shall test this hypothesis by looking closely at one set of letters written by Rahel Levin Varnhagen and her most important friend, Pauline Wiesel ... In the atmosphere of renewed interest in women writers that has developed in the late twentieth century, Rahel Levin Varnhagen has emerged as one of the key figures of German romanticism.” See Laura Deiulio, “The Voice of the *schöne Seele*: Rahel Levin Varnhagen and Pauline Wiesel as Readers of German Classicism” in: *Challenging Separate Spheres. Female Bildung in Eighteenth and Nineteenth-Century Germany*, ed. E. Marjanne E. Goozé, North America Studies in 19th-Century German Literature, vol. 40 (Bern: Peter Lang, 2007), 94-95.

⁴⁹ R. Varnhagen, GW 3:35.

Self-education or *Bildung* furthermore helps the human being to recognize the difference between *capacities* (talent/vocation) and *incapacities* or an absence of talent. In this respect Rahel was fully aware of her own limitations. In her letters, she rhetorically asks: “I thus have talent. Should I exercise it? And earn something? Ah, God! I know myself too well.”⁵⁰ She was likewise aware that some human beings even possessed genius; but as she recalled, genius is an exception. For a person with a cultivated character and devoted to *Bildung*, ethics “cannot be reduced to a mechanical application of principles,”⁵¹ but ethics must have “style”, in the sense of having quality. A plentiful life from an ethical point of view is the capacity of the human being to assume and live in the present; the awareness and ability to live completely in our surroundings. In a letter to her husband Karl Varnhagen, Rahel writes: “Our future happiness will consist in our interest in learning something new at every moment.”⁵² A person who is not occupied with the ennoblement of their character, both ethically and aesthetically, in which beauty and freedom are reflected, is unable to forge a moral link with their own community in which genuine sociability may be cultivated. In the romantic sense, each human being is therefore like an artist: “Human beings are a work of art that is given to ourselves as a task. The material, the artist, and the work itself, are all contained within ourselves.”⁵³

4. Ethical Community and Sociability

According to Varnhagen, an ethical and social community is impossible without the opening of one person toward another, an opening that depends on how much this person is able to “give himself” to the other and therefore establish an authentic human bond. The moral character of a person is revealed in the manner in which they act in relation to their surroundings.

Rahel is the promoter of a kind of dialogical philosophy that Martin Buber later considered as the basis of what he would call “the philosophy of realization.”⁵⁴ For her, as well as for Buber and Emmanuel Levinas, an

⁵⁰ R. Varnhagen, *Briefe an eine Freundin: Rahel Varnhagen an Rebecca Friedländer*, ed. Deborah Hertz (Cologne: Kiepenheuer and Witsch, 1988) (Cited as: *Briefe an eine Freundin*), 155.

⁵¹ Hufeland to Kant, Letter 1728 (AA, 12-136) cited in: C. Wellmon, *Becoming Human*, 3.

⁵² R. Varnhagen, GW 3:581.

⁵³ R. Varnhagen, *Briefwechsel*, ed. Friedhelm Kemp (Munich: Winkler, 1983), Vols 1-4, (Cited as *Briefwechsel* 1:340).

⁵⁴ As far as I am aware, Rahel Varnhagen’s writings are not cited in Martin Buber’s work. When reading Varnhagen’s philosophical reflections on community, sociability or dialogue, it is impossible not to recall Buber’s own reflections on dialogue and community. It is possible he learned of her work in Hannah Arendt’s text, *Rahel Varnhagen. Lebensgeschichte*

ethical life is only possible when we are *face to face* with other people. Ethics truly begins when we have the other person before us. In Buber's eyes, the realization of oneself begins in this *encounter*; or, as Levinas would say, only being "outside the subject", outside of oneself, can a human being be the witness of the blossoming of their own character before the other person. It is an invitation for ethical renewal, and this ethical life is achieved before the presence of the human face. Presence means relation; it is the period of a genuine encounter with the world, where moral life naturally emerges from the human being and is contrary to an imposed rule.

Rahel Varnhagen's friendship is embodied and expressed in countless letters, and her sociability and dialogical relations with others represent the foundations for carrying out a meaningful and ethical manner of living. The concept and term "sociability" has its root in *societas*, a word signifying "company". From this perspective, a life that is not accompanied, i.e. a life that is not the realization of the self in the company of others is not a fully lived human life. Varnhagen writes:

Sociability. Actually, that which is most human among human beings! The essence and the point of departure of all that is moral! Without companions, without comrades during this earthly existence, we would ourselves not be persons and any ethical action, law, or thought [would be] impossible: impossible, without the premise that to another – the image of a person – is the same as to us, that he is what we are. Therefore, whoever ruins sociability, harms it, harms me, whoever damages it, damages me: my innermost self.⁵⁵

Subsequently, sociability for Rahel is one of the most foundational aspects of human existence. Its acquisition implies searching for freedom, love, and mutually acknowledging the autonomy and wellbeing of others. The human being is a social being, yet we do not need to forfeit the personal sphere. When a person attains genuine sociability with others they simultaneously achieve the realization of themselves as a human being.

