

***The Hangman* by Pär Lagerkvist in the Netherlands: Politics and the Personal**

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Abstract

In this contribution the debate in the Netherlands in 1935 on the play *The Hangman* by the Swedish author Pär Lagerkvist will be discussed. The article shows also the various steps in the transfer history and the influence of politics on decisions in the cultural transfer process regarding the performance of *The Hangman*. Furthermore, the debate about the play provides material to scrutinise a myth in the Dutch reception of Scandinavian literature. The Dutch critic Menno ter Braak (1902-1940) was one of the actors who contributed to the unsuccessful cultural transfer of *The Hangman* in the Netherlands. The analysis shows that Ter Braak might have had personal reasons for his critique on the play. Though he is known as a critic who was in favour of modernism, his romantic view on Nordic literature became posthumously a 'Blood and soil literature' image after World War II.

Key words

Pär Lagerkvist, Menno ter Braak, transfer history, politics, images

Introduction

The performance of the play *The Hangman* by the Swedish author Pär Fabian Lagerkvist (1891-1974) in the Netherlands in 1935 was highly debated. Furious reactions by members of the National Socialist Movement (Nationaal Socialistische Beweging (NSB) and orthodox Christians, supported by some politicians made a continuation of the performances at the City Theatre of Amsterdam and elsewhere in the Netherlands impossible. The NSB members were furious because they regarded the play as an anti-German propaganda; the Christians were upset because they found the play blasphemous. On the other hand, the socialists and the communists welcomed the play for its anti-fascist message. In the end, the directors of the play, amongst others the famous Dutch actor Albert van Dalsum (1889-1971), decided to stop the performances.

The 'Hangman-case' provides intriguing material from the point of view of cultural transfer as it shows how the decisions in the cultural transfer process were influenced by politics. Furthermore, the 'Hangman-case' provides interesting material in order to scrutinize a myth in the Dutch reception of Scandinavian literature. The Dutch critic Menno ter Braak (1902-1940) was one of the actors who contributed to the unsuccessful cultural transfer of *The Hangman* in the Netherlands. After World War II Ter Braak became known as the critic who gave Scandinavian literature the name of 'Blood and soil literature'.

Political Breakthrough

In the 1930s, the political developments in Europe started to take a leading role in Pär Lagerkvist's work. Besides *The Hangman* from 1933, the novel *Dvärgen* (1944, The Dwarf) is representative of this phase. This also meant a new role for Lagerkvist: the role of the 'fighting humanist' (Möller 2009: 191).¹ Lagerkvist first wrote *The Hangman* as a novella. He was worried about the political situation in Europe, and had seen the developments in Germany in the spring of 1933 when travelling through Germany on his way to Greece, Egypt and Palestine with his wife Elaine. He was the first Swedish author to react

to events in Germany, such as the Nazi book burnings in May 1933 (Möller 2009: 247ff). *The Hangman* as a play signified Lagerkvist's political breakthrough. With *The Hangman* Lagerkvist wanted to show that ideologies such as fascism, Nazism and racism can be murderous and that evil is hidden in every human being. The novella was adapted with the help of the Swedish director Per Lindberg (1890-1944) who started to write about Lagerkvist's plays at the beginning of the 1930s. Throughout the 1930s, Lindberg was Lagerkvist's reader, interpreter and director until Lindberg died in 1944 (Lagerroth 1978: 261).² Correspondence between Lindberg and Lagerkvist shows that the director played a leading role in the process of adapting the novella *The Hangman* for the stage (Lagerroth 1978: 279-280). Lindberg regarded the story as an extremely suitable vehicle for his poetic and political programme, which was to make social and political theatre and to establish communication between the stage and the audience. Lindberg also saw theatre as a way to build a society and engage the people. The 'people' were not only the lower classes but all classes of society.³ Lindberg's role in the adaptation of the play and the staging of it, resulted in an emphasis on the play's politics, especially in the second part. He did this by reducing and transforming the roles. Many of the unspecified persons in the novella were transformed into four uniformed parts who were responsible for most of the Nazi and fascist statements and acts in the play. According to Lagerroth the changes to these parts emphasized the anti Nazi-German tendency of the one-act play (Lagerroth 1978: 300).

