

THE JEWISH SPIRIT AND LITERATURE:

MENNO TER BRAAK, LION FEUCHTWANGER, ET AL.

Lion Feuchtwanger's fiftieth birthday, July 7, 1934, elicited a tribute from an unlikely quarter: Menno ter Braak.¹ Unlikely, because Holland's foremost interwar cultural critic was no fan of the German-Jewish author. In seven years reviewing books for *Het Vaderland*, 1933-1940, and years of freelancing before that, Ter Braak chose not to review any of Feuchtwanger's, favorably or unfavorably. Keeping in mind that, coincident with Ter Braak's tenure at *Het Vaderland*, Feuchtwanger was publishing book after book, in German and in translation, with Dutch publisher Querido in Amsterdam²; and, further, that Ter Braak was thoroughly at home in German and professed a soft spot for émigré literature — keeping all that in mind, Feuchtwanger's snub, if we can call it that, does seem a trifle peculiar. While Ter Braak may not have reviewed Feuchtwanger, he was intimately acquainted with his work, as evidenced by scattered remarks and the column paying tribute on the occasion of the author's jubilee. In the latter, Ter Braak

¹ 'Lion Feuchtwanger 50 jaar,' *Het Vaderland*, 5 July 1934, http://mtb.dbnl.nl/tekst/braa002vade03_01/braa002vade03_01_0097.php [accessed 8 June 2015]

² Shortly after Hitler came to power, the Amsterdam publishing house Emanuel Querido started a separate German division primarily designed to bring out émigré literature. Feuchtwanger, a best-selling author, was much sought after; his sales, along with other best-selling authors like Vicki Baum and Stefan Zweig, enabled Querido to float poor or mediocre selling writers like Arnold Zweig and Bertolt Brecht. See Fritz Landshoff, *Querido Verlag: Amsterdam, Keizersgracht 333. Erinnerungen eines Verlegers* (Berlin and Weimar: Aufbau Verlag, 1991).

commended Feuchtwanger's courage in raising Hitler's hackles early on, singling out *Erfolg* as the author's 'big novel'; lauded his talent for depicting historical events; pegged him as the 'chronicler of postwar Germany, but especially of Munich'; briefly mentioned *Die Geschwister Oppenheim*, which had recently appeared in a Dutch translation, and, channeling the fifty-year-old himself, summarized the overarching theme of his novels as that of the individual caught 'between action and inaction, between power and knowledge.'

For all that, Ter Braak hesitated to call Feuchtwanger a first-rate author, citing 'exhaustive thoroughness' (elsewhere characterized as 'description mania') as the fictional Achilles Heel that kept the exiled author from cracking literature's inner circle. In the same vein, Ter Braak decried Feuchtwanger's habit of swathing his characters in double and triple adjectives — 'painting with words' — as though he were working on a film in which every facial expression and physical attribute had to be scripted.³

'DEMOLITON MENNO'

Menno ter Braak (1902–1940) grew up in a middle class household in a small town on the German border. His mother was related to Johan Huizinga, the Dutch historian who made his name chronicling the death

³ 'Het Schrijverspalet,' in *Verzameld Werk*, 7 vols (Amsterdam: van Oorschot, 1980), III, pp. 400–418 (hereafter VW).

throes of the Middle Ages. Menno, too, went in for history. Upon completion of his doctorate, on Holy Roman Emperor Otto III, Ter Braak taught history at secondary schools while keeping a finger in the literary pie. Freelancing and collaborating on literary magazines, he built a reputation as a perceptive and hard-nosed critic — ‘Demolition Menno’ (‘Menno ter Afbraak’). Staunchly anti-fascist, the critic defined National Socialism as a movement of ‘losers’ filled with rancor toward their betters, with Jew-hatred — ‘the easiest and most giving of hatreds’ — leading the charge.⁴ As well, he helped found an organization committed to combating fascism. Sustained, anti-Nazi activities made him a marked man in the event of a German invasion.

COMPLETE AND INCOMPLETE ASSIMILATION

Feuchtwanger exemplified a breed of Jewish authors — Arnold and Stefan Zweig, Emil Ludwig, Jakob Wassermann, André Maurois, among others — whose writings struck the Dutch critic as products of incomplete assimilation: inferior yet important in moving a culture forward that was problematic, stagnant, and mediocre to begin with; the culture Ter Braak had in mind was Western Europe’s. There was another way, Ter Braak insisted, the way of Julien Benda, Franz Kafka, and Lev Shestov, whose works

⁴ ‘Het nationalisme als rancuneleer,’ in *VW*, III, pp. 575–594.

demonstrated ‘the possibilities of a truly emancipated assimilation.’ In these, assimilation had become creative, trumping the Zweigs, the Feuchtwangers, the Wassermanns, the Ludwigs, de Maurois-es — in short all the intermediary phenomena between originality and unoriginality, for one can only speak of literature, Ter Braak elaborated, by ‘distinguishing originality from imitation,’ great works from average, ‘the writer from the litteraat.’ ‘Litteraat,’ or *littérateur*, was the pejorative label Ter Braak slapped on literature’s alleged unfinished projects of cultural assimilation plying their craft a rung or two from the top, relying for effect on ‘superficial rationalism’ and ‘cheap sentimentality.’