Notwithstanding, Rahel could also express supreme disappointment when seeing how certain human beings preferred falsehood over active cognitive efforts to try and create social bonds and live from the perspective of authenticity. On this point, she writes in a letter dated 23 March 1812:

To understand people thoroughly is an absolute and urgent necessity, which, however, is often hindered by a few trivial circumstances. From

einer deutschen Jüdin aus der Romantik (Rahel Varnhagen. *The Life of a Jewess*), her *Habilitation* dissertation written in 1929, but published much later.

⁵⁵ R. Varnhagen, GW 2:616; English cited in: H.T. Tewarson, *Rahel Levin Varnhagen*, 43.

a variety of small conflicting purposes people become false, or else are stupid, and lack altogether the fine mental perception essential to the contact of mind with mind.⁵⁶

Varnhagen endeavoured to put into practice a form of authentic sociability. Since sociability is a fundamental principle that defines human existence and action it is of intrinsic value of the community. There is no community without sociability. Human beings require this relation to one another because living in isolation would denote the negation of life. In the twentieth century, it was Levinas who characterized sociability as the essence of an ethical life, as a person's ability to exist and live with others, while Buber likewise understood sociability as an interpersonal relationship placing us before the other. A total openness is required in order to be authentically beside the other, to be in front of the other, and to understand the intrinsic needs of a person seeking to attain their own self-realization. For Rahel Varnhagen, a person is capable of recognizing their own image in another person, encapsulated in her saying: "the other is me." This act of recognizing the other allows us to understand our proximity to them. By ignoring their presence, or harbouring an unwillingness to embrace their presence with openness, we renounce any claim to moral community. The highest morality can only exist and flourish if has its roots in the highest freedom. Rahel's salons were full of extraordinarily different people, who ultimately became aware of the value of such a community for their own intellectual and social growth.

From Spinoza, Rahel learned the moral sense of free will, the person and community, which implies the ability to develop our potential; for freedom furthers the building of our character when putting ourselves face to face with others in a meaningful existence. She writes in a letter to a friend:

The highest morality can only come through the highest freedom. To be free can only mean to be permitted slavishly to follow one's inmost nature. [...] The possession of freedom is merely the possession of that which is necessary for us, in order that we may be that which we really ought to have.⁵⁷

The importance that Rahel attributed to the idea of an ethical community, was not only gained from her experiences of the Berlin salons, but also from the reflections of her close friend, the philosopher and theologian Friedrich

⁵⁶ Cf. J. Vaghan, *Rahel: Her Life and Letters*, 106.

⁵⁷ Cited in: B. Meyer, *Salon Sketches. Biographical Studies of Berlin Salons of the Emancipation*, 113.

Schleiermacher. This relation speaks volumes about her actual philosophical approach. In his *Soliloquies (Monologen)*, Schleiermacher was one of the first philosophers to explore the potential of the idea of an ethical community, presenting the idea of community as a mirror in which the human being is reflected. For community to be possible, human beings must create it and develop their spirit through free will. Both for Schleiermacher and Rahel Varnhagen, it is therefore impossible to speak of the creation of a community without the action and direct involvement of the human being. Each action that is carried out is not meant to satisfy one's own immediate desire but to create a likeminded community. Again, it is not a question of renouncing our individuality, because individuality can only be fully realized in this relational, dialogical and reciprocal manner of being with others.

In his *Essay on a Theory of Social Behaviour* – later incorporated into his *Lectures on Philosophical Ethics* – Schleiermacher argues that the realization of the person in the community is the highest ethical principle. Unlike Kant, this does not represent a duty, since for the romantic philosopher the conditions of ethical realization are not duties, but intelligence, character, love and sociability. He writes:

Community does not feature in any active way in the doctrine of duties; only the individual becomes community when he comes into being [...]. Anyone who enters a universal community without bringing his whole individuality with him, does not actually enter himself, so that entering into [community] and existence within it are only possible [when accompanied by] love.⁵⁸

In 1799 Schleiermacher began to develop this *theory of sociability (Geselligkeit)*, emphasizing that to carry out this virtue there are no limits to religion, gender or social position. As we have seen, in order for sociability to be possible, interaction with the other is absolutely necessary, because our individuality is only properly and reciprocally developed in this way. Accordingly, sociability actually has nothing to do with “being social”, as Frederick C. Beiser has remarked, criticizing the tradition of the social contract (Hobbes and Rousseau).⁵⁹ Nor is sociability a “social agreement”; it has nothing to do with the public (political) sphere and its relation with the private sphere. On the contrary, as Schleiermacher explains, there is an inherent desire in our

⁵⁸ F. Schleiermacher, *Lectures on Philosophical Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 123, 129.