Though *The Hangman* is a one-act play, it takes place in two different times: the first part takes place in a medieval tavern and the second part at a German cabaret. The sound of battle between the first and second part of the play represents the transition from the Middle Ages to modern times. The first part of the play deals with the question 'What is evil?' The main character, the Hangman, remains silent during the first part. He sits and listens at a table in the tavern. The second part of the play ends with the question of who the Hangman is. What (or whom) does he represent? (Lagerroth 1978: 283).

Whereas the first part focuses on the individual, the second part focuses on the crowd, the soldiers, the musicians and the prostitutes.

There are two orchestras, one playing foxtrot and tango and a 'Negro orchestra' (Lagerkvist 1966: 181) playing jazz. In the second part, Lagerkvist uses the same biting realism as the German playwright Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956) and the music continually interrupts the dialogue (Lagerroth 1978: 284-286). In this part the Nazi and fascist ideologies are expressed by Aryan looking young men. One of them 'salutes with his arm extended in front of him: Heil!' (Lagerkvist 1966: 181). Others provoke murder with racist motives. The black musicians are beaten up while eating their sandwiches, because they are not allowed to eat together with the whites. One of them is murdered and some of the other black musicians are wounded. The play ends in an orgiastic dance after which the Hangman finally speaks to the people. The closing scene could be regarded as a third part of the play. It consists of a long monologue by the Hangman, but the last words are from his companion, the woman who comforts him when he comes home after executions.

Different Reactions

Lindberg directed *The Hangman* four times. The premiere of the play, on 23 October 1934, was not in Sweden but at The National Stage (Den Nationale Scene) in Bergen, Norway. The play was an enormous success. People from Oslo travelled to Bergen on special 'theatre trains' to see it. The Vasa Theatre (Vasateatern) in Stockholm, which was the next venue for the play, had to wait its turn until 28 December 1934, because all the stage sets and theatre props had to be transported there. Lindberg wrote in his essay on Lagerkvist that the author from now on had to be regarded as a fighter and a playwright who writes for everybody, and no longer as an exclusive author (Lagerroth 1978: 309).

According to Lagerroth, the success of *The Hangman* in Bergen has to be seen in relation to Lindberg's broader reception as a director in Norway; where he was regarded as the innovator of the dramatic arts in general (Lagerroth 310). The play was also seen as a weapon against Germany and the Quisling party, the Norwegian Nazi party (Lagerroth 1978: 311).

Lagerkvist's own reaction was very ambivalent. In a letter to a friend where he offered his play for a performance in Copenhagen and in interviews in Bergen, he stated that he had actually written the play as a protest against violence, whether it was against the backdrop of ideologies such as Nazism, fascism or Bolshevism or not (Lagerroth 1978: 313).

Whereas the play was proclaimed 'a religious revival' and 'a political sensation' (Lagerroth 1978: 310) in Norway, the audience in Stockholm reacted quite differently. Many critics and some members of the public were of the opinion that Lagerkvist was exaggerating the situation in Germany. The play was called a fiasco in Sweden and performances stopped as early as January 1935 (Lagerroth 1978: 318). An interesting aspect in the Swedish reception is the German reaction and the Swedish answer. The Germans were not amused, but the Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs could assure a German diplomat at the German embassy in Stockholm that the play had already 'died a natural death' and that it would probably not be staged elsewhere in Sweden (Lagerroth 1978: 317). Research into the records showed that *The Hangman* was the subject of discussion between the authorities of the two countries. In the period 1933-1945 Germany tried to influence the Swedish government to take action against negative comments regarding Hitler's regime in the Swedish press and cultural life (Lagerroth 1978: 316-317).

After the Stockholm fiasco, Lindberg directed *The Hangman* at The National Theatre (Nationaltheatret) in Oslo (premiere on 5 March 1935). As we can read in a short notice in the Dutch newspaper *Het Vaderland* ('The Fatherland', Betooingen tegen een anti-fascistisch stuk te Oslo, 07-03-1935)⁴, a group of students and people with sympathy for the Quisling party protested against the play. In the same news report the above mentioned statement of the author is included; he did not refer to a specific country, but his play should be seen as a general protest against terrorism and violence. Lindberg was pleased, because he had reached his aim: a theatre that caused debate and political discussions.

