

# “Literary criticism is not justified if a cry from the heart for millions is at stake”: German Exile in the Netherlands, 1930–1940

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*After Hitler came to power in Germany and the books of rejected writers were burned in 1933, many writers, publishers, and critics fled. The Netherlands became a center of exile literature because two of the biggest publishers were established in Amsterdam. How did this exile literature affect existing Dutch literary field? Did it achieve a lasting place in Dutch literary history? This paper examines how the reactions in the press reflected positions and changes in the established Dutch literary field. It also addresses the question why exile literature, even if it was closely connected with Dutch history, almost completely disappeared from sight.*

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When National Socialism came to power in Germany in 1933 and the books of unwanted writers were publicly burned, many writers, scientists, and intellectuals fled. Most of them first went to neighboring countries, hoping for a change for the better. Amsterdam became a central meeting place and business center, where two of the largest publishers of exile literature were founded in cooperation with prominent Dutch publishers: Allert de Lange and Emmanuel Querido. Book production started in 1933 and continued until the German invasion of the Netherlands in May 1940. From 1933 to 1940, Querido published 137 titles by fifty-seven different authors (Walter 237–266), and de Lange published ninety-one titles by forty-nine different authors (Schoor 85). Apart from these two, there were about fifty other Dutch publishing houses which occasionally produced works by exile writers. They published not only literary works, but schol-

arly ones as well. Publishing the work of exiled writers meant that the texts appeared in German and were shipped to German-speaking areas, mainly Switzerland, Bohemia, and, until the *Anschluss* in 1938, Austria (Landshoff; Navrocka; Schoor). In the Netherlands, however, there was a relatively large market because about 75,000 people of German origin – expatriates and refugees – lived there in 1937 (van Roon 43). Moreover, the German language had been taught at the secondary-school level since about 1850; it shared with French the prestige of a language of “culture”; English, the third foreign language that was part of Dutch education, was considered a more practical language for business. Consequently, there was a well-educated Dutch “elite” with an interest in German books, and critics had been paying attention to German literature for decades. Moreover, the most successful authors were translated into Dutch: Stefan Zweig, Jakob Wassermann, Thomas and Heinrich Mann, Joseph Roth, Vicky Baum, and Lion Feuchtwanger, to name the most popular of that time. All of them went into exile, even the Nobel Prize winner Thomas Mann, whom the Germans were reluctant to give up.

This migration of German literature took place within a very short time, which makes it an interesting case to study how an established literary system and a new one interact under the conditions of political pressure, social urgency, and a highly complicated market. Not only were the books written in a foreign language, but they also reflected the writers’ agonizing experience and situation. In terms of chemistry, it is an opportunity to observe the reactions that take place when new elements enter an existing milieu under certain conditions. It is not possible to fully unravel the intricate processes that took place here; therefore I focus on how the established Dutch polysystem was reflected in the early critical reception of the exile literature and how the first cracks appeared in this system. Finally, I briefly address how this exile literature has been preserved in Dutch literary history.

The polysystem theory developed by Itamar Even-Zohar serves as a heuristic instrument to describe the structure and dynamics of the changing literary field. Even-Zohar defined a polysystem as a system of subsystems that relate to each other in a hierarchical order according to social prestige and economic power.<sup>1</sup> The way I use the basic concepts, a literary subsystem is defined as a group of actors – writers, publishers, critics, and readers – that share a repertoire of literary knowledge, standards, and values. Literary knowledge comprises, for example, titles of works and names of writers that serve as a frame of reference. Standards and values determine the criteria of judgment and selection. A polysystem is principally unlimited and constantly changing as a consequence of factors outside and

inside the literary field. External factors are predominantly what this study deals with: political and social constraints; examples of internal factors are the resistance against worn-out conventions, the urge to innovate, and the struggle for recognition.<sup>2</sup>