‘THE JEWISH SPIRIT AND LITERATURE’

The principal essay in which Ter Braak brokered these observations, ‘The Jewish Spirit and Literature,’⁵ appeared in 1939 in a collection of articles on the Jewish question.⁶ In it, Ter Braak singled out Arnold Zweig’s *Bilanz der deutschen Judentum*, equating Jews with humanity, civilization, and justice,

⁵ Ter Braak’s argument was not all that new, albeit with a somewhat altered focus. In 1912, the German-Jewish literary critic Mortiz Goldstein published an essay in a prominent German cultural journal that stirred up a hornet’s nest of debate and controversy and was later quoted by Nazi works on German Jews. ‘We Jews,’ wrote Goldstein in *Kunstwart*, ‘are administering the spiritual property of a nation which denies our right and ability to do so.’ Forty-five years later Goldstein supplied the backstory.’ He was driven, Goldstein writes, ‘By an irresistible urge to release the pressure which had accumulated in my mind. So I sat down to describe the position of the literary Jew in Germany as I saw it; to point out the intolerable and undignified ambiguity; to demonstrate the meaning of being a Jew and of being a German and a European; to reveal the resulting schism and the impossibility of overcoming it.’ Goldstein, ‘German Jewry’s Dilemma. The Story of a Provocative Essay,’ in *Year Book of the Leo Baeck Institute*, II (1), (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1957), pp. 237, 242.

⁶ ‘De joodsche geest en de litteratuur,’ in *Anti-semitisme en Jodendom, Een bundel studies over een actueel vraagstuk*, edited by Dr. H. J. Pos (Arnhem: Van Loghum Slaterus, 1939), pp. 148–164. Citations here are from ‘De joodse geest en de litteratuur,’ in *VW*, IV, pp. 463–480.

as a prototype of the kind of second-rate literature he had in mind. Zweig, asserted Ter Braak, failed to subject his abstractions to critical examination and tease out the appropriate nuances, and as such amounted to a simplistic attempt to come to grips with the Jewish question and with antisemitism.

Zweig, he writes,

is a true representative of the Jewish intellect in the upper layers of culture with which he has completely identified himself, which is why he fails to notice all that is superficial, appearance... or problematic. As a start, we might want to ascertain to what extent, in whole or in part, in appearance or in reality, assimilated Jews do transmit the *externals* of civilization; to what extent they are thus typical *intermediaries*, intermediaries and conduits of European culture ... and to what extent they have, moreover, enriched this culture with their own values. (466)

In Ter Braak's scheme of things — and he seems to have had in mind mainly German-Jewish authors — Jews entered the literary arena dominated by a middlebrow culture that furnished an ideal vehicle on which to graft survival skills honed in the diaspora. 'Owing to the stupidity of official Christianity,' he writes, 'Jews evolved into a people that learned to meet brute force with cunning; that this cunning is likewise reflected in literature, and indeed in the guise of a second-rate literary dexterity, is in itself hardly surprising.' Virtuosi in the 'art of adaptation,' Jewish writers

are able to achieve a certain superiority. They thereby become the symbol of adaptability in general, although they do nothing other than seek out the 'horizontal layer' where they are best able to flourish,

where originality counts for less than cleverness, where the intellectual life has taken on the character of mere production. (470)

Ter Braak held that all writers had something of the *littérateur* in them and that European culture itself exhibited a tension between writer and *littérateur* as both undesirable and necessary. ‘The possibilities and dangers of Jewish assimilation for European culture are as inseparable as that of writer and *littérateur*.’ So, while Jewish writers like Feuchtwanger and Arnold Zweig helped seed middlebrow culture, their exertions on balance left a positive impression; cutting across borders, they laid the foundation of an international culture.

Only sentimental biases would unequivocally maintain that the influence of Jews on literature enriches literature, which is not to say that in a culture whose broad foundation is mediocre Jewish writers don’t play a positive role; to deny this role amounts to ingratitude, a reverse snobism. [...] Isn’t this as much a European as a specifically Jewish phenomenon? (471)

We would not miss the target by much were we to characterize ‘The Jewish Spirit and Literature’ as a hodgepodge of mixed messages that resist fine-tuning. In the end, Ter Braak turns antisemitism’s international Jewish conspiracy on its head by casting the likes of Feuchtwanger as trailblazers of European unification, as though the Jewish spirit moved through literature the way Hegel’s moved through history.