Later that year the play was performed at the Duke of York's Theatre in London (premiere on 22 October 1935). Lagerkvist was disappointed with the English performance, because censorship meant

that Lindberg had to leave out some important parts, thus neutralizing the play. Maybe because of the turmoil the play did cause in Norway and Sweden, the British censorship demanded that all allusions to Nazi Germany had to be left out (Lagerroth 1978: 321). Lindberg did not succeed to keep the political tendencies in the play, even though he tried to make the actors to express some kind of indignation by referring them to the second Italo-Ethiopian War that had broken out in October 1935 (Lagerroth 1978: 322). Lagerkvist consequently called the English version 'fake' (Möller 2009: 290).

The performance of the play in Norway caused different reactions. Anti-Nazi groups reacted positively to the play, but those who sympathized with Germany and the Quisling party reacted furiously. In Sweden there were no strong protests at all, but there was a 'silent' diplomacy from the German side. Furthermore, the play was not well attended, and the performances stopped within one month. In England the politic message of the play was neutralized before it came on stage and was in that way a harmless play without causing debate. Only the director and the author were disappointed. In the Netherlands the situation would become different. The reception was similar to the reception in Norway to a certain extent. In Norway politics played a leading role; in the Netherlands it was about politics and religion as well.

Transfer History

In the Netherlands the actor Albert van Dalsum, the artistic leader August Defresne (1893-1961) and Jo Sternheim (1887-1956), leader of the theatre company *Amsterdamsche Toneel Vereeniging*, were the people who decided to perform *The Hangman*. The author H.W. Keuls wrote (1883-1968) on behalf of the group to Lagerkvist and asked for permission to perform the play in Amsterdam (Möller 2009: 229). After that, Lindberg made a thorough description in English of his own 'scenario' for the company in Amsterdam (Lagerroth 1978: 287-288). This can be regarded as the *first* phase of *The Hangman's* 'transfer history' in the Netherlands: its introduction (Broomans 2010b). A cultural transmitter discusses or reviews the literary

work of an author based on the author's original literary works and/or these works in translation.⁵ Thus, regarding *The Hangman* there were various cultural transmitters involved in the first phase: not only Keuls and the group around Defresne in the Netherlands, but also Lindberg who 'translated' his scenario into English. The group around Defresne wanted to perform the play with political intentions. Sternheim was the most outspoken, he was a socialist and was raised in a SDAP (Social Democratic Workers' Party) milieu and wanted to perform for and engage the people (Pos 1971: 74). One could say that he had similar reasons to work with theatre as Lindberg had.

In the *second* phase the selected author is 'in quarantine'. A cultural transmitter (it does not need to be the same one as in phase 1) tries to find an interested publisher or another way to publish the work in translation or maybe even in the original in, for instance, a journal that publishes foreign literature in the original language. Lagerkvist's play did indeed remain a short while 'in quarantine' because the producers hesitated. The reactions to the play in Scandinavia by pro-Nazi groups troubled Van Dalsum, Defresne and Sternheim. They discussed it for hours, and at three o'clock in the morning Sternheim said that they had to perform *The Hangman*, even if that would mean they would lose their jobs (Pos 1971: 119). Van Dalsum stated in an interview much later, in 1968, that the decision to perform the play in a time of non-alignment policy was taken because they wanted to inform people of the threatening situation in Germany. They also feared a suppression of art, especially theatre: 'whether or not we liked the play, it did not matter, but we felt that we had to do it, conforming to our conscience.'⁶ So they decided to have the play translated from the English into Dutch.

In the *third* phase the author's work is translated. The translation is the point of no return and can be regarded as an important event in the process.

The English version was used and translated into Dutch by Evert Straat (1898-1972). Straat functioned as an 'additional and executive' cultural transmitter. In the case of *The Hangman*, ideological motives thus made the difference between 'to translate' or 'not to translate'.

The play got translated, but the next step, a *fourth* phase, had to be a performance. If the translated text was not performed at all, this translation/performance-event may never have resulted in a national debate.

In the *fifth* phase, an in-between phase, the author and his/her translated work is 'in quarantine' again. The translation might be bought and read. The actions of buying and reading the book may happen by chance and the reader may not be aware of having bought a translation.