From the end of the nineteenth century onwards, Dutch literature was characterized by ideological segregation. Four main streams or subsystems were most prominent: two were religion-based (Catholic and Protestant); one was a confessionally “neutral,” liberal segment; and, partly running across the others, there was a socio-politically driven socialist current.<sup>3</sup> The four established segments penetrated all domains of society from politics to school education and health care, and, furthermore, they were reflected in cultural life. In the domain of literary activity, there were publishers, writers, readers, and mediators producing and reading books, journals, reviews, and essays that represented each segment. The various repertoires differed in the values underlying the literary programs and judgments. The most obvious value criterion of the Catholics was that a literary work should express a balance between aesthetic form and a spiritually inspired positive attitude towards life. The Protestants’ program was based on the intention “to test a literary work against the Truth that is revealed to us by God’s Word”;<sup>4</sup> they required a rather puritan ethics. The socialists valued the realistic depiction of social problems and dilemmas. The Dutch “liberals” of that period distinguished themselves by a preference for individual expression and an emphasis on intrinsic, aesthetic values. The various repertoires distinguished themselves not only by the values underlying their literary programs and judgments, but also by the strategies of recommendation and warning to guide their readers. Catholic priests, for example, were appointed by the church to make lists of works that should not appear in Catholic libraries and schools – a mild, but nonetheless strict form of censorship.

In the period after the First World War, pragmatic coexistence of the parties prevailed, although they profited themselves in polemic battles. Such battles took place not only between the segments, but sometimes also within them. Differing opinions about the balance between aesthetics and confessional expression, for example, divided the editors of the most prominent Catholic journal *De Gemeenschap* (The Community). In 1934 the disagreement escalated and two editors launched the alternative journal *De nieuwe Gemeenschap* (The New Community). It soon turned out that the difference was not simply in the degree of confessional engagement, but also in the orientation of this engagement: the new journal’s contribution to what was called “Catholic reconstruction” came very close to the Nazis’ nationalistic ideology.<sup>5</sup> No wonder that the latter journal ignored the exile

literature and even showed signs of anti-Semitism, whereas the former included, for example, essays by Joseph Roth and poems by Hans Keilson under the pseudonym Alexander Kailand.

These four separate currents lasted until secularization transformed Dutch society in the 1960s; they still form the backbone of traditional Dutch historiography and are mirrored in literary history. During the 1930s, however, the reception of contemporary German literature not only reflected this established system, but also induced developments that cut across the segments. In search of an approach to find boundaries in a literary polysystem, procedures in critical discourse analysis inspired me to carefully examine linguistic indications in critical texts.<sup>6</sup> Differing positions and perspectives particularly come to the fore in contrastive and comparative constructions. Let me give an example. In 1935, the critic Johan Winkler wrote in a review: “Literary criticism is not justified if a cry from the heart for millions is at stake.”<sup>7</sup>

The combination of the negation and condition in “not [...] if” draws a boundary between a normal and an exceptional situation that is coupled with the standard norm of “literary” criticism versus a different norm. If Johan Winkler exclaims that a situation of agony requires a deviation from the accepted standard, he implies a shift of literary function. This quotation precisely indicates the debate that started running across the various segments as soon as exile literature started to appear. When sticking to strictly aesthetic criteria, critics would reject a range of exile works that expressed the actual situation; when shifting to loyalty and empathy, they would embrace a vision of literature as an expressive witness of contemporary history. This dilemma was articulated in different ways and with different emphases. The prominent liberal critic Anthonie Donker, for example, wrote an essay on “Literature and Politics in Germany” in 1934, arguing that

literature on a political basis is normally doomed to destroy the nature of art as a consequence of too glaring colors, emphasis, and contrasts, and by having too little distance from its subject. The propagandistic effect easily dominates the pure, undisturbed atmosphere of concentrated creation that is at the core of the often abused *l'art pour l'art* mentality.<sup>8</sup>

Nonetheless, the same critic praised Heinz Liepmann’s “reality novel” about Germany for its integrity, and Ernst Toller’s autobiography of his youth in Germany for its honesty and authenticity. Another factor still complicated the debate, as, through the emphasis on actuality and political implication, critics sometimes noticed a similarity between works written inside and outside Germany. Writing about the exiled writer Lion

