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## **Introduction. The Return of the Author to the Field of Dutch Studies**

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## Introduction: The Return of the Author to the Field of Dutch Studies

“There is no avoiding literary authors in Dutch media.” This variation on Joe Moran’s opening sentence about *literary celebrity* in the United States would also be an appropriate first line for the present special issue (Moran 2000). Moran points out that authors are ubiquitous, giving interviews in dailies and weeklies, appearing as guests in talk shows and at lectures, at signing sessions and at all kinds of literary festivals. The American situation as described by Moran may perhaps be slightly more radical than the Dutch but, even so, there are plenty of resemblances. Dutch authors, too, are part of a literary system that is increasingly embedded in the entertainment industry and the attention economy.

Not only does the author have to compete with novel-writing television personalities in the book market, there are many authors – often the most successful ones – who shape their reputation through various media performances. This has made the figure of the author the main contemporary lens through which the media look at literature. This is also indicated by the fact that the Dutch literary biography is becoming more popular. Recent books about the sensational lives of famous authors sell well. Such books appeal to the desire, which dominates the present-day literary field, for getting to know the man or woman behind the book both via the literary text *and* through the author’s public performances. The recent commotion caused by Griet Op de Beeck’s public confession about her incestuous past and the debate about Charlotte Mutsaers’s fictional, or actual, possession of child porn demonstrate that this has major consequences for the way in which literature is read (Bax 2017b, 2017c).

It is, therefore, hardly surprising that literary studies have in recent years increasingly turned their attention to research into (the public manifestation of) authorship. Where the author had long been out of bounds as a field of study,

at the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century we see him reappearing on the literary radar. Illustrative of this revolution is the way in which the text “La mort de l’auteur” [The Death of the Author], published by Roland Barthes in 1968, is being reread (Moran 2000; Bax 2017a). If the title of this text served for a long time as a slogan for dismissing author research as outmoded, Moran rightly shows that on reflection the text in fact contains an intriguing theory about authorship.

The return of the author to Dutch literary studies manifests itself most strongly in research focusing on *celebrity culture* – a phenomenon by no means reserved for the world of entertainment and popular culture. Literary history, too, abounds with celebrities. Therefore, a special form of celebrity is *literary celebrity*. Examples of past and present authors who have gained the status of *star author* are not hard to find. Past authors might include Lord Byron, Charles Dickens and Oscar Wilde, while Bret Easton Ellis, Haruki Murakami and J.K. Rowling may be viewed as the celebrities of our times.

Meanwhile, in the Netherlands, too, *literary celebrity* has been given due consideration. Gaston Franssen (2010) was the first to publish an article on the subject, which has subsequently also received attention in the work of Rick Honings, for example in his monograph *De dichter als idool* [The Poet as Idol, 2016], on literary fame in the nineteenth century (cf. Honings 2018). Recently, Franssen and Honings have also edited two volumes (Franssen and Honings 2016, 2017) analysing the celebrity of (inter)national authors.

The research of Edwin Praat and Sander Bax is similarly situated at the interface of authorship, modern media and celebrity culture. Praat (2014) analyses Gerard Reve’s public authorship. In 2015 Sander Bax published *De Mulisch Mythe*, where he conducted an analysis of Harry Mulisch as a public figure. In addition, mention should be made here of the work of Laurens Ham (2015), inspired by Jérôme Meizoz’s posture analysis, together with the more ‘economic’ perspective on authorship adopted by Helleke van den Braber (2002) and Nina Geerdink (2012). Such research aims to examine the role of the author in the public debate, in the world of politics and modern media.

Closely related to the study of literary celebrity is the research on authors as public intellectuals. In 2016 Odile Heynders published her book *Writers as Public Intellectuals. Literature, Celebrity, Democracy* (2016). There, she characterizes the public intellectual as someone on the sidelines who takes part in the public debate with provocative views. He can do so through public performances, although another (perhaps particularly) important channel is that of literary texts (Bax and Heynders 2016). Heynders’s work clearly demonstrates that author research does address the author’s *work*, and is not solely concerned with his public performance. However, research into authorship focuses on the interaction between authors, their work, the media and the world surrounding them.

This special issue of *Werkwinkel* aims to give a picture of the possibilities that research into authorship opens up. In their articles, each of the four academics from the Netherlands puts a famous contemporary author centre stage: three Dutch writers and one Flemish. How do these star authors deal with their special status, how much use do they make of modern media, and what position does the author adopt as a voice in recent public debates – as a public intellectual – both in his work and in public performances?

The opening article by Odile Heynders is about Tommy Wieringa, who takes a stand in the (over-)heated debate on immigration. His novels – *Dit zijn de namen* [These Are the Names, 2012] and *De dood van Murat Idrissi* [The Death of Murat Idrissi, 2017] – force readers to reflect on human solidarity and the complexities of the migration issue. In so doing, he presents himself as a public intellectual – that is, in Heynders's words, “as a writer who intervenes in the public debate and proclaims a moral stance.”

Central to the second article, by Rick Honings, is Herman Brusselmans, who constantly navigates between high and popular culture in his work. Honings analyses Brusselmans as a star author, and not only analyses his television performances and the cult of the private, but also explores how Brusselmans thematises the subject ‘fame’ in his work. Brusselmans has suggested on many occasions that his work merely serves to entertain. As a result of his fame, literary or otherwise, over recent years he has been increasingly forced to assume the role of a public intellectual.

Inge van de Ven examines A.H.J. Dautzenberg's multi-faceted oeuvre and not undisputed authorship. Well-nigh impossible to pigeonhole, here the author is set against a number of prototypical kinds of writers: the public intellectual, the modernist, autonomous writer and the twenty-first-century star author, but also against the rebellious outsider. Her analysis of his work and public performances shows that reality is even more complex and that Dautzenberg combines a range of roles.

The fourth and last article is by Sander Bax. Analysing the phenomenon of “literary gossip” that is closely connected with celebrity culture, Bax makes a connection between celebrity, autobiography and life writing. In his article he examines the ‘personality system’ found in modern media, where a work receives particular attention if it deals with something that the author has experienced himself – with authors themselves sometimes cleverly capitalising on this. This is what Bax demonstrates, using the example of Connie Palmen writing about her life with Hans van Mierlo in *Logboek van een onbarmhartig jaar* [Logbook of a Pitiless Year, 2011]. It brought her to the attention of the media, but the fact that this is a fictional construction was largely passed over. Bax addresses this phenomenon that is so typical of twenty-first-century media culture.

Together, the four articles reveal the position in which the author finds himself in today's world. In 2005 the French literary scholar William Marx published his cultural-pessimistic book *L'adieu à la littérature* [Farewell to Literature, 2005], where he argues that literature has lost its function of playing a meaningful role in contemporary discourse. "The writer-as-role model has had to make way for the film star and the pop idol," it says on the blurb. This special issue demonstrates that this statement needs to be substantially qualified. It is precisely from the fact that some writers develop into star authors that they derive the authority to speak out about the world's problems and issues. The case studies in this special issue show that authors do not shy away from doing so. As star authors and public intellectuals they have the opportunity to function as the nation's conscience.

And there is more. This issue opens with the words of thanks that Breyten Breytenbach spoke upon accepting the Zbigniew Herbert International Literary Award 2017. If anyone has claimed a social role as a critical writer and public intellectual – against Apartheid – then surely it is Breytenbach. His text therefore fits in beautifully with the theme of this issue.

Rick Honings and Sander Bax

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