In the case of *The Hangman* the quarantine is closely connected to the translation event: changes in the text and other adjustments were made. The intentions of the producers became clear from the fact that Defresne did add clear allusions to Nazi Germany in the script with words such as 'Aryan' and 'concentration camps' (Pos 1971: 120-121).

The intermezzo with battle sounds and the film between the first and second part needed to be edited. Furthermore, Defresne and Van Dalsum tried to 'translate' the cry of Lagerkvist against the psychosis of violence into a Christian pacifist protest. The negative ending in the original novella and play was transformed into something that was meant as a solution to cruel violence (Pos 1971: 121). As we will see, not everybody perceived this new ending in a positive way. There were also some technical problems that had to be solved. Therefore the premiere did not take place on 9 November but on 10 November. This 'quarantine' period was thus due to practical reasons as well as ideological motives.

In the *sixth* and the final phase we can speak of a successful cultural transfer because the process of the cultural transfer was completed. The author receives a second reception, be it in the form of reviews, articles, lectures, books etc. In this phase the actions may have been carefully orchestrated events, but they may also be accidental incidents. The 'transfer-history' of *The Hangman* shows that every step taken was guided by ideological motives.

The Hangman was translated, performed and had an audience; and the performance in Amsterdam turned out to be a major event in Dutch theatre history, in the politics and ethics of theatre. The performance caused a fierce debate and turmoil, described by Pos as 'uniek in onze

toneelhistorie' (unique in our theatre history') (Pos 1971: 123). The question whether or not *The Hangman* underwent a successful cultural transfer needs, however, to be discussed.

The Image of Nordic Literature

The Dutch critic Ter Braak, one of the critics involved in the debate, wrote in his review in the Dutch newspaper *Het Vaderland* ('The Fatherland', 18-11-1935) that the original prose text, the novella, was merely a series of images and not a real story and the drama only was meant to tell a story with strong images, a cry, as Lagerkvist himself emphasised.⁷ Ter Braak wrote that the dialogues were chaotic and that all the author had actually written amounted to no more than an expressionistic revue. Ter Braak's negative reaction refers to aesthetical aspects of the play. In the reviews of Ter Braak in *Het Vaderland* a detailed overview can be read of the reception of the performances. After the premiere on 10 November the play was performed three times. The play was also performed in The Hague on 19 November, according to Ter Braak in his review the following day, with an enormous success: it received a standing ovation, something he had never seen before in the theatre of The Hague (Ter Braak 20 November 1935). This was the only positive argument in his review; regarding the content and the form Ter Braak was very negative and was of the opinion that with such phrases 'the rhetoric of fascism cannot be combated'. Lagerkvist is not a good writer, argued Ter Braak. The monologue at the end of the play is the only thing the author really has to say, it is not brilliant but it is a statement at least and the leading actor, Van Dalsum, performs it with belief. The question, concludes Ter Braak, is whether the show was needed at all. In Swedish literary history Lagerkvist's *The Hangman* is regarded as a modernistic, expressionistic and experimental drama. Ter Braak had another opinion and maybe did not know the literary historical context of Lagerkvist's work in Sweden; he called it a revue and classified the play as vulgar literature.

After the first performances without any trouble, the performance on 1 December was disturbed by some members of the audience. In the next review on 2 December 1935 Ter Braak comments on the turmoil

in the theatre in Amsterdam on that Sunday afternoon 1 December, reported by the correspondent in Amsterdam. What was the reason? It was probably, as Pos also observed, a scandal constructed by certain newspapers (Pos 1971: 126). The independent newspaper *De Telegraaf* had published an article on 25 November by J.W.F. Werumeus Buning (1891-1958) who protested against the financial support of the play by the city council. According to Ter Braak, *De Telegraaf* was a newspaper that swims with the tide and now it tried to benefit from the NSB (Hanssen 2001: 331). According to Hijmans, Werumeus Buning did not criticise the political tendencies, but the artistic value of the play. Later he was blamed for his reluctance to participate in anti-fascist actions (Hijmans 1969: 19).⁸ After the article in *De Telegraaf* the play was performed four times. The catholic newspaper *De Tijd* also contributed anti-propaganda and stated that the play included blasphemy. The propaganda had the result that it was not possible to continue the performances. During the performance on Sunday afternoon 1 December, the audience started to fight with each other and the actors could not perform because of the tumult. The National Socialist Movement (NSB) was against the play because of its anti Nazism. Christians regarded the play as atheistic and immoral. And of course there was a part of the audience who appreciated the play for its anti fascism and anti Nazism. People who sabotaged the performance were taken away by the police. At the end, the theatre was half empty and the actors received a standing ovation.