Feuchtwanger, an anonymous critic observed: “Art requires, as a matter of fact, a certain maturity: direct *Zeit-Kunst* has hardly produced anything of lasting quality; the new ‘national’ German art, paradoxically, suffers from the same weakness as Feuchtwanger in the second half of his novel.”<sup>9</sup>

Holland’s most prominent liberal critic Menno ter Braak gave the arguments yet another twist. He hoped that writers that had lived through threat and fear would go through a process of inner revolution that would free them from worn-out conventions, spiritual sterility, and the dictates of the market. In 1934 he published an essay about German exile literature in the exile weekly *Das Neue Tage-Buch* (The New Daily) in which he blamed the exile writers for continuing to write in the traditional way; moreover, he criticized the exile press for blindly praising new works instead of judging them for quality and innovation. In the first paragraph, he set out his position against the background of the existing discourse:

When the “National Revolution” took place in Germany in 1933, not only the *German* writers were forced to take sides, since German literature was a European matter, not simply a German one. In the present Europe, it is no longer possible to speak of national literatures [...]. Although it may be foolish to exclude the national character entirely and regard European literature as a kind of “collective Esperanto,” it is a thousand times more foolish to turn the national into the central standard.<sup>10</sup>

The literature of emigration, ter Braak emphasized, “should be more than continuation. It should have the courage to understand its European task and should not be driven by the necessity to fight against the false mysticism of the Blubo-devotees.”<sup>11</sup> Ter Braak’s vision, inspired by Nietzsche’s “good Europeanism,” was a transnational, innovative literature that would surpass any narrow nationalism.

The oppositional structures in these quotations reflect cracks and changes in the repertoires of critical values of that period. Contrastive figures are everywhere: aesthetics versus veritability, aesthetics versus loyalty and compassion, ideology versus anti-ideology, and internationalism versus nationalism. Returning to the structure of the Dutch polysystem, one may wonder how these positions were connected to the four segments. I first rely on a study by Paul Buurman, who investigated the reception of German literature in prominent Dutch daily newspapers before and after the Second World War. He selected one representative newspaper for each of the social segments and counted how many contemporary exile writers, writers that were on the list of Nazi-favorites (contemporary NS), and other writers that could not be classified or identified were reviewed. The results for the period from 1930 to 1940 are shown in Table 1:

| Writers        | Newspaper                 |                                  |                                |                                    |
|----------------|---------------------------|----------------------------------|--------------------------------|------------------------------------|
|                | Liberal<br>( <i>NRC</i> ) | Socialist<br>( <i>Het Volk</i> ) | Catholic<br>( <i>De Tijd</i> ) | Protestant<br>( <i>Standaard</i> ) |
| Contemp. exile | 83 (14.5%)                | 66 (40.5%)                       | 17 (15.4%)                     | 5 (18.5%)                          |
| Contemp. NS    | 82 (14.3%)                | 17 (10.4%)                       | 17 (15.4%)                     | 2 (7.4%)                           |
| Contemp. other | 408 (71.2%)               | 80 (49.1%)                       | 76 (69.2%)                     | 20 (74.1%)                         |
| Total          | 573                       | 163                              | 110                            | 27                                 |

Table 1: Number of reviews of three categories of German writers in four Dutch newspapers, 1930–1940 (adapted from Buurman)

Three outcomes are striking. In the first place, the liberal newspaper paid far the most attention to German literature; however, it equally divided this honor between exile writers and writers that belonged to the NS-camp. Looking more closely at the reviews, it transpires that most reviewers either did not see or did not want to see the NS-ideology in these works. Sometimes they just seemed to be naive, and sometimes they were clearly sympathetic to the Nazi ideology. The same pattern is visible for the Catholic newspaper, although with less impressive figures. Hence, not all literary critics in the Netherlands favored the exile writers – a fairytale that Dutch society readily wanted to believe after the war. Second, the Protestant newspaper showed very little interest in German literature. Third, the socialist newspaper definitely had a preference for the exile literature. A closer look at the reviews revealed that the socialist reviewers favored writers with a socialist or pacifist profile such as Erich Maria Remarque, Andreas Latzko, and Lion Feuchtwanger.

