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Mathijs Sanders

“We lack novelists such as Feuchtwanger, Wassermann, and Döblin”. The Dutch Reception of *Berlin Alexanderplatz*: A polyphony

Within a year after its initial publication in Germany in 1929, Alfred Döblin's *Berlin Alexanderplatz* was translated into Dutch. Both, the original book and its translation were read and discussed against the background of a search for a renewal of prose writing. Authors and critics were fascinated and puzzled by a novel that showed modern metropolitan life in all its fury and that seemed to break with the conventions of traditional psychological realism. The societal and political dimensions of the book however were largely ignored.

This article explores the early reception of *Berlin Alexanderplatz* in the Netherlands in order to study the way Dutch critics classified, interpreted, and evaluated this book. The term *Nieuwe Zakelijkheid* was widely present in literary criticism when Döblin's book and its translation were launched on the Dutch book market (see Wagner 2019). It is plausible to assume that this new literary phenomenon constituted one of the contexts in which Döblin's book was read. The research question underlying this exploration is twofold: how did *Berlin Alexanderplatz* function in contemporary critical discourse on literature, and to what extent did the Dutch reception show similarities with the German reception of the novel? The analysis of reception documents from Dutch newspapers and periodicals from a discursive and institutional perspective forms the basis of this exploration. After a brief introduction into the reception of foreign literature in the Netherlands during the 1930s (2) and a state of affairs in research on the relationship between *Berlin Alexanderplatz* and *Nieuwe Zakelijkheid* (3), this chapter focuses on the analysis of the Dutch translation (4.1) and on the interpretation and evaluation of Döblin's book by Dutch critics (4.2 and 4.3). The conclusion (5) summarizes the findings and makes suggestions for future research.

1 Literature in the 1930s: A transnational perspective

In recent years the long-dominant focus on the essence and meaning of literary texts has given way to research into the various functions and uses of literature

(Dorleijn et al. 2017). Not the question what literature *is*, but what literature *does* dominates the agenda of literary studies (at least in the Netherlands). This shift from essentialism to functionalism gives new impulses to sociological, institutional, and reception-historical research. While research on the reception of foreign literature tended to focus on the way readers (usually limited to critics) realized the aesthetic potential of a singular text, current research analyses the transnational networks, institutional positions and social interests of historical readers who were receptive to foreign literature. As a small country between major European powers and linguistic areas, the Netherlands were highly susceptible to external influences. It is a significant fact that during the early and mid-1930s, over 70 percent of all novels published by Dutch publishing companies were translations of books from abroad. Dutch newspapers, weekly magazines, and literary periodicals paid structural attention to foreign literature (both in the original language and in translation) and their critics often interpreted literature from abroad against the background of domestic developments and debates (Sanders 2016).

It is characteristic of the relatively high degree of organisation and of functional differentiation in Dutch literary criticism that during the 1930s many journals and magazines had one or more specialized reviewers, covering literature from a specific country, region, or linguistic area. Journals and critics considered it their task to inform readers about foreign literature, broaden their intellectual horizon, and guide them through a rapidly expanding book market. More strategic considerations were also involved. By reviewing foreign literature, critics could mark their position in literary debates and at the same time distinguish themselves as international cultural connoisseurs (Sanders 2013; Grüttemeier 2013). With regard to German literature, the names of Menno ter Braak, Anthonie Donker, Anton van Duinkerken, Chris de Graaff, Georg Hermann, Nico Rost, Albert Vigoleis Thelen, and Johan Winkler should be mentioned (Andringa 2014, 119–120). These critics and translators functioned as mediators between German and Dutch literature and aimed at making the former accessible to a Dutch audience.

Studying the functions of foreign literature in a national context is high on the agenda of Dutch literary studies. That also applies to the study of *Nieuwe Zakelijkheid* in Dutch literature. The traditional scholarly focus on the literary aspects of novels that were considered the core of this phenomenon (stylistic features, narrative techniques) gave way to a more institutional, international, and less normative approach of the novels by M. Revis, Ben Stroman, W. A. Wagener and Jef Last (Grüttemeier et al. 2013). This shift in scholarly practice did not mean that studying literary texts was abandoned. Textual analysis became an important part of a more fundamental investigation into the way in which

these novels responded to an ideologically polarized society. Ralf Grüttemeier emphasized the polyphonic nature of these novels and raised the hypothesis that by juxtaposing different voices, the novels by Stroman, Wagener, Last, and F. Bordewijk fostered the possibilities of dialogue: “Der Zielpunkt einer solchen Strategie dürfte dabei letztlich darin gelegen haben, die verschiedenen Lager aus ihren Festungen zu holen, ohne auf den Sieg einer der Parteien zu hoffen” (Grüttemeier 1994, 188).

Studying the early reception of *Berlin Alexanderplatz* in the Netherlands must therefore take various factors into account: the availability and accessibility of the German text and its translation, the institutional positions and ideological orientations of those who commented on these books, as well as their conceptions of literature, and the wider context of the specific structure and dynamics of the Dutch literary field in which this novel from abroad was received and reviewed.