On 3 December the authorities got involved in the matter when the city councillor, Walrave Boissevain (1876-1944) of the reformed Anti Revolutionary Party (ARP), asked the mayor Willem de Vlucht (1872-1945), also member of the ARP, if it would not be wise to ban the play. De Vlucht refused to ban the play, he reacted with the words: 'Voor terreur ga ik niet opzij, met terreur reken ik af' (I will not make way for terrorism, I will end terrorism') (Pos 1971: 125). But he did send his alderman to Van Dalsum and Defresne to ask if there were any possibilities for changing the play so that the protests would die out. On 4 December a member of the Dutch parliament asked the Minister of Interior affairs, J.A. de Wilde (1879-1956) of the ARP and minister in the period 1933-1937, to ban the play if it indeed included blasphemy

and glorification of violence. Though De Wilde did not want to ban the play officially, it was banned in the cities of Haarlem and Utrecht. Van Dalsum and Defresne decided to give only closed performances, so they wrote to De Vlucht (Pos 1971: 125). This happened three times, each time for 900 visitors, until minister De Wilde banned the performance of the play.

Although Ter Braak was negative about the play for aesthetical reasons, he was against the smear campaign of the *De Telegraaf*. In an article on 6 December in *De Vaderland* Ter Braak discussed how the play could not be regarded as blasphemy. He demonstrated that both Lagerkvist and Van Dalsum had already made amendments to the play, especially to the last part. They tried to maintain the pacifistic content while at the same time adding a more religious character. Ter Braak also concluded that formally the play could not be regarded as blasphemy. On 9 December Ter Braak received a reaction from a reader, who sent a long letter to *De Vaderland* and argued that the play was in fact blasphemous. Ter Braak wrote a short response and concluded his reaction explaining that in a country where freedom of opinion is warranted, indignation can be worked out by free discussion. However, the debate and turmoil in the theatre went on, even after the closed performances. A few weeks later, on 21 December, Van Dalsum announced on the VPRO-radio that the company was forced to stop the performances and stated that '[i]n a reality, so mighty, that every theory of beauty fades away or seems to be fake, it is almost unrealistic to give theatre a cultural meaning when this in life itself no longer or only rudimentary exist.'⁹

Van Dalsum, Defresne and Sternheim, who introduced the play in the Netherlands, were forced to stop a possible completion of the cultural transfer process for political reasons.

As we have seen, Ter Braak was not the only one who was negative about *The Hangman*, but the fact that Ter Braak was not positive is remarkable. In Dutch literary history he is regarded as an anti-fascist and modern man of letters. Why did he criticise Lagerkvist in the way he did? Furthermore, Ter Braak also became known as the literary critic who characterised Scandinavian literature as a trivial and conservative literature.

In Dutch reception studies, the common opinion is that Scandinavian literature in the Netherlands during the 1920s and 1930s gradually changed from a 'new' literary and progressive 'intellectual power' around 1900, as the Danish literary critic Helge Topsøe-Jensen (1896-1976) wrote (Topsøe-Jensen 1926: 1), to a conservative literature, due to the popularity of novels about peasants and farmers, about landscapes and nature.¹⁰ According to these reception studies Scandinavian novels such as *Beyond Sing the Woods* (1936), the first novel of 'The Bjørndal cycle' by the Norwegian novelist Trygve Gulbrandsen (1894-1962), became a synonym for Scandinavian literature. Novels of Gulbrandsen and other Scandinavian writers were regarded as 'Heimat'-literature, as vulgar and as a 'Blood and soil literature' with traditional and in some cases even Nazi-influenced elements (see Broomans 2010a).