NIETZSCHE, TER BRAAK, AND THE JEWISH QUESTION

Not Hegel, however, but Nietzsche is Ter Braak's go-to philosopher. For what spring is to summer, Nietzsche is to Ter Braak: never far behind. And it is left to Nietzsche, 'the thinker of nuance par excellence,' to help the critic unravel the mysteries of the Jewish question and literature. As is well known, Nietzsche rowed with both 'philo' and 'anti' oars, and Ter Braak pulls away at each in turn, by and large coopting his mentor's characterization of Jews as actors and mimics without equal, 'a people among whom certain individuals "strive for genius," while their cultural mean creates the impression of a "virtual breeding ground for actors."' (469)

Though he admired their vitality, Nietzsche did not think of Jews as the genuine article. [W]here the Jew coincides with the actor in the broadest sense of the word,' writes Ter Braak,

'he looks upon him as the representative of European decadence par excellence [...]; he knows how to value the Jew without overestimating him as the cultural mediator among European nations and as such recognizes the significance of Jews in terms of a unified Europe. At the same time, he clearly sees the limits and dangers of that mediation and never was taken in by the Jewish capacity for adaptation, which often takes on the guise of originality despite being rooted in cultural 'mimicry.'⁷

⁷ 'Friedrich Nietzsche, 1844–1934,' in VW, IV, p. 315.

THE HISTORICAL NOVEL

‘The Jewish Spirit and Literature’ was not the first time Ter Braak found fault with Jewish writers like Lion Feuchtwanger, Arnold Zweig, and Emil Ludwig. The same, standing in for a larger contingent, also figured in his critique of historical novels. A 1934 article in the Paris-based émigré journal *Das Neue Tage-Buch* savaged the tendency of émigré writers to resort to this particular genre. According to Ter Braak, these efforts, many of them by Jewish authors — in the nature of things disproportionately represented in the émigré community — amounted to a ‘flight into the past,’ confronting Nazism backdoor instead of head-on.⁸ The most successful and unabashed champion of the maligned medium was Lion Feuchtwanger.⁹

Feuchtwanger picked the International Congress of Antifascist Writers for the Defense of Culture, held in Paris in the summer of 1935, to present his side of the story, promoting historical fiction as a legitimate approach to doing history — better able in effect to convey the past than

⁸ Menno ter Braak, ‘Emigranten-Literatur,’ in *De artikelen over emigrantenliteratuur 1933–1940*. Selected and introduced by Francis Bulhof (s’-Gravenhage: Uitgeverij BZZTôH, 1988), pp. 146–150. Ter Braak’s article appeared in *Das Neue Tage-Buch* on December 29, 1934.

⁹ Ludwig Marcuse considered Feuchtwanger ‘the greatest representative of the historical novel of our time.’ *Mein Zwanzigstes Jahrhundert* (Munich: Paul List, 1960), p. 279. *The Los Angeles Times* book critic Robert Kirsch concurred: ‘it is not too much to say that he was the most important and influential historical novelist in twentieth century German literature.’ *Los Angeles Times*, February 17, 1965. Box A3a, folder 3, Lion Feuchtwanger papers, Collection no. 0204, Feuchtwanger Memorial Library, Special Collections, USC Libraries, University of Southern California.

history proper. The writer of historical fiction is an artist expressing his personal view of the contemporary world, transmitted in a pleasing, accessible format by means of ‘distancing.’¹⁰

Ter Braak, who also attended the congress but left before Feuchtwanger’s address, did not think ‘distancing’ was the correct strategy for engaging a clear and present danger. A column bemoaning the tendency of émigré writers to resort to historical fiction appeared three months after the conclusion of the Paris congress.¹¹ ‘And now the illustrious authors of the emigration,’ he wrote in *Het Vaderland*,

flee into the past, that is, into topics that enable them to make allusions to, and comparisons with, the present situation, yet on the whole detract from the seriousness of that situation. Heinrich Mann visits Henry IV, Ludwig Marcuse Ignatius de Loyola, Gina Kaus Catherine the Great, Alfred Neumann Napoleon III, etc.; the list is by no means exhausted.”¹²

And yet, historical novels and *vies romancées* — fictional biographies — seemed to be more popular than ever, a trend not lost on the industrious critic. The newfound popularity of the genre was attributed to cravings for

¹⁰ For Feuchtwanger’s speech, ‘Du sens et du non-sens du roman historique,’ see *Pour la défense de la culture. Les textes du Congrès International des écrivains, Paris, juin 1935*, edited and commentary by Sandra Teroni and Wolfgang Klein (Dijon: Éditions Universitaires de Dijon, 2005), pp. 385–390.