2 *Berlin Alexanderplatz* and the *Nieuwe Zakelijkheid*

When *Berlin Alexanderplatz* was published in 1929, Alfred Döblin (1878–1957) was already well-known in the German-speaking literary world. He had gained a reputation as an author of short stories and novels, as one of the founders of the expressionist magazine *Der Sturm* in 1910, winner of the prestigious Fontane Prize in 1916, and as a socially committed man of letters (Prangel 1975). The publication of what was soon to become his most popular and famous novel was preceded by essays in which Döblin held a plea for an adequate representation of the complexities and multidimensionality of modern life. The modern novel should not focus on what Virginia Woolf in her essay on “Modern Fiction” (1919) famously referred to as “the dark places of psychology,” but on the “entseelte Realität.” Already in 1913, Döblin wrote: “Los vom Menschen! Mut zur kinetischen Phantasie und zum Erkennen der unglaublichen realen Konturen! Tatsachenphantasie! Der Roman muss eine Wiedergeburt erleben als Kunstwerk und modernes Epos” (Döblin cit. Prangel 2003, 317). In line with these aphoristic propositions, Döblin argued for a radical depersonalization of both author and narrator:

Die Hegemonie des Autors ist zu brechen: nicht weit genug kann der Fanatismus der Selbstverleugnung getrieben werden. Oder der Fanatismus der Entäußerung: ich bin nicht ich, sondern die Straße, die Laterne, dies und dies Ereignis, weiter nichts. Das ist es, was ich den steinernen Stil nenne. (Döblin cit. Pranger 2003, 324)

Döblin's poetics and his *posture littéraire* are related to what Helmut Lethen refers to as the "cool persona," who – in response to an over-heated postwar atmosphere – shields himself from the surrounding world by an attitude of apparent indifference and impassivity (Lethen 2018).

The title *Berlin Alexanderplatz* mirrors Döblin's views on the modern epic: the metropolis Berlin is the real protagonist, not the character of Franz Biberkopf. It was Döblin's publisher Samuel Fischer who insisted on adding a subtitle, *Die Geschichte vom Franz Biberkopf*, thus adapting the novel, at least at first sight, to the expectations of readers who were used to reading novels centred around a protagonist (Becker 2016, 108). While the subtitle suggested a chronologically structured Bildungsroman – describing the progress of a hero – the main title presented the city Berlin as the proper character.

The tension created by the juxtaposition of title and subtitle between *Berlin Alexanderplatz* as a Bildungsroman or a *Großstadtroman* and the two intertwined storylines associated with these genres runs like a read thread through contemporary critical debates surrounding the book. Authors whose work was frequently associated with *Neue Sachlichkeit* (Erich Kästner, Irmgard Keun, Hans Fallada) were inspired by Döblin's technique of letting the city speak for itself, whereas left-wing critics applauded the book for its portrayal of (a representative of) the working class (Becker 2016, 117–119). In what was soon to become the most influential review on *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (in terms of references, reprints, and translations) Walter Benjamin took the tension between "the novel" and "the epic" as his starting point.¹

In "The Crisis of the Novel," Benjamin refers to Döblin's essays on epic. He compares the "epic writer" to "a man lying on the beach, listening to the surf, collecting the shells that it washes up on the shore" (Benjamin 1999, 299). According to Benjamin, the epic writer is a storyteller by nature, collecting and re-working elements from reality as it presents itself to him.

The stylistic principle governing this book [*Berlin Alexanderplatz*] is that of montage. Petty-bourgeois printed matter, scandalmongering, stories of accidents, the sensational incidents of 1928, folk songs, and advertisements rain down in this text. The montage explodes the framework of the novel, bursts its limits both stylistically and structurally, and clears the way for new, epic possibilities. (Benjamin 1999, 301)

¹ Benjamin's review was published in 1930 in *Die Gesellschaft*. I refer to the English translation by Rodney Livingstone: Benjamin 1999.

This technique is closely intertwined with another characteristic of *Berlin Alexanderplatz*: “The texture of this montage is so dense that we have difficulty hearing the author’s voice” (Benjamin 1999, 301).

Although Benjamin did not refer to *Neue Sachlichkeit*, his characterization of Döblin’s book echoes some of the key features that are usually attributed to this phenomenon, especially the polyphonic composition of the text (montage) and its focus on modern urban life. By not characterizing the book with the term *Neue Sachlichkeit*, Benjamin in a way prevented the book from being associated with a phenomenon that was negatively evaluated by the majority of literary critics during the early 1930s. Döblin thus escaped the negative consensus formation around *Neue Sachlichkeit*.²

The next section explores the reception of *Berlin Alexanderplatz* in Dutch literary criticism and aims to answer the question of how the book functioned in the Dutch context and to what extent a homology can be observed between Benjamin’s influential review and the way Dutch critics characterized, interpreted, and evaluated the book.³

3 Translation and critical reception

Alfred Döblin was mentioned in Dutch newspapers from 1911 onwards, be it often in passing.⁴ The German author and critic Georg Hermann, who was among the first critics to introduce the term *Nieuwe Zakelijkheid* in Dutch criticism, frequently mentioned Döblin in his “Letters on German Literature” for the daily newspaper *Algemeen Handelsblad*. In 1921 he referred to Döblin as “one of the most gifted storytellers of our time” (Hermann 1921). It was not until 1926 when his first substantial article on Döblin was published, a review of *Reise in Polen*. Hermann notes that it is as if Döblin has a recording machine in his head that registers the finest vibrations (Hermann 1926).