Examining the literary journals, a similar pattern becomes visible. I checked three liberal, three Catholic, and one Protestant journal for the years 1933 to 1935.<sup>12</sup> The centrality of the liberals and the Catholics became visible in the simple fact that they dominated the market of journals. A comparable socialist journal was not available for those years. The Protestant journal *Opwaartsche wegen* (Upward Ways) paid little attention to foreign literature anyway, and none at all to German exile literature. German exile literature was non-existent in two of the Catholic journals. The third, *De Gemeenschap*, included exile writers, even in German, as observed before, after 1935. A pattern of divided interest was found for the liberal journals: two of them regularly paid attention to exile production, and one of them, *Forum*, by exception only. All in all, it can be established that most of the liberal, a small part of the Catholic, and practically none of the Protestant press paid critical attention to the new “subsystem.” Hence, the confessional segments can be interpreted as an inhibiting factor in the reception

processes. The socialist critics did their best for the exile literature; however, they had a less prominent position in the literary polysystem.<sup>13</sup>

The Netherlands became a center of literary production and distribution, and there was a readership for German books. Reviews appeared in central newspapers and journals; moreover, the most successful works appeared in Dutch translation in the same or different publishing houses. However, were these conditions powerful enough to provide exile literature a lasting position in Dutch literary history? The answer is short: no. Among those works that were translated into Dutch in the 1930s, only very few were reprinted or translated a second time. However, the most remarkable fact is that Dutch literary histories have so far not included any exile writers, not even those that continued to live in the Netherlands and eventually started writing in Dutch.<sup>14</sup> I will briefly sum up a few hypothetical explanations. They do not answer the question of *who* chooses, but point to some social constraints that governed the exclusion processes.

The historical situation in the Netherlands was, of course, embedded in a broader international context. A few factors played a role in this international polysystem at large. The war disrupted social and cultural life all over Europe. After it was over, most people tended to look forward and there was a general reluctance to look back – it was a period of silence and suppressed memories that lasted for decades. The literature and art that reminded people of the dark period just overcome was not very welcome. Moreover, there was a disinclination towards German language and culture in the occupied countries, whereas the interest in English, the language of the liberators, greatly increased, as can be seen for the Netherlands in Figure 1. The number of reviews of German literature decreased dramatically, as Buurman concluded.

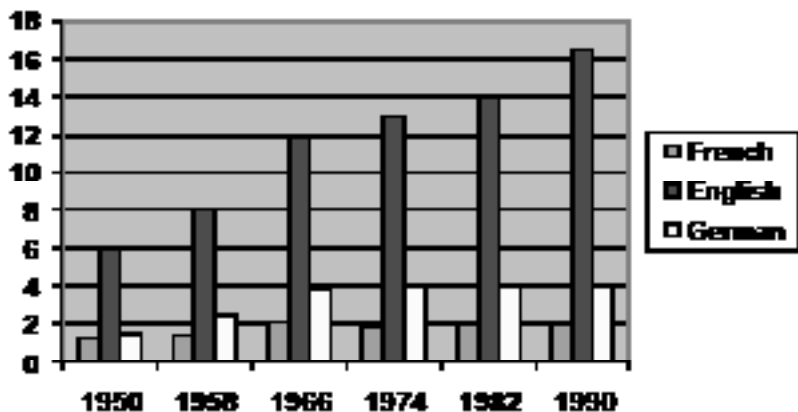


Figure 1: Percentage of translated titles of the total title production, 1950–1990 (Heilbron)

Another general factor is that the inclusion of literature written in a foreign language is highly unusual in the tradition of writing national literary histories.<sup>15</sup> I believe this is universal. The question why this is the case is not explicitly addressed by Pascale Casanova, but could have to do with the struggle to maintain a position of one's own dominant language and identity internationally. Even if literary scholars since Russian Formalism, Czech Structuralism, and French Sociology of Culture have been well aware of external social factors in literature, national literary histories tend to keep to traditional formats, thus reproducing selections once made. Among the specific causes for leaving out the German exile literature in the Netherlands may be the division of attention due to the segmentation of the polysystem. In addition, the poetics of engagement and solidarity was not generally accepted and faded soon after the war in favor of artistic autonomy and innovative form; the consequence was an increasing interest in the cohort of the European "modernist" writers. The fact that some of the exile writers had also experimented with new forms to express their experience was easily overlooked.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> For Even-Zohar's own slightly different definition, see Even-Zohar 11. For a critical discussion of Even-Zohar's concepts and an operational adaptation of his definitions, see Andringa, "Penetrating" 522–529).