An intriguing question is thus why *The Hangman* did not contribute in changing the image of Scandinavian literature. The question could also be posed another way; maybe the image was more multifaceted in the 1920s and 1930s than was assumed and only changed into an image of traditional and regional literature much later. Ter Braak could have been a suitable medium in recognising the value of *The Hangman* given that he was one of the reviewers of this play and that he participated in the debate about the drama. On the contrary, Ter Braak and his other colleagues in the journal *Forum*, with their harsh criticism of regional literature, became synonymous with a rejection of Scandinavian literature in the 1930s (Grit 1994: 124).

Menno ter Braak is regarded as one of the most prominent critics in the Netherlands in the period before World War II. He wrote an enormous amount of reviews, essays and other works. He also published fiction, such as the play *De Pantserkrant* (The Armour Newspaper) in 1935, but did not succeed as an author of literary works to the same extent as with his essays and criticism. His *philosophical* thinking, influenced by Nietzsche and Hegel, comes to the fore in books such as *Het carnaval der burgers* (The carnival of citizens, 1930). He was interested in new art forms such as film. In 1927 he founded together with amongst others Joris Ivens (1898-1989) the Dutch Film Society. Ter Braak had a leading role in the journal *Forum* (1932-1935) that he founded together with Edgar du Perron (1899-1940) and Maurice

Roelants (1895-1966). In Dutch literary history *Forum* is associated with the programme 'Vorm of vent' ('Content or form'). From 1933 until his death in 1940, Ter Braak was the leading literary critic in *Het Vaderland*, a liberal, 'high society' newspaper in *The Hague*. As the editor of the section 'Kunst en Letteren' (Art and Literature), he came into conflict several times with the chief editors, because he wanted to be free as a critic. He was very critical and had a polemic way of writing. He regarded his newspaper writings as 'a kind of vulgarization of culture' and had to find a way to be honest to himself (Hanssen 2001: 202).

In 1936 he founded together with other intellectuals, the 'Comité van waakzaamheid van anti-nationaalsocialistische intellectuelen. Verdediging der geestelijke vrijheid' (Committee for Vigilance). In the second half of the 1930s he became involved in the anti-fascist movement in the Netherlands and was afraid of being arrested by the Nazis. At the outbreak of the Second World War he took his own life.

Ter Braak's personality was somewhat similar to Lagerkvist's character. He was like Lagerkvist ambitious and ambivalent. In the 1930s Lagerkvist regarded himself as a fighting humanist; Ter Braak called himself a militant humanist (Hanssen 2001: 320). However, Ter Braak had a different view on the function of drama than Lindberg and Lagerkvist. In Lindberg's opinion, drama had to engage the people, not only the lower classes but also the upper classes. Ter Braak, on the other hand, regarded drama as entertainment for the masses (Hanssen 2001: 318).

He also wrote a play, the above-mentioned *De Pantserkrant* and sent it to Van Dalsum and Defresen. The play was meant to denounce every form of idealism, whether or not it was for the purpose of pacifism (the good form) or for the purpose of the arms industry (the evil form) (Hanssen 2001: 319). In a letter to Ter Braak from 15 May 1935, the same year of the debate on *The Hangman*, Defresne explains extensively why the troupe did not want to perform it. He thought that the characters were unbalanced: the ones Ter Braak hated were well-defined, but the ones he liked were only vaguely outlined. For this reason the dialogues were not convincing. Moreover, since the action of the play was, according to Defresne, based on ambivalent

personal positions, both poles in this dramatic conflict needed to be equally strong. The action did not work because this was not the case in *De Pantserkrant*. Defresne ends his letter inviting Ter Braak to react to the criticism, and adds: 'By the way, the form is also really, very traditional'.¹¹

Ter Braak did not succeed with his play that was written against the backdrop of the same political development in Europe in the 1930s as Lagerkvist's *The Hangman*. It is probably a far-fetched assumption to call Ter Braak a frustrated playwright, but it is striking that his critical remarks on the form and the dialogues of *The Hangman* are reminiscent of Defresne's comments on *De Pantserkrant*. Moreover, according to Ter Braak, Lagerkvist was just not a good writer.