While Döblin already enjoyed a solid reputation in Germany when *Berlin Alexanderplatz* was published, his work was barely known in the Netherlands. This changed rapidly once the book caught the attention of leading Dutch critics.

² On the negative consensus formation in Dutch literary criticism, see Wagner (2019, 74–93). Wagner also refers to a similar process in German criticism.

³ According to Pierre Bourdieu, homology occurs when actions or actors in two respective fields resonate (Bourdieu 1993, 89).

⁴ According to the online repository Delpher (www.delpher.nl) the first newspaper to mention Döblin was *Dagblad van het Noorden*, 9 June 1911, in an article on the German Bookseller’s Association.

In his collection of essays *Fausten en faunen* (1930), Anthonie Donker wrote: “We lack novelists such as, in Germany, Feuchtwanger, Wassermann, and Döblin” (Donker 1930a, 55). In that same year he stated:

Er is behoefte aan romans, die zich rechtstreeks inlaten met de werkingen, de uiterlijke functioneeringen en innerlijke waarde van onze regeering, rechtspraak, pers, politiek, beurs, havenwerken, graanhandel, theaterwereld, studentenmilieus. Van deze zijden, afzonderlijk of in samenhang moeten het menselijk leven en onze tijd in de romanliteratuur benaderd worden, wanneer zich de beteekenis en horizon van onze romans eindelijk verruimen wil.

[There is a need for novels that deal directly with the workings, the outer functioning and inner value, of our government, judiciary, press, politics, stock exchange, ports, grain trade, theater world, and student life. It is from this angle, separately or together, that human life and our time should be approached in literary novels, if we want to enlarge the scope and significance of our novels. (Donker 1930b, 377)]

In the same periodical in which Donker’s review was published (*Critisch Bulletin*) the critic Nico Rost wrote, in a similar innovative spirit, about literary forms of reporting by Egon Erwin Kisch and Heinrich Hauser:

Het zou mijns inziens een mijlpaal in de ontwikkeling onzer moderne Hollandsche literatuur kunnen zijn, als plotseling een der jongeren een dergelijk werk over Twente, Eindhoven, de Limburgsche kolenmijnen of de Zuiderzee-werken liet verschijnen. Zijn wij enkel nog maar in staat dit in film te beleven? Zijn de meeste werken der jongeren niet een vlucht uit de sociale werkelijkheid? Vermogen wij deze werkelijkheid niet meer in het gelaat te zien.

[In my opinion it would constitute a milestone in the development of our modern Dutch literature if one of our younger authors could produce such a work about Twente, Eindhoven, the coalmines of Limburg, or the Zuiderzee-works. Are we only capable of experiencing this in film? Are not most of the works of our new generation just escapes from social reality? Are we no longer capable of looking this reality in the eye? (Rost 1930a, 1299)]

This desire for novels about the contemporary world of business and profession constituted an important background for the reception of foreign literature around 1930. Two critics set the tone in the response to *Berlin Alexanderplatz*: Nico Rost and Jo Otten. They were involved in both the primary phase of the reception (the response to the German book) and in the second phase (the production and reception of the Dutch translation).

4.1 “Looking this reality in the eye”: Nico Rost

As a journalist, critic, and translator, Nico Rost (1896–1967) was one of the most prominent mediators between German and Dutch literature during the interwar period. From 1923 to 1933 he lived and worked in Berlin, writing for the Dutch newspaper *De Telegraaf*, the weekly magazine *De Groene Amsterdammer*, and the literary periodical *Groot Nederland*. During his Berlin years, Rost became acquainted with several German writers, including Erich Maria Remarque, Egon Erwin Kisch, Ernst Toller, Hans Fallada, Lion Feuchtwanger, and Alfred Döblin. Rost also gained a reputation as a prolific translator, although many also criticized his translations for being too liberal and too sloppy. His conception of literature resulted from his communist convictions: literature was a means to an end, an instrument for influencing the reader’s consciousness, and a way to contribute to a social revolution (Olink 1997; Andringa 2014, 32–33).

Rost was the first Dutch critic who wrote extensively about Döblin. In an essay on *Die drei Sprünge des Wang Lun* and *Wallenstein*, published in 1923 in *Groot Nederland*, he called Döblin a prominent “author of epics” (Rost 1923, 495). Döblin’s books overwhelm their readers, he argues, with the fullness of life. A multitude of characters emerge and disappear from the scene, he continues, while a real protagonist is missing, and the author – nameless and unknown – hides in the wings. For Rost, in other words, the focus is not on individual feelings but on the masses. He thus concludes that *Wallenstein* is more an epic than a novel. Rost refers to what the critics Ferdinand Lion and Georg Lukács wrote about the epic as a genre per excellence for “these chaotic times” (Rost 1923, 497). Although Rost did not refer to Walter Benjamin, his vision of *Berlin Alexanderplatz* as an epic seems to come close to that of “The Crisis of the Novel.”

Given the fact that Döblin was still relatively unknown in the Netherlands, it is plausible to assume that Rost himself took the initiative for the translation of *Berlin Alexanderplatz*.⁵ He finished his translation within the time span of a few months, probably with the help of one or more assistants (Olink 1997, 73–74). The translation was published in the spring of 1930 by W. de Haan, a publishing company that during the 1930s would also publish translated novels by Stefan Zweig, Joseph Roth, and Ilja Ehrenburg (the “authorized” Dutch translation of *The Life of the Automobile* from Russian by Manja Zwalf was published in 1931). Although Rost’s translation was also presented as “authorized,” it is un-

⁵ Unfortunately, no correspondence has been preserved between Rost and publisher W. de Haan regarding the translation of *Berlin Alexanderplatz*.

likely that Döblin was able to read the Dutch text and thus to approve the translation. Perhaps the indication on the title page pointed to the fact that Rost himself “authorized” the work of the assistants who helped him finish his job.

