



COLUMNISTS

## *Dutch Treat*

Hans Ree

### Johan Barendregt

**I THOUGHT ABOUT** the Dutch Master Johan Barendregt recently, and the reason was not a new instance of the Barendregt Mate about which Tim Krabbé wrote one of his first articles for **The Chess Café**, but the behaviour of psycho-therapists, a subject on which Barendregt had had much to say when he was still alive.

Dutch television is a powerful producer of the foul stream of mud that goes under the name "emotion-TV" and the Dutch Christian Broadcasting Company moves in the vanguard of television hooligans. They used to be models of decency there, a bit dull perhaps, but with the fear of God in their hearts. Alas, those who have turned away from God will fall into the hands of psycho-therapists.

The Christian company showed a TV documentary called Hidden Mothers where a woman told us that ritual abuse by her family had caused her to give birth to five babies before her sixteenth year, of which three were killed, one was sold and one died soon after birth. She had lived her life without ever being disturbed by these horrible memories, but recently they had been "brought to the surface" by a therapist.

The unfortunate family, accused of monstrous misdeeds, was not mentioned by name in the documentary, but was easily recognized by people in their neighbourhood.

When the family went to court, the broadcasting company argued that it was not their duty to find out if these monstrosities had really happened. The professional word of the psycho-therapist was enough for them. The family's lawyer said that his method, resurrecting so-called repressed memories that were never heard of before his own intervention, was controversial. Yes, one could say that. And indeed I had the feeling that such therapists had been aptly described by Johan Barendregt.

He was not only an International Master, who had won games against Botvinnik and Portisch, but also a professor in psychology and in 1977 he wrote a little book called *Characters by and after Theophrastus*. This Greek writer had written sardonic portraits of his

contemporaries in the fourth century BC. Barendregt translated the work from the Greek and added his own Characters. For each character by Theophrastus, Barendregt invented one with similar weaknesses, but taken from his own professional world of therapists and psychologists. It was his very unorthodox contribution to a symposium dedicated to Methodology and the crisis in Psychology.

One of his characters was called the Loathsome. Someone who utters statements just because they suit him and makes no effort to find out if they are really true.

"He disdains to test his theories and scratching his head he considers thinking. When he talks he chatters; when he writes he babbles. His concepts are so slimy that everything connects with everything. This sodden mass he considers the sediment of his experience; and he has only to stir it to get a consistent theory."

The Journalist, who tells people what he thinks they like to hear, was another character described by Barendregt.

He had a critical eye for the fads of his time, but I like to think that the modern alliance between junk television and junk therapists would be beyond his worst nightmares.

Like all serious people he fought on two fronts. He did battle with psychologists who neglected methodological strictness and just prattled their cherished theories, but also with those who had made sterile method their idol and flaunted their trivial investigations, trembling with fear as soon as they were confronted with something as unscientific as a living human being.



He attributed it to his chess background, this tendency to contradict everyone at all times: make your move and I will refute it with a counter-move, that is the chessplayer's attitude.

I think he did himself an injustice, for in his short life he originated important scientific projects that were not at all exclusively based on contradiction.

During the period that I was a serious chessplayer, I did not only try to find out if doping could further my chess career, but I had one other fruitless idea. I let myself be hypnotized by Barendregt, thinking that a post-hypnotic suggestion such as "you'll play like Tal" would do me good.

Barendregt had noticed that I had often failed exactly at the moments when success was within easy grasp and he thought it

conceivable that hypnosis might help.

But he failed to hypnotise me. After a few sessions he asked if I had ever been seasick. Indeed I had been, a few times, and apparently this was a characteristic of people who were difficult to hypnotise. They couldn't yield to the hypnotist, nor to the rhythm of the waves; subconsciously they resisted and so they became seasick or, in our case, unhypnotisable, at least in the time we were willing to spend on it.

During our last session something bothered him that had to do not with our project, but with his pending divorce. He behaved grimly like a true misanthrope and then I understood something that I had heard a few times, that many students and colleagues were a bit frightened of him.

Obviously he wanted me to leave as soon as possible and that was what I wanted myself too, but I begrudged him a small social victory and kept lingering for a while. That was my chess background. Make a move and I'll make a counter-move. You keep playing games, even when they are totally uncalled for.

For some years we played for the same club team and once after a match I took him to a bar where I often went. We talked spiritedly until he was distracted by the nice girls that frequented the place. "If you want me to leave because you have better things to do, just say it and I'll be gone," he said. "Don't be an idiot, Johan, we are talking nicely, aren't we?" But this of course he interpreted as the generosity of wealth, imagining that I was only willing to endure his presence because of the certainty that my time for other pursuits would come later that evening. I wasn't, it wouldn't.

"You know, at my age women are still willing, but only for serious relationships, not just for fun," he said.

A few months later I was called by a mutual friend who told me that I should pay Johan a visit in the hospital where he had just been taken. Apparently there was something wrong with his leg.

Something wrong with the leg. I once had suffered a fracture myself and did not consider it a big thing, so this hospital visit promised to be in light spirit, but when I entered his room he said it was lung cancer and nothing could be done anymore.

I don't really remember what we talked about then, except that at the end he said: "If only you realise that there is no God," as if he were giving me his blessings in his way.

A few weeks later I entered that room again, but then he was so far gone that he had been put in a darkened corner, his bed surrounded

by the people who were dearest to him, and standing apart there, awed by the sight, I thought that had he been younger and both of us less shy than we were, we could have been friends instead of the good acquaintances that we actually were.

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