Ter Braak's negative critique of Lagerkvist's play could have had a personal background and could be regarded as an exception in his reception of Nordic literature. Ter Braak reviewed other Scandinavian authors in *De Vaderland*, thus it is possible to compare his reviews with his view on *The Hangman*. Besides reviewing Lagerkvist in November and December 1935, he reviewed a translation of Inuit poetry from the Danish in 1934, his first review on Nordic literature (see the bibliography for a complete list). In the period of the debate on *The Hangman*, Ter Braak reviewed on 24 November 1935 the first volume of the Bjørndal trilogy, *Beyond Sing the Woods* of the Norwegian author Trygve Gulbrandsen (1894-1962). His general opinion of Scandinavian literature is a Romantic one. In his reviews of the *Kalevala*, the *Edda*, the neo-Romantic novel *Gösta Berling* by Lagerlöf and the novel by Gulbrandsen, Ter Braak was very positive. He liked especially one of the introducing chapters in which a fight between one of the male protagonists and a bear is depicted in 'powerful and colourfully written prose' (Broomans 2010a: 410). In his review of the *Edda* he wondered why in 'our culture' so little is left of the Nordic mythology. Ter Braak declares the *Edda* an important document of the Teutonic spirit; it is poetic and full of motifs. Also the Finnish epic *Kalevala* gets a positive review. The subtitle of the review 'Romantic inspiration and scholarship' shows that Ter Braak was aware of the context of the national Romantic movement in Scandinavia and the collection and construction of folktales. Both the *Edda* and the *Kalevala* are described as interesting

and poetic. In his review of the novel by the Finnish writer Sillanpää he places the novel and the Nobel Prize for Sillanpää against the historical backdrop; the threatening attack of Soviet Russia. Sillanpää is depicted as a Romantic and poetic writer; the title of the review 'Finnish nature poetry' and 'the atmosphere of the Nordic night' places Sillanpää in a Romantic tradition. For that matter the review can be compared to the one about Gulbrandsen's novel. Lagerlöf too is characterised as a Romantic writer. Ter Braak calls the style of *Gösta Berling* 'Romantic, but at the same time compelling and poetic'. It becomes obvious that Ter Braak favoured Scandinavian literature when it was poetical, strong and Romantic. His negative critique of Lagerkvist's play therefore becomes less surprising as it is clear that he did not like realism à la Ibsen or modernism à la Lagerkvist. Although in his earlier years he did identify with the protagonist Brand in Ibsen's play *Brand* (1866) (Hanssen 2000: 143), he discarded Ibsen's realistic and social plays as old fashioned and too abstract in 1938.

As a matter of fact Ter Braak never used the adjective 'regional' to describe Scandinavian literature in these reviews. But in a review of a novel of Theun de Vries (1907-2005), on 19 July 1936, he refers to Gulbrandsen as the writer of 'the Romantic peasant trilogy' and in April 1940 in an essay called 'In the country of Gulbrandsen' he writes about the invasion of the Nazi forces in Norway and about what in his opinion was the naive reaction of the people in Oslo. Here too, he refers to Gulbrandsen. Ter Braak describes the Norwegians as people who believe that evil always will happen to other people, just as in a novel. The crowd is curious, has too much 'newspaper knowledge' to be naive, but not enough knowledge to reach beyond Gulbrandsen. Ter Braak remarks that the Norwegians have had a long tradition of socialism; they were as far from fanaticism as Oslo from Islam. Thus, Ter Braak associated Gulbrandsen's popular novels with the masses and peasants, but not with 'Blood and soil' literature as such.

When considering Ter Braak's general view of Nordic literature, positive key words include 'romantic', 'poetic', 'powerful' and 'strong'. Nordic realistic and social literature as well as modernistic literature à la Lagerkvist was less interesting in the opinion of Ter Braak.

The case of the reception of *The Hangman* shows how Menno ter

Braak had an important role in shaping the image of Scandinavian literature in the Netherlands. Nel van Dijk states in her study on Ter Braak, that after the Second World War Ter Braak was regarded as an influential critic (Van Dijk 1994: 115-130). This might have had an influence on the importance of Ter Braak in the Dutch reception history of Scandinavian literature. After the success of Scandinavian literature a period of decline was constructed in the Dutch reception history. After the Second World War, authors such as Annie M.G. Schmidt (1911-1995) and Godfried Bomans (1913-1971) wrote funny poems and parodies on Scandinavian trilogies (Grit 1994: 124). However, in the 1920s and 1930s the readers in the Netherlands had a more varied view on Scandinavian literature as suggested by reviews of Scandinavian authors in the 1930s. Until the mid 1930s cultural transmitters such as Greta Baars-Jelgersma (1911-) were searching for new mainstreams and modern Scandinavian literature (Klok 2010: 84). Distinctions within the reception of Scandinavian literature during the 1920s and 1930s come also to the fore in Grit's observations; he refers amongst others to Annie Romein-Verschoor (1895-1978) who in her reviews remarked that not all Scandinavian literature is similar to peasant literature (Grit 1994: 124).