Rost’s translation was anything but a literal one. This was already apparent from the title. Rost turned the original subtitle, *Die Geschichte vom Franz Biberkopf*, into the main title, transforming the original main title into a subtitle in parenthesis. Furthermore, he “translated” the German word “Geschichte” (story) into the Dutch “zondeval” (the fall of man): *Frans Biberkopf’s zondeval (Berlin-Alexanderplatz)*. It is not known whether the publisher insisted on this reversal of title and subtitle (Döblin’s German publisher certainly would have applauded this) or whether it was Rost’s own initiative. By foregrounding the name of Franz Biberkopf the translation suggests that the book is ultimately about the fate and fortune of an individual character against the background of a city and a square.

The title is only the most visible reworking of the source text. A closer comparative analysis leads to the conclusion that Rost turned Döblin’s book into a more conventional novel (Van der Knaap 1998). By eliminating several textual elements that contributed significantly to the polyphonic character of *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, Rost reduced the multiplicity of voices. The effect of his interventions can briefly be demonstrated on the basis of the “Zweites Buch.” Like the original, each part (“Buch”) opens with an epigraph in which we hear the narrator’s voice. The first sentence of the epigraph that precedes the second book reads as follows: “Damit haben wir unseren Mann glücklich nach Berlin gebracht” (Döblin 2018, 49). In Rost’s translation: “Onze held is dus gelukkig in Berlijn gearriveerd” [“Our hero has thus fortunately arrived in Berlin” (Döblin 1930, 39)]. By changing “unseren Mann” into “Onze held” Rost not only foregrounds Biberkopf as the main character, he also turns him – with or without ironic intent – into a working class hero. The second paragraph of Döblin’s epigraph enhances this effect: Rost transforms “Aber es ist kein beliebiger Mann, dieser Franz Biberkopf” into “Frans Biberkopf is echter niet de eerste de beste,” again syntactically foregrounding Biberkopf.

“Book Two” introduces the city of Berlin and more specifically the hustle and bustle of Rosenthaler Platz from an impersonal narrative point of view. In this book, Döblin takes his cinematic montage technique to a maximum (De Cauwer and Fabré 2019, 79–80). The narrator takes the shape of a film editor or a stage director, carefully hiding in the wings. Following the epigraph, the “book” opens with two paragraphs: an evocation of Adam and Eve in paradise and a call from the narrator to be cheerful (“So wollen wir fröhlich beginnen” (Döblin 2018, 51)), followed by the title of the first chapter of the second book: “Franz Biberkopf betritt Berlin,” a chapter that famously begins with a series

of pictograms representing various administrative departments of Berlin, thus visualizing the city. The pictograms are followed by three documents: a building permit for a lot situated “an der Spandauer Brücke 10,” a hunting license for wild rabbits in the name of “Herr Bottich,” and a letter honoring “Albert Prangel” for several years of voluntary service. This sequence of documents is followed by a blank line and the sentence: “Der Rosenthaler Platz unterhält sich” (Döblin 2018, 51–53). Rost radically changed this passage. He translated the chapter’s title into “Frans wandelt over de Rosenthalerplatz” (Döblin 1930, 41), thus eliminating the name Biberkopf, and moves the title line to the position above the first two paragraphs. He then places a blank line, deletes the pictograms, and continues with two of the three document-stories, eliminating the passage about Albert Prangel. Rost transforms “Der Rosenthaler Platz unterhält sich” into “Op den Rosenthalerplatz is het weer druk als altijd, Veel mensen, auto’s, trams, verkeersagenten....” [On the Rosenthaler Platz it is busy always. Many people, cars, trams, traffic, policemen (Döblin 1930, 41–42)]. Instead of personifying the city, Rost turns the grammatical subject into an adverbial construction, followed by an additional impression of the hectic pace of the city. In short, Rost reduces the polyphony of the book (by eliminating the pictograms) and foregrounds the character of Franz: the city functions as the canvas on which his experiences are projected. One could assume that these transformations (or even deformations) influenced the critical reception of the book and fuelled the debate about the nature and purport of *Berlin Alexanderplatz*.

4.2 “A characteristic expression of our time”: Jo Otten

The Protestant critic Hein de Bruin, reviewing the German edition of *Berlin Alexanderplatz* in the monthly magazine *Opwaartsche Wegen*, seemed to agree with Rost’s interpretation. He argues that Döblin’s novel is essentially about Franz Biberkopf, a single character who generates compassion.

Wat Alfred Döblin wilde beschrijven, dat is niet allereerst het leven in Berlijns misdadigerswereld. Maar de levensgang van een mensch. Een van gelijke beweging als wij, met soortgelijke smarten en vreugden. Iemand met opvattingen over kwaad en goed, over leugen en waarheid; beurtelings boordevol haat en vervuld van liefde. Een man, recht en stevig in zijn trotsch, die wordt afgebroken langs den lijdensweg tusschen het goede voornemen en het juiste inzicht.