<sup>2</sup> Even-Zohar's model is partly rooted in earlier theories developed by Russian Formalists such as Jurij Tynjanov and Roman Jakobson, and Czech Structuralists. In his ideas about a sociology of the aesthetic, Jan Mukařovský repeatedly pointed out the interaction of the immanent dynamics of art's breaking away from tradition and the effects of changes in social structures on aesthetic value (Mukařovský, *Aesthetic* 22–23, 67).

<sup>3</sup> Actually, there was still another segment (though relatively small) present in Dutch society: a Jewish community had been formed since the sixteenth century. Although its social and cultural role had been considerable since the second half of the nineteenth century, Dutch historiography has failed to recognize it as a substantial segment of Dutch society, nor has Dutch-Jewish literature, which had a signature of its own since the late nineteenth century, found a place in Dutch literary history. For the impact on the reception of exile literature, see Andringa, "Begegnung."

<sup>4</sup> Roel Houwink in the literary journal *Opwaartsche wegen* (1936/1937: 66).

<sup>5</sup> The controversy is documented in Van Faassen, Chen, and Asselbergs.

<sup>6</sup> An explanation and exemplification of this procedure is given by Andringa, "Grenzübergänge."

<sup>7</sup> Johan Winkler, in a review of *Verse der Emigration* ("Verses of Emigration"), an anthology of poetry written by exiled poets, in the daily newspaper *Het Volk* (16 May 1935). Winkler and *Het Volk* belonged to the socialist segment. Actually, Winkler appeals to the readers and critics in the liberal camp as well, urging them to give up an exclusive and individualistic aesthetics in such an agonizing situation. I translated Dutch quotations as literally as possible. The quotations from Dutch sources were translated by myself as liter-



ally as possible. No attempt was made to do justice to the stylistic features that were typical for that period.

<sup>8</sup> Anthonie Donker in *Critisch Bulletin* (1934, 43–47: 43). This critic was representing the liberal camp.

<sup>9</sup> Anon., "Nieuwe Duitse romans. Emigrantenuitgaven," in the right-wing liberal daily newspaper *De Telegraaf* (1 March 1934).

<sup>10</sup> Menno ter Braak in *Das Neue Tage-Buch* (29 December 1934: 1244–1245).

<sup>11</sup> "Blubo" refers to the "Blut und Boden" (blood and soil) ideology of the National Socialists.

<sup>12</sup> The liberal journals were *Forum*, *Critisch Bulletin* (Critical Bulletin), and *De Gids* (The Guide), the Catholic ones *De Gemeenschap*, *De nieuwe Gemeenschap*, and *Roeping* (The Calling), and the Protestant one *Opwaartsche wegen*.

<sup>13</sup> Even if there was no representative literary journal with a socialistic profile, a few individual socialist critics (Nico Rost, A. M. de Jong, and Jef Last) energetically took sides with the exile literature. They published not only in the daily and weekly socialist newspapers, but also in various liberal literary journals. Moreover, they played a role as translators.

<sup>14</sup> Elisabeth Augustin, for example, had already learned Dutch before she emigrated; she started writing in Dutch immediately and did so well that her novels were published and treated as if they were written by a Dutch writer. Nevertheless her recognition was insufficient to render her a place in literary history.

<sup>15</sup> Not even minority languages within the same geopolitical space are included in standard literary histories. In the north of the Netherlands, the province of Friesland has its own language; its literary tradition may be modest, but even the fact that it exists is not mentioned in current Dutch literary histories. This is another example of the convention that the centrality of a literature in terms of recognition and intellectual power dominates literary history, not its interface with the history and society it reflects.

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