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Menno ter Braak in Dutch literature: Object and subject of image-building

Nel Van Dijk

In the Netherlands Menno ter Braak (1902–40) is considered a leading critic of the pre-war period.¹ The importance attached to him is comparable with that attached to T. S. Eliot in English literature. Like Eliot, Ter Braak had a wide range of talents and like Eliot, he left his mark on various areas of cultural life. Two short quotations may serve to illustrate the lasting presence of Ter Braak. Recently, the author Willem Frederik Hermans called him ‘the last Dutch taboo’. Hermans was referring to Ter Braak’s suicide shortly after the outbreak of World War II. He was trying to debunk the established view of Ter Braak as a hero who had died for his country. And in an article on the growing influence of fascism, Hugo Brandt Corstius, a well-known columnist, lamented: ‘if only Menno ter Braak were still alive’. He expected Ter Braak’s pencil to have somehow provided an antidote to the extremist right-wing movements trying to obtain a foothold in the Dutch political field.

These two examples make it clear that Ter Braak is the object of image-building. Since the 1930s authors and critics have pointed to his influence and discussed his significance. They use his thoughts as a stepping-stone for putting forward their own ideas. Ter Braak’s name functions as a label that is referred to either in a negative or a positive way, depending on place and time.

In this chapter I wish to argue the following thesis: Ter Braak was not only the object, but also the subject of image-building. Underlying this view are two assumptions. First: the literary field consists of various institutions. The members of these institutions are involved in the material production of literary works. However, this is not their only concern. They also create images of these works as possessing certain traits
and qualities. This process, which can be called the symbolic production, results from the interaction between agents in the different institutions. Second: agents involved in symbolic production aim not only at assigning quality to literary works, but also at obtaining an authoritative position in the literary field. What is said and done by members of the institution of criticism is greatly influenced by their ambition to obtain a respected reputation. In support of this, I will discuss Ter Braak’s strategic activities as a literary critic, focusing on the manner in which he dealt with the work of the Flemish author Willem Elsschot.

**Literary institutions and the key position of literary criticism**

Pierre Bourdieu’s metaphor of the cultural field inspired my colleagues at Tilburg University to generate a series of questions on the production and consumption of literature. They view the literary field as a set of literary institutions. This set includes the organizations involved in the material production and distribution of books (publishing houses, public libraries, booksellers and book clubs); the councils that advise national and local authorities on public subsidies for the arts, as part of their cultural policy (departments of arts councils); and finally the somewhat loosely organized group of people who seek to specify and propagate conceptions of literature in terms of which value can be assigned to literary and non-literary fiction (literary criticism). This last group employs specific channels of communication (literary education, scholarly and literary magazines, press and media).

The literary field embodies a varied network of relations. Members of different institutions engage in specific professional activities with respect to literary texts. These activities are shaped by the institutional framework. Therefore, in order to gain insight into an agent’s functioning and its effects, one must take into account the rules and conventions governing both the institution to which she or he belongs and the other institutions in the field.

The institution of literary criticism plays a crucial role in the symbolic production of literature. The complementary activities of journalist, essayist and academic critic determine to a great extent which texts are held to be legitimate forms of literary fiction in a given period, the rank they are supposed to occupy within the hierarchy of literary works and which statements count as proper ways of characterizing these texts. The main responsibility for the constitution of the repertory and for the
ranking process rests with reviewers and critics from the field of journalism. The attribution of grades and quality by authoritative members of the institution of criticism has proved to be socially effective, as other reviewers and critics – and even the writer of the work under discussion – appear inclined to reproduce their view.\(^5\)

The main task of critics is to ascribe properties and value to literary works. In my opinion, critics also have other interests, interests which can be called political or strategic. Bourdieu describes the literary or artistic field as a stage on which there is constant competition. It is a field of forces, but it is also a field of struggles which tend either to transform or conserve this field of forces.\(^6\) Irrespective of friendships and pleas for a common conception of literature, all reviewers and critics are involved in this competitive struggle. ‘Newcomers’ in literature, those with little esteem, want to improve their position; they are looking for change. Those with a respected position try to defend this position and, therefore, wish to maintain the status quo.

To illustrate this institutional view of the functioning of criticism, I will now discuss the case of Menno ter Braak. I will restrict myself to Ter Braak’s support of Willem Elsschot’s authorship and show that he also had strategic interests in focusing attention on this writer.\(^7\) I do not wish to detract from Ter Braak’s many qualities. He had highly original opinions and his manner of arguing was very effective. Those qualities are not being disputed here. What interests me here is the strategic dimension of his behaviour as a participant in the literary scene. My aim is to show that his actions were to a significant extent determined by his striving for authority.

While Ter Braak’s literary critical activities and his conduct in the Dutch literary field are the object of analysis, it should be pointed out here that many of the observations made can also be applied to situations in other countries. In this respect it is worth mentioning Webster’s *The Republic of Letters* (1979) about the history of post-war American literary opinion and John Rodden’s *The Politics of Literary Reputation* (1989) about the literary career of George Orwell.\(^8\)

**Menno ter Braak as a literary critic**

Many literary historians look upon Ter Braak as the man who gave new life to the career of Willem Elsschot. Indeed, as an editor and as a reviewer, Ter Braak argued strongly for the re-evaluation of this author. In the period 1914 to 1924 Elsschot published four books. After that he
was silent for close to a decade. In common opinion, he retreated because recognition of his authorship failed to materialize. Indeed, attention to Elsschot’s work decreased, but it is not certain that this was caused by a lack of appreciation of his literary work. Non-literary aspects have to be taken into account when looking at Elsschot’s early reputation. His books were marketed by three different publishers in the turbulent period of World War I. Moreover, one of his books was placed on a list of forbidden literature, drawn up by an organization which was working in the service of the Catholic church. Finally, Elsschot himself acted as an outsider: he was not connected with any literary movement, nor did he contribute to any literary magazine on a regular basis. This made it very difficult for the reading public to look upon Elsschot as a productive and promising new author.

After ten years of silence Elsschot made a comeback in the early thirties. At that time Ter Braak’s career was making important progress. In 1931, he had become the editor of Forum, the literary magazine he had founded with his friend Edgar du Perron. Two years later he would be appointed the literary editor and, thus, main reviewer for the newspaper Het Vaderland. Ter Braak no longer needed to concern himself with trying to gain a foothold in the Dutch literary scene; his years as a newcomer were a thing of the past. He now had at his disposal two important media organs through which he could promote his conception of literature to his colleagues and to the reading public. He was in a position in which he could regularly state his literary preferences.

As editor of Forum Ter Braak invited Elsschot to contribute to his magazine. Besides several early poems, Elsschot published his new novel, Kaas, in Forum. As a reviewer at Het Vaderland Ter Braak would discuss every new book Elsschot wrote. In his reviews, Ter Braak repeatedly pointed out Elsschot’s qualities as a writer and would repeatedly recommend his work to the reading public. Yet there was a striking inconsistency between Ter Braak’s public support and his private opinion of Elsschot. In his letters to Du Perron, he took a drastically different position on the value of Elsschot’s work. Du Perron is the first to call Elsschot a second-rate author, and it is remarkable that Ter Braak does not contradict this harsh judgement. On the contrary, he actually admits he too has a poor opinion of Elsschot’s talent. How can we explain this discrepancy between public support and private condemnation? In my opinion, it confirms the view that Ter Braak pursued strategic aims in his critical and editorial work.⁹

First, there is the aspect of incorporation and group formation. As founder and editor of Forum, Ter Braak attempted to gather a permanent,
recognizable group of authors around the magazine. Elsschot was a more than suitable candidate, in part because of his position as a writer. He was not very well known and was not already linked to a specific literary movement or magazine. Therefore, it was possible to present him as an author who ‘belonged to the club’. As he had made his debut in 1914, Elsschot clearly belonged to an older generation of writers. But Ter Braak ignored Elsschot’s early work without comment and presented him to the reading public as both a young and a typical ‘Forum author’.

At the same time, on account of his early work, Ter Braak typified Elsschot as a ‘forerunner’. Here we touch a second aspect of the function Elsschot performed for Ter Braak. Referring to Elsschot as a ‘forerunner’ permitted Ter Braak to take a firm position on the issue of what constitutes the Dutch literary heritage. In Het Vaderland, Ter Braak repeatedly wrote about ‘the authors of common sense’. These authors, including Multatuli, Nescio and Elsschot, functioned as a model. They were referred to as favourable exceptions to the bulk of past writers. A positive reference to ‘the authors of common sense’ implied resistance to the still present authority of tradition.

In addition, Elsschot also served as a reference point in Ter Braak’s reviews of contemporary literary works. In this context, it should be remembered that Elsschot was a Flemish author and thus came from the wider Dutch-language area. As a literary critic for a Dutch newspaper, Ter Braak also had to deal with publications from neighbouring Flanders. He had to keep abreast of literary developments in Flemish literature as a whole. Stemming from a feeling of solidarity, ‘integration’ has been a constant element in the relationship between Flemish and Dutch literature. Many Flemish authors had and have Dutch publishers and Dutch literary magazines often have Flemish co-editors and contributors. Yet this integration has always given rise to controversy. The amount and quality of the attention Dutch newspapers give to Flemish literature is as topical a subject in the 1990s as it was for Ter Braak in the 1930s. His assessment of Flemish literature carried more weight than his evaluation of French and English works. Nevertheless, for Ter Braak the striving for integration was a thorny issue. Most Flemish authors were Catholic and Ter Braak was an atheist. As Elsschot constituted a favourable exception to the widespread Catholicism of Flemish writers, he was perceived as a worthy representative. In Ter Braak’s reviews of Flemish literary works, Elsschot was often referred to positively while his fellow countrymen were judged negatively.

Ter Braak’s remarks on Flemish literature were also influenced by problems surrounding the publication of Forum. The magazine was
not doing well and in 1934 the publisher insisted on cooperation with Flemish authors. In this manner, he hoped to broaden the range of the periodical. Ter Braak resented this reorganization. In his reviews of Flemish literature, his concern about this development can be read between the lines.

**Concluding remarks**

One can conclude that Ter Braak succeeded in his efforts on behalf of Elsschot, who became a well-known writer and is still seen as a typical ‘*Forum* author’. Still, it would be incorrect to reduce Ter Braak’s conduct in the literary field to a ruthless, strategic game. Here, the literary context must be taken into account. It is a context that is constantly changing, a context in which different and divergent interests are at stake. In such a context, agents have to adjust opinions, shade judgements and make compromises. This is true of writers, critics, publishers and other members of literary institutions. That is why preconceived strategies and long-term planning are out of the question. We must take into consideration that Ter Braak was only one of many critics. We now consider his conduct as successful and look upon him as one of the most important spokesmen of his time. But this view is based on knowledge of later developments and thus it is a view dependent on hindsight.

In my current research I am attempting to specify the different elements of literary reputation by studying the aspects that affect the literary careers of contemporary Dutch authors and critics. Both textual and non-textual aspects are being taken into consideration. In this chapter I have restricted myself to one aspect of this large project. My aim was to make clear that strategic goals are inextricably linked to the conduct of those holding or trying to hold a position in the literary field.