[What Alfred Döblin wanted to describe is not primarily life in Berlin’s criminal world. But the life course of a man. One of the same disposition as we, with similar sorrows and joys. Someone with ideas about good and evil, about lies and truth; alternately bursting with hatred and filled with love. A man, straight and firm in his pride, who is broken down

along the agony between the good intention and the right insight. (De Bruin 1931–1932a, 121)]

Several months later, de Bruin discussed the translation and fiercely condemned Rost, not because of the many deviations from the source text but because the translator deliberately inserted quite a few curses that were not there in the original text and that would potentially undermine the uplifting and purifying purport of the novel: “There is a danger that many who only read the translation will not notice the deep silences of sadness and fear in this work of art, due to the bang effects. And then the book will have missed its best effect” (De Bruin 1931–1932b, 227).⁶

While De Bruin interpreted *Berlin Alexanderplatz* as the story of a singular hero, other critics seemed to recognize and partly reproduce Döblin’s conception of literature. As a reviewer of both the German original and the Dutch translation, the novelist and critic J.F. (Jo) Otten makes an interesting case in point. In 1928 he met Nico Rost in Berlin and – despite their different ideological preoccupations (Rost was a communist, Otten sympathized with Italian Fascism) – the two became friends (Groenewegen 2011, 245). Shortly after having read Döblin’s book in German, Otten wrote extensively about *Berlin Alexanderplatz* in the review magazine *Critisch Bulletin* of March 1930 (Otten 1930). The title of his essay – “Een Berlijnsche roman” [A Berlin novel] – already indicates what the book, according to Otten, is essentially about. He starts by summarizing the plot, focusing on the story of Franz Biberkopf, and pays attention to the protagonist’s ultimate purification. Contrary to de Bruin, Otten regrets this moralization at the end of the novel, since he is not interested in Biberkopf’s life. “Like Ilja Ehrenburg in his *Michael Lykow*, Döblin portrayed a man in Biberkopf who, in general, leaves us completely indifferent.” Nevertheless, he argues, the novel holds the reader’s attention, because “although chosen as a subtitle, the story of Franz Biberkopf is not the most important element in Döblin’s book” (Otten 1930). More important than the story about Biberkopf is

de uitstekende, rake beschrijving van het actiecentrum, van het milieu: den Alexanderplatz en diens omgeving, waarin zich de geschiedenis van Biberkopf afspeelt. Een stuk Berlijn met zijn speciale structuur, met zijn vele eigenaardigheden, met zijn lief en leed wordt hier voor onzen oogen werkelijkheid. En niet slechts Berlin-Alexanderplatz krijgt in Döblins boek een eigen leven: Berlijn zelf, een tragische, wreede, harde stad, waarin voor zooveel

6 Art critic Luc Willink voiced similar moral objections to the translation of the novel: Willink 1931.

tegenstellingen, voor zooveel verscheidenheid, voor zooveel onrechtvaardigheid plaats is, verrijst voor onze oogen

[the excellent, striking description of the action center, of the environment: the Alexanderplatz and its surroundings, in which the history of Biberkopf takes place. A piece of Berlin with its special structure, with its many peculiarities, with its love and sorrow, is here before our eyes. And not only Berlin Alexanderplatz gets a life of its own in Döblin's book: Berlin itself, a tragic, cruel, hard city, in which so many injustices, so much diversity, so much injustice takes place, rises before our eyes. (Otten 1930)]

According to Otten, the juxtaposition of documents is highly functional: it reveals the fact that everything that catches the senses of the narrator is of equal importance. This, he argues, is what makes *Berlin Alexanderplatz* – together with John Dos Passos' *Manhattan Transfer* – “a characteristic expression of our time.”

Anticipating criticism of Döblin's narrative techniques, Otten asks the question what distinguishes this book from a newspaper report. The answer, he replies, can be found in the artistic composition of the book that reveals an artist's craft. According to Otten, *Berlin Alexanderplatz* is not a social or political tract (he ignores the political speeches and songs in the book), but a demonstration of the complexities of metropolitan life, a book that shows “how insignificant in itself the fate of the individual is, how necessary it is to place it in a context that is able to display the relative value and the small importance of it.” By explicitly placing the novel outside of journalism, Otten emphasized that *Berlin Alexanderplatz* has to be counted as true literature. Victor van Vriesland used a similar argument by stating that Döblin's book favorably distinguished itself from *Nieuwe Zakelijkheid*, since Döblin used the technique of montage and simultaneism to evoke the “mood and temper of street and era” (Van Vriesland 1958, 698). Otten concludes by making the book an example for Dutch novelists: “We are waiting for the artist who will give us a work in which the *world's simultaneity* is depicted in an equally beautiful form” (Otten 1930).

Exactly one year after his essay on *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, Otten reviewed the translation by Nico Rost in the same magazine (Otten 1931). Once again, Otten emphasizes the narrative subordination of the singular character – to whom he ironically refers to as “our friend” – to the spatial world. Although he praises the translation, Otten remarks that the title of the Dutch book might be misleading, since it places the character and not the city on the foreground.⁷

⁷ Otten was not the only critic who criticized the title of Rost's translation. See for example V. D. 1931, who prefers the impression of impersonality in the German original to the focus on a single character in the translated title.