¹¹ Ter Braak wrote two unflattering reports on the congress for his newspaper.

¹² ‘King Christina. De emigranten vluchten in de geschiedenis. Barok en hysterie,’ 29 September 1935. Irmgard Kuenn supplied Feuchtwanger. ‘What are the other émigrés writing? Kesten has a novel about Philip II, Roth has one about the Dual Monarchy of Austria-Hungary, Zweig is writing on Erasmus of Rotterdam, Thomas Mann on ‘Lotte in Weimar,’ Heinrich Mann on Henry IV, Feuchtwanger on Nero ... Who is writing the great book about now?’ Cited by Michael Hofmann. Afterword to Keun’s *Child of All Nations* (Woodstock and New York: The Overlook Press, 2008), p. 190.

models of principled conduct in a time of moral dissolution. Once more remarking a strong Jewish presence, Ter Braak went on to suggest a connection between their long history and emphasis on morality.¹³

Feuchtwanger could not have agreed more. Indeed, the question Ter Braak posed regarding the extent to which writers like Feuchtwanger enriched European culture ‘with their own values’ is best answered by examining Feuchtwanger’s writings, specifically those produced in exile between 1933 and 1940, the year he managed to make his way to the United States. What are his émigré novels but appeals to reason and morality, both in politics and in individuals? As Feuchtwanger put it in his 1935 Paris speech:

As for me, ever since I began writing, I have endeavored to write historical novels on behalf of reason, against stupidity and violence. [...] [T]he historical novel is the weapon that best suits me and I fully intend to continue to avail myself of it.¹⁴

Perhaps no work created between 1933 and 1940 expresses Feuchtwanger’s *mission civilisatrice* more forcefully than the second volume in the Joseph trilogy. In *Die Söhne (The Jews of Rome)*, 1935, Joseph embraces the role of mediator, a bridge between two worlds, Rome

¹³ ‘Joodse schrijvers,’ VW, VI, pp. 157–163.

¹⁴ In *Der Falsche Nero* (1937), which traces a crude impostor’s rise to power in Mesopotamia, evil is presented as existing ‘merely to advance reason and goodness.’ The ‘three-headed monster’ — Terence, Trebonius, and Knops — respectively stand-ins for Hitler, Goering and Goebbels, come to grief in horrific fashion.

and Jerusalem, power and spirit, remaining ‘a Jew while becoming a Roman,’ (79) [...] ‘in spite of the ignominious contempt of both parties.’¹⁵ For with Rome’s conquest of Israel, the mission of the Jewish writer was clear; it was ‘to conquer Rome from within, in the spirit. To display the Jewish spirit in all its greatness to mighty Rome and the admired and hated Greeks, until they submitted to it.’

The closing lines of Joseph’s poem ‘Psalm of the Citizen of the World’ bestow the seal of divine approval: *The Kingdom that I promised you, its name is not Zion; Its name is the World.* ‘Some time,’ Joseph prophesies [...], ‘the hour would come all the peoples on earth would understand his psalm.’ (16) By *Söhne*’s end, Joseph ben Matthias is Flavius Josephus, a full-fledged Roman and self-described citizen of the world bent on uniting all nations in the spirit of reason, ‘God’s first-born child.’ In other words, neither Rome nor Jerusalem, but reason, has the last word.¹⁶

The final volume in the trilogy, *Der Tag wird kommen* (English: *Josephus and the Emperor*) came out in 1942.¹⁷ Written in part in France

¹⁵ *The Jews of Rome*, trans. by Willa and Edwin Muir (New York: The Viking Press, 1936).

¹⁶ In the foreword to *Moscow 1937: My Visit Described for My Friends* (New York: The Viking Press, 1937), Feuchtwanger writes: ‘I sympathized inevitably with the experiment of basing the construction of a gigantic state on reason alone, and I went to Moscow hoping that the experiment was succeeding. [...] [I]f a social system is to prosper, it must be built upon judgment and reason. [...] I have never been able to look upon world history in any other way than as a bitter and unceasing struggle waged by a thinking few. I have always ranged myself on the side of reason, and it was this inevitable that I should sympathize with the gigantic experiment being conducted from Moscow.’ p. viii.

¹⁷ Trans. by Caroline Oram (New York: The Viking Press, 1942)

while on the run from the Nazis, *Der Tag* expresses diminished faith in the prospect of reason. What's more, having shed his 'dishonest, fashionably cosmopolitan objectivity toward his own people,' Joseph identifies more fully as a Jew, yoked to a fervent longing for a Jewish homeland.

Who dared to declare that Jehovah was identical with logic and arid reason? Had reason spoken out of the mouths of the prophets? He [