A public educator pinioned

One is not born a public educator. One evolves into the role that emerges from a life within its own context, in retrospect a distillation of many and varied factors resulting in a biography: background, disposition, development, environment, religion, identity, profession, position, time, place, society and culture. A life story in which the why, the how and the what of Rijnsdorp’s role as public educator, together with the appreciation voiced by its own public, eventually find their tragic and harrowing answers. In 1940, the main figure in this book, the Rotterdamer Cornelis (Kees) Rijnsdorp (1894-1982), could see no manuscript in his life for a biography. This, despite his largely completed metamorphosis from author to public educator, nota bene, the central turning point in his life as an artist.

It is impossible to understand Rijnsdorp, either as author or public educator, without knowledge of the profound influence and spiritual moulding that A. Kuyper (1837-1920) had on him. As a neo-Calvinist, he would not only adhere to and propagate the principles of the Reformed movement, but also cause the domain of art to further grow and bear fruit. Rijnsdorp had an unprecedented need for knowledge and general development. He grew up in a religious and socially isolated environment, which surrounded him spiritually, at home, at school and in the church with its flourishing social life based on the Reformed tradition of Rotterdam-Delfshaven. A safe and heartfelt environment, coloured as much by the schism as the appeal, embossed with the all-encompassing presence of the theology and cultural perceptions of Kuyper. At the same time the enormity of the Kuyper movement (Kuyperianum) was a stumbling block to the artistic life terrain of the up and coming author Rijnsdorp. This leant an irreversible dynamic to his calling in life as a public educator with a double culture task.

The Calvinist community had to be awakened to and culturally educated against the dangers of worldliness and sectarian complacency, at the same time establishing a culture on its own objective basis. As one of the literary and artistic inspired members in the Reformed youth movement, Rijnsdorp answered the problematical case of religion and art in his own circle by producing Christian literary works. For example, his first novel in 1930 Koningskinderen, which was enthusiastically received by the general (church) public. He saw the rectification of cultural deprivation relating to art, the nurturing of a sense of culture and the activating of cultural efficacy within the Calvinist community, as a divinely imposed didactical task. The Biblical creation command formed the central motive for his actions regarding the education of his public in all things cultural, theologically legitimized by Kuyper’s notion of ‘common grace’. As a writer with a mediating task concerning culture, Rijnsdorp realized the necessity for literary (public) education and ethical development of taste, as crucial constraints for the blossoming of an own, specific Christian literature and neo-Calvinistic aesthetic. When compared to the cultural indifference as seen in the socialist and Roman Catholic populations, the cultural inertia under Kuyper’s kleine hayden (common people) appeared not to be a Calvinistic ailment alone. In his double role, Rijnsdorp was able as a writer to unite the artist and public educator in an artistically emancipated fashion, aimed at propagating his cultural gospel within the Calvinist community.

From without the Socialist slogan ‘De kunst aan het volk’ (The art to the people), Rijnsdorp’s antithetical ideas about the cultural elevation of the Calvinist community had an idiosyncratic strategic effect on the tilted, Biblically inspired opposing slogan: ‘Het volk aan de kunst’ (The people to the art). In the early years of the 1930’s, Rijnsdorp spoke inspiring about this dizzying turn-about whilst lecturing, thoughts that he further explored in depth in various essays. His Lantaarn-articles from 1933 in particular, which contained the shape of his public educator thinking and action, a blueprint for his public educator practical theory. There was content and form in practical lines for a programme, tuned to the, for him available instruments of the Christelijke Volks-Universiteit, N.C.R.V.-radio, the protestant periodical press and Christian literary organisation. Rijnsdorp’s strategy and programme gained a tactical and concrete effect in the strategic trio: from ‘giving to calling’, from ‘beneficiary to the interested’ and from ‘imparting
to partaking’. In this way he emphasized the importance of real contact between writer and public, and pointed to the latent artistic potential amongst the general population, who could have a voice through the Christian writer, through whom God’s voice could be heard: vox populi, vox Dei.

To understand Rijnsdorp as a public educator, it is essential to have read Eldert Holier. An allegorical novel published in 1938, a vision encompassing the literary imagination of his Christian national cultural ideal, as well as his public educating mission: a ‘novel from the life of culture’. In his ‘literary catechism’, Rijnsdorp demonstrated how backward members of the Reformed faith were in literary and cultural efficacy and contemplation. He consequently applied the strategic and tactical principles of his cultural public educating practical theory in this novel, using it as a literary educational vehicle. However, when regarding the domain of art, his literary aesthetic imagination practice appeared to clash with the Anabaptist daily experiences of the Calvinistic community. To Rijnsdorp’s great disappointment, the unforeseen misconception of his ‘culture fantasy’, during its reception by both public and press, spoke volumes. Looking back on the reception of both his pre-war novels, he declared indignantly that his novel Koningskinderen had admittedly known success, but that no justice was done to Eldert Holier.

According to Koos van Doorne, literary critic of the newspaper Trouw, it was said that Rijnsdorp was a ‘commander without an army’. Regarding the aim and result of his ‘cultural intervention’, Van Doorne furthermore indicated that Rijnsdorp’s literary-educational work had not lead to obvious literary prosperity. In Rijnsdorp’s repertoire are to be found five ambitions, in which he as a reputed leader in the area of art, took the initiative regarding the theory and practicality of public education regarding culture. However the army of culture bearers within his Reformed rank and file, from all walks of life, were not partially or completely revealed by the hypotheses. The Calvinist population abandoned the cultural and artistic Rijnsdorp, by partly or totally rejecting the Biblical cultural task and the Kuyperian cultural mandate. This ‘cultural desertion’ of art, related not so much to the God-fearing population, but rather to the leaders, the ‘culture-bearers’ - from publishers and journalists to the clergy, from professors and politicians to magistrates. According to Rijnsdorp, they had an arbitrary function arising from their Biblical cultural task, mediating between the public and art. The illustrations follow successively: the literary and general-cultural paper Kunst en Leven (between 1936-1938, together with Piet Risseeuw en the Reformed publisher J.H. Kok from Kampen), the A.M.V.J.-society in Amsterdam (between 1937-1939, together with H. Burger, art and literature editor of De Standaard, the ‘Boekenweek’ of 1953, and the resulting following Calvinist cultural congress (from 1953 to 1954 together with E. Diemer, chief editor of the Rotterdammer-Kwartet newspapers and part of the Reformed intelligentsia), and lastly the plan to appoint Rijnsdorp as ‘head of cultural development’ for Calvinist students: the future cultural frame work within the Vrije Universiteit in Amsterdam and the Theologische Hogeschool in Kampen (in 1954, with once again Risseeuw, Jaap Das and publisher E. Diemer).

Even after decades of proclaiming the positive Christian cultural-ideal in all manner of ways, with the ultimate aim of a literal-cultural mission under Reformed believers, Rijnsdorps message seemed for the most part to fall on deaf ears. Despite public recognition and scholarly crowning of Rijnsdorps lifework in his double role as author and public educator: a royal decoration as a ‘Ridder’ (Knight, 1957) and later as ‘Officier in de orde van Oranje-Nassau’ (Officer, 1974), a literary critics’ prize (1964) and - partly owing to the efforts of W.F. de Gaay Fortman - an honorary degree in literature from the Vrije Universiteit (1965), misunderstanding seems to form the echo of the cultural deficiency in his own religious circle, colouring his public educating flaw and declaring the bankruptcy of his cultural-ideal.

In 1910 Albert Hahn Sr. published a cartoon, ‘The public educator pinioned’, on the frontpage of the Notenkraker, the Sunday edition of the Socialist newspaper Het Volk. Those who follow Rijnsdorp’s unceasing efforts from about 1930 until the 1970’s, aimed at elevating culture within the Calvinist community, recognise striking similarities with the caricature as penned by

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Hahn. Struck down by the descendants of the ‘Kuyperianum’ - three notables symbolizing the domains from without the Reformed mindset, the church, state and society - Rijnsdorp lay chained and shackled within the domain of art, whereby honourable decorations and accolades completed his disenfranchisement.

The Anabaptist (and un-Biblical) defensive attitude of the Calvinist community towards literary-cultural and public education aspects, appeared to be insurmountable to Rijnsdorp and his small group of cultural allies. As a result, he lacked real support from leading figures in his own circle, who - in contrast to the grossly neglected domain of art - were able to accomplish emancipation in the areas of church, state and society. In his leadership in the area of art, while trying to elevate culture within the Calvinist community, Rijnsdorp became shackled by seven restrictive and obstructive factors: background and environment, the self-taught man and low self-esteem, narrow-mindedness and Reformed custom, the unyielding Kuyperianum, his office job outside the domain of art, neo-Calvinist artistic practice, and his doglike devotion to the Reformed community.

When accepting his calling and life’s mission, Rijnsdorp knew that his double culture-task as writer and public educator, would involve ‘blood and tears’. His creative-artistic practice would appear to be his biggest sacrifice, offering it as a deed of faith on the altar of the cultural educator. The writer Rijnsdorp did not break with his church, as many other talented Reformed artists had done, rather he broke with his artistic soul. In this ‘life offering’, he made his personal importance as an author - consensual and without grudge or regret - subordinate to the for him higher and more urgent importance of the cultural elevation of the Calvinist community.