Het is Döblin gelukt op zeer originele wijze een stuk Berlijn met al zijn tegenstellingen, kleine vreugden en vele ellenden, te herscheppen. Döblin heeft zich echter ook tot deze milieu-beschrijving niet beperkt. Zijn boek is een snede geworden door het heele Berlijnsche leven überhaupt – en weer niet allèen van Berlijn. Het geheele moderne Duitschland, een zeer gecompliceerd gistingsproces, leeft in “Berlin Alexanderplatz.” Döblin is niet de man die zich houdt aan zijn onderwerp in den geijkten zin des woords. Hij springt van het eene gebied naar het andere, van Frans Biberkopf naar de laatste beursberichten en via de economie naar interessante meteorologische mededeelingen

[Döblin succeeded in recreating a piece of Berlin in a very original way with all its contradictions, small joys and many miseries. However, Döblin has not limited himself to this environmental description. His book has become a cross-section of the whole of Berlin life – and not only of Berlin. The whole of modern Germany, a very complicated fermentation process, lives in “Berlin Alexanderplatz.” Döblin is not the man who sticks to his subject in the usual sense of the word. He jumps from one area to another, from Frans Biberkopf to the latest stock market reports and through the economy to interesting meteorological communications (Otten 1931)].

According to Otten, *Berlin Alexanderplatz* is “an expression of sobriety [*zakelijkheid*], which speaks directly and inescapably to us.”

Other critics developed a similar view on Döblin’s novel as a functionally constructed mosaic of contemporary metropolitan reality that does not ventilate any unambiguous vision on society. Chris de Graaff, writing about German literature for the daily newspaper *Algemeen Handelsblad* (and in that capacity a colleague of the aforementioned Georg Hermann) characterizes Döblin as the literary counterpart of Thomas Mann, the champion of a coherent European culture and aesthetics. Unlike the author of *Der Zauberberg*, Döblin does not impose an all-encompassing world view on his readers, since the only thing he observes is chaos. From that chaos new opportunities will arise. In that sense Döblin is more closely related to Dostoevski than to his Western colleagues.

Voor mij is Döblin nauwelijks meer Europeesch. Maar waar is op het oogenblik de “Westerse” auteur die iets dergelijks zou kunnen schrijven, minder chaotisch, ook minder pessimistisch misschien, maar vooral minder opzettelijk destructief, en toch met even onbevooroordeelde naastenliefde zonder groote woorden, met even groote oorspronkelijkheid, met een zelfde vernieuwingsdrift, afkeer van het versleten romancliché en zin voor veerkrachtig, fonkelnieuw proza?

[For me, Döblin is hardly European anymore. But where is the “Western” author who could write something similar, less chaotic, perhaps less pessimistic, but most of all less deliberately destructive, and yet with a similar unbiased charity without big words, with equally great originality, with the same urge for renewal, with aversion to the worn out novelistic cliché and sense for resilient, brand new prose? (De Graaff 1930)]

De Graaff praises Döblin for his courage to plunge into modern life without judging the characters and groups he describes. “He writes as some Russians manage to film, image after image, at a furious pace, without explanations, with illogical, purely intuitive associations” (De Graaff 1930).

By emphasizing the originality and compositional innovations of *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, and by distinguishing the book from a journalistic report, critics like Otten and De Graaff acknowledged Döblin’s work as true literature. Only one critic explicitly referred to the political dimensions and purport of *Berlin Alexanderplatz*. According to Johan Winkler in the socialist newspaper *Voorwaarts*, the novel, by using hypermodern narrative techniques, adequately brings the miseries of the working class to light (J. W. 1930). After having read the book “we know about the lives of thousands of people from which Berlin recruits its hunger protesters, its fascist brawlers or ... its criminals” (J. W., 1930). The critic praises the book for its social commitment. “Today and in years to come, this book will provide a time frame and a document of the same value as Zola’s painting of the Parisian life of the nineteenth century, as Querido’s epic of the Jordaan, Nes and Zeedijk” (J.W., 1930).

4.3 ‘I just do not like them’: *Forum*

Not all critics appreciated the polyphonic and ambiguous nature of *Berlin Alexanderplatz*. The documentary scope and the hypermodern technical features were only some of the reasons for two of the leading critics of the 1930s to treat *Berlin Alexanderplatz* with reserve. In the programmatic introduction to their magazine *Forum* (1932–1935), Menno ter Braak, E. du Perron, and the Flemish author Maurice Roelants polemically claimed that “personality is the first and last criterion in judging an artist” (ter Braak et al. 1932, 2). Given this criterion – personality as a touchstone – it will come as no surprise that they not only rejected autonomous conceptions of literature (Paul Valéry, M. Nijhoff) but also distanced themselves from the *Nieuwe Zakelijkheid* and its emphasis on impersonal narrative modes. According to ter Braak and du Perron this escape from personality – or what the Dutch critic Constant van Wessem in an essay on ‘Modern Prose’ (1929) referred to as “a ‘distance’ ... from our feelings” (Van Wessem 1929, 327) – resulted in texts that suffered from a lack of psychological depth and could easily be imitated. Ter Braak and du Perron felt a strong affinity with chroniclers of the *condition humaine* like André Malraux, André Gide, Valéry Larbaud, or Aldous Huxley, whereas authors like Joyce, Woolf, Eliot, Proust, and Musil almost completely escaped their attention (Den Boef 1991).