⁵⁹ Cf. Frederick C. Beiser, “Schleiermacher’s Ethics” in: *Cambridge Companion to Friedrich Schleiermacher*, edited by Jaqueline Mariña (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 53.

nature to relate to others and be recognized by them. Thus, in order to achieve sociability we must be able to overcome the restrictions of selfishness, comfort, leaving the private sphere to encounter other people, and to transmit our knowledge and establish links with them. At base, it is a kind of versatility, the ability to adapt to any situation, to any type of topic, without losing one's identity. As William Rash states, sociability for Schleiermacher can be summarized as follows: "he who knows how to adapt and knows how to express his own uniqueness in varied ways."⁶⁰ For the German philosopher Schleiermacher, sociability is therefore the virtue through which an ethical community becomes possible without being determined by external purposes, selfishness, or the moral law, and it represents one of the most primary and noble needs of human beings. Although it is characterized as a free interaction between people, sociability is not just passively given to everybody. It requires effort to cultivate one's character in order to carry it out, and hence ethics begins when we face each other, or in Schleiermacher's words: "where the one is, there is the limit of the other."⁶¹ He was convinced that any human being, when encountering the other, is forced to go beyond their own self-limitations. This implies a responsibility that helps us realize ourselves within our own existence: "Thus each one would find life in the others, and would become what is fully within their possibilities."⁶²

Consequently, among all the philosophers, I would argue that Schleiermacher had the greatest impact on Rahel Varnhagen's thought. She quickly assimilated Schleiermacher's theoretical ideas, and put them into practice in her Berlin salons, where openness and heart-to-heart encounters with the other, dialogue and sociability were all essential, promoting a community life that made demands on the personal involvement of its members. For her, the relationship between human beings should be like the extension of one's arm: "the other should be my extension, my continuation."⁶³ Her starting point is a questioning of morality itself, she believes in the idea of an elevated life as *dynamis*, a life where there is movement, freedom, and the idea of responsibility, which become translated

⁶⁰ W. Rasch, "Ideal Sociability. Friedrich Schleiermacher and the Ambivalence of Extrasocial Space" in *Gender in Transition. Discourse and Practice in German-Speaking Europe 1750-1830*, edited by Ulrike Gleixner and Marion W. Gray (University of Michigan, 2006), 330.

⁶¹ F. Schleiermacher, *Monólogos* (Barcelona: Ed. Anthropos, 1991), 87, frag. 86. Spanish edition (my translation).

⁶² *Ibid.*, 81 (Frag. 80).

⁶³ Cf. J. Vanghan, *Rahel: Her Life and Letters*, 108.

as the development of the spirit to attain humanity. She declares moral war as it were on the “established order” of her time:

the need of morality continues, but also that the conceptions of morality cannot remain unaltered. [...] The present age is sick with such old imaginings [...] All existence is progressive, gains unceasingly in intensive vision; in this way earthly life is raised and that life which falls outside its bounds. The more insight we obtain, the more we shall come into harmony with life itself. [...] Life is not a dead repetition but a development to insight and through insight.⁶⁴

5. Conclusion

Rahel Varnhagen was not only one of the most brilliant women of her time, whose genius expressed itself in her manner of writing and in her personality, but she was also the singular manifestation of a special era in European cultural history. In this sense, Georg Brandes has rightly remarked: “Rahel is the first modern woman of German culture.”⁶⁵ Throughout her life she wrote countless letters, contributing to the development of the epistolary genre by sharing her ideas and experiences with close friends. These letters undoubtedly highlight the brilliance of her thought, not to mention her strong personality and character, which led Goethe himself to admiringly call her “a true woman.”

Nevertheless, as both a thinker and woman Rahel struggled her entire life to find her place in society. She did not adhere to the rules and chose to live freely. The fact that she remained unmarried until 43 years of age illustrates her non-conformity. For this reason, a number of historians see her as a feminist role model.⁶⁶ She sought to express her personality in essays and letters that can be revelatory for the reader, strongly believing that a collection of letters could be more instructive about a particular era, life, or mode of thought, than the writings of a famous historian.

Was she a visionary? It is hard to say, but in any event, she learned from some of the most important thinkers of her time, and transformed this knowledge into a specific manner of living or *Weltanschauung*. As Laura DeJulio notes, the way in which Rahel Varnhagen perceived “otherness” makes her a particularly rich source for a study of *Bildung* in German

⁶⁴ Cited in: E. Key, *Rahel Varnhagen. A Portrait*, 49-50.

⁶⁵ G. Brandes, “Young Germany”, 692.

⁶⁶ Cf. Werner Hanak, Astrid Peterle and Danielle Spera (eds.), *The Place to Be. Salons als Orte der Emanzipation*, 19.

Romanticism.⁶⁷ Although the idea of presenting Rahel's philosophical reflections and contributions, might seem exaggerated to some, I consider her reflections and unique combination of ideas – such as those on education, moral character, the progress of humanity, ethical community life, and sociability – as anticipations of concepts that will later be developed by many celebrated philosophers.

⁶⁷ Cf. L. Deiulio, "The Voice of the *schöne Seele*: Rahel Levin Varnhagen and Pauline Wiesel as Readers of German Classicism", 94-95.