Ter Braak paved the way for the 'Blood and soil' image that arose after the Second World War to a certain extent. The reception conflict in the case of Ter Braak versus Lagerkvist remains an intriguing question. Ter Braak carried different views and had a different opinion on the status and function of drama than Lagerkvist. The consequence of this was that the reception of *The Hangman*, a play that is regarded as important and innovative in Swedish literary history became a forgotten incident in the Dutch reception history of Scandinavian literature instead of a turning point.

The 'Hangman-case' in the Netherlands illustrates that not only aesthetical values, but also and in a greater extent ideological motives, politics and personal motives were involved in the cultural transfer process. Moreover, ideologies and politics interrupted a successful cultural transfer. Ter Braak's position is an ambivalent one. He was regarded as a critic who was in favor of modernism, but he had nevertheless a romantic image of Nordic literature. Lagerkvist's

expressionistic play *The Hangman* did not fit in with this image and Ter Braak may also have had personal reasons for criticizing the play. Ter Braak's romantic view became posthumously a 'Blood and soil' image and a myth that dominated for a long time the image of Nordic literature in the Dutch reception history.

Endnotes

¹ *The Hangman* and *The Dwarf* belong to the genre of so-called 'beredskapsliteratur', 'literature of preparedness', i.e. texts 'defending democratic and humanistic values' (Forsås-Scott 106). The genre arose in Sweden, as well as in other Scandinavian countries, as a reaction to the developments in Germany.

² According to Arne Hannevik it has been Hans Jacob Nilsen (1897-1957) who encouraged Lagerkvist to dramatise the novella but Hannevik does not mention any source, Hannevik 'Pär Lagerkvists drama Bödeln', in *Edda*, 1964, Bind LXIV, p. 5. The fact is that Nilsen, theatre director in Bergen and Oscar Braaten (1881-1939), theatre director in Oslo, had pleaded to Lindberg to ask Lagerkvist to adapt the novella to a play, but it was Lindberg who really did convince Lagerkvist and helped him with the adaption (Lagerroth 1978: 279).

³ Lindberg's programme has to be seen against the backdrop of the Swedish 'folkhem' (people's home) ideology.

⁴ 'Protests against an anti-fascist play in Oslo'. All translations from English into Dutch are mine.

⁵ See for a definition of the phenomenon 'cultural transmitter', Broomans, P. 'Women as Transmitters of Ideas. Introduction', in: Broomans, P., *From Darwin to Weil. Women as Transmitters of Ideas*, ed., vol 1 in the series Studies on Cultural Transfer and transmission (CTaT), Barkhuis Publishing, Groningen, 2009, p. 2.

⁶ See the documentary on the debate about 'The Hangman' in the Netherlands, <http://www.vpro.nl/programma/wintergasten/afleveringen/3486338/> (last check, 15 September 2012).

⁷ The prose text was translated into Dutch by N. Boelen-Ranneft in 1935.

⁸ In the study of Hijmans there is a supplement with (fragments) reviews of Weumeus Buning and others of the play and a letter of Werumeus Buning to a reader, Hijmans, Bijlage 8 (supplement 8), pp. 283-290.

⁹ See the documentary on the debate about 'The Hangman' in the Netherlands, <http://www.geschiedenis24.nl/andere-tijden/afleveringen/2000-2001/De-Beul.html> (last check, 1 August 2013).

¹⁰ For example in Grit, D. *Driewerf zalig Noorden. Over literaire betrekkingen tussen de Nederlanden en Scandinavië*, Universitaire Pers Maastricht, Maastricht, 1994.

¹¹ http://mtb.dbnl.nl/tekst/braa002vers01_01/braa002vers01_01_0204.php (last check 15 September 2012).

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