Nevertheless, Menno ter Braak was initially intrigued by Döblin. In a letter to his fiancé Hanneke Stolte he wrote: “*Manhattan Transfer* is a favorite book of Henny Marsman; I have not read it, keep myself recommended for reading it in due course! I am just starting out in *Berlin Alexanderplatz* by Döblin, a new German novel, that supposed to be excellent” (letter from ter Braak to J. M. B. Stolte, 29 January 1930, www.mennoterbraak.nl). Ter Braak did not publically report on his reading experience. When he mentioned Döblin in later reviews and essays, he associated his work with the *Nieuwe Zakelijkheid*. His essay “Het schrijverspalet” (1935) summarizes his objections to this “fashionable” literary trend:

De “petits faits” van het naturalisme hebben een andere naam gekregen, zij worden tegenwoordig bij de “nieuwe zakelijkheid” ondergebracht; er zijn allerlei hoogst belangrijke “verschillen” tussen Zola’s uitvoerige “Freude am Stinken” (het woord is weer van Nietzsche) en Döblin’s “simultanisme”; maar de “petits faits” paraderen, de beschrijving tiert welig en de illusie ener schilderkunstige veelheid maakt de mens blind voor een schrijfstijl, die niet van leningen leeft. Want hoe zonderling het ook moge schijnen in een tijd, die het procédé van een Feuchtwanger en zelfs het grove cliché van een Ehrenburg (met de daarbij behorende domheid inclusief) als meesterlijk pleegt te beschouwen: er is een schrijfstijl, die geen domheid nodig heeft om te kunnen bestaan, er is een soort schrijvers, dat de *beschrijving* nog altijd met de instinctieve weerzin van het kind bejegt en die beschrijving pas aanvaardt, wanneer zij strikt noodzakelijk is en dus zin heeft.

[The “petits faits” of Naturalism have been renamed, they are now accommodated with the “nieuwe zakelijkheid”; there are all kinds of highly significant “differences” between Zola’s extensive “Freude am Stinken” (the word is from Nietzsche) and Döblin’s “simultanism”; but the “petits faits” parade, the description flourishes and the illusion of a painterly multiplicity makes people blind to a writing style that does not live on loans. No matter how strange it may seem at a time when the process of a Feuchtwanger and even the rough cliché of an Ehrenburg (accompanying stupidity included) is considered to be masterful: there is a writing style that does not need stupidity to exist, there is a kind of writer, who rejects description with the instinctive aversion of the child and who accepts that description only when it is strictly necessary and therefore makes sense. (Ter Braak 1950, 402)⁸

Ter Braaks rejection of Döblin’s work results from his poetics of “personality” and runs parallel to his objections to *Nieuwe Zakelijkheid*. Novels like those by Dos Passos and Döblin reminded him of the unpleasant fact that we are nothing more than atoms, ephemeral phenomena (Ter Braak 1934). In his reviews of Dutch novels he associated with *Nieuwe Zakelijkheid* (*Sjanghai* by Wagener,

⁸ On other occasions Ter Braak also pointed out the similarities between Döblin and (in his view) old-fashioned Dutch authors like Israël Querido. According to Ter Braak, neither would have much respect for the reader’s fatigue. Ter Braak 1933.

Aan beide kanten van den drempel by Maurits Dekker) he criticized their authors for being weak epigones of Döblin and ironically warned against “the success of the Ilja Ehrenburg-Dos Passos-Döblin procedure in our germane fatherland” (ter Braak 1935).⁹

Ter Braak’s friend E. du Perron was of the same opinion when it came to Döblin. In letters to Ter Braak and H. Marsman he referred to *Berlin Alexanderplatz* as tedious, annoying, and loathsome, though without any explanation or argumentation. “I have read Döblin and I found it insufferable. I looked at Dos Passos; seems more sympathetic to me, but ... And why should I ‘ignore’ these gentlemen, I just do not like them. Should one then be able to appreciate everything? Moreover: it does not matter” (letter from Du Perron to Marsman, 2 August 1932, www.eduperron.nl).

In a review article on Dutch literature for the German-speaking audience of the monthly literary magazine *Die Sammlung* – founded in 1933 by Klaus Mann and Fritz Landshoff of the German branch of publishing company Querido in Amsterdam as a forum for writers who had sought refuge in the Netherlands after the Nazis took power – Du Perron ironically “welcomed” innovative Dutch prose writers:

Doch wird es an verschiedenerlei Ausdrucksformen von soviel neuer Kraft gewiß nicht mangeln: dieses Jahr haben wir schon unseren kleinen Döblin oder Dos Passos in dem Roman *Sjanghai* von Wagener bekommen, wir besitzen unseren kleinen Ehrenburg in dem jungen Autor Revis, und unsere revolutionäre Kraft liegt zünftig vor uns in *Partij Remise* von Jef Last. (Du Perron 1958, 654)

Du Perron’s statement is characteristic of his rejection of *Nieuwe Zakelijkheid* as well as of his depreciation of Dutch literature in general.

5 Conclusions

The inventory and interpretation of contemporary Dutch reviews of *Berlin Alexanderplatz* and its translation reveals that the reception of Döblin’s novel was almost as polyphonic as the book itself. In order to answer the question how the book functioned in contemporary critical discourse on literature, and to what extent the Dutch reception showed similarities with the German reception of the novel, it is important to realize that Dutch critics had a different frame of reference than their German colleagues. While they occasionally referred to current

⁹ Ter Braak 1934, Ter Braak 1935a, Ter Braak 1935b.

trends in European literature, there is no evidence that they were acquainted with previous works by Döblin or with his essays on the novel (Rost was the exception). Nor did they refer to Walter Benjamin's review of *Berlin Alexanderplatz* or to any other review in German newspapers and magazines. In fact, they did not explicitly consider the book to be a German novel and were not inclined to comment on the rise of National Socialism or the economic and social situation in the Weimar Republic. Instead, they focused their attention to genre-specific issues and to the way Döblin depicted the city and the masses. It is difficult to explain this predominantly aloof attitude to the turbulent world within and outside the novel. This could be due to the predominantly autonomist logic of the literary field and of literary criticism around 1930. As a result, *Berlin Alexanderplatz* was first and foremost considered a *literary* phenomenon. This is all the more evident from the fact that critics only casually related the novel to *Nieuwe Zakelijkheid*, that was at best considered a phenomenon in the periphery of "proper" literature. In their demarcation of the literary and the nonliterary *Berlin Alexanderplatz* was on the right side of the boundary. *Forum* was an exception to this: Ter Braak and Du Perron projected their criticism of the *Nieuwe Zakelijkheid* on *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, thus disqualifying the novel on the basis of their views on literature.¹⁰

A certain homology can be observed between Benjamin's characterization of the book as "the last and most advanced stage of the old bourgeois *Bildungsroman*," a renewal of the epic in the form of a *Großstadtroman* (Benjamin 1999, 304), and the two directions that can be distinguished in the Dutch reception of *Berlin Alexanderplatz*. While Rost as the translator of the book foregrounded Franz Biberkopf as the main protagonist, the critic J. F. Otten was of the opinion that the book was mainly about the city of Berlin. The marginal and predominantly negative attention for Döblin by Ter Braak – the critic who would exert the strongest effect on the consecration and canonization of literature until long after his death in 1940 – might be the reason why Rost's translation was not reprinted during the 1930s and that *Berlin Alexanderplatz* faded away as an international literary point of reference for Dutch authors and critics. Books that could possibly be interpreted as attempts to write a Dutch city

10 In her dissertation on the Dutch critical discourse on *Nieuwe Zakelijkheid*, Janka Wagner states: "Alfred Döblin, dessen Großstadtroman *Berlin Alexanderplatz* in den deutschen Debatten als Musterbeispiel neusachlicher Montagetechnik galt ..., wird zwar in sechs Beiträgen des niederländischen Feuilletons erwähnt, aber nicht ausführlich besprochen" (Wagner 2019, 232). Studying the reception of Döblin's book reveals however that critics did pay extensive and in-depth attention to the novel, albeit usually outside the direct semantic context of the *Nieuwe Zakelijkheid* and more in literary periodicals than in the newspapers studied by Wagner.

novel, following the example of *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (for example *Amsterdam* by Maurits Dekker, published in 1931 and sabbed down as a weak imitation of Döblin's work), did not receive a favourable critical reception (Nijhoff 1932). Rost's translation was not reprinted until 1971 and it took until 2015 for a new Dutch translation to be published (Döblin 2015).

Given the economic crisis and ideological polarization during the early 1930s, it is striking that Dutch critics almost completely ignored the political dimensions of *Berlin Alexanderplatz*. The political speeches and songs simply did not catch their attention. This was not due to the translation. Although Rost allowed himself many liberties in translating the book, he ensured quite accurate translations of these specific parts of the text. When Biberkopf visits Georg Henschke's pub in the penultimate chapter of the second book, he sings a couple of songs: "Der gute Kamerad" ("Ich hatt' einen Kameraden") and "Die Wacht am Rhein," a song he remembers from his time in prison ("Es braust ein Ruf wie Donnerhall") (Döblin 2018, 98–99). Rost included both songs, but while he translated the lines of "Der gute Kamerad", he quoted those of "Die Wacht am Rhein" in German, thus underlining the nationalistic tenor of this patriotic song (Döblin 1930, 78). After Biberkopf finishes the song, he is attacked by one of the regular visitors who suspects him of hiding a band with a swastika in his pocket and accuses him of being a fascist. While hostility escalates, Franz Biberkopf relives his traumatic war experiences and starts shouting Nazi slogans. He is then thrown out of the pub by Henschke, "Weil du ein Faschist bist, du hast die Binde in der Tasche, Hakenkreuzler bist du" (Döblin 2018, 101). Rost transforms this line by dividing it into three short sentences and substituting "Hakenkreuzler" with a reference that was probably more familiar to his Dutch readers: "Omdat je een fascist bent, daarom. Omdat je zoo'n lint in je zak hebt. Verdomd stukkje Mussolini" [Because you are a fascist, that's why. Because you are hiding such a band in your pocket. Damn piece of Mussolini (Döblin 1930, 80)]. The excessive verbal violence dominating this scene mirrors the heated debates in the streets of Berlin during the years preceding Hitler's rise to power. None of that was discussed by the Dutch critics who commented on *Berlin Alexanderplatz*. This leads to the paradoxical conclusion that both the polyphony of the novel as well as the reduction of this polyphony in criticism may have contributed to the de-escalation of a politically and ideologically polarized societal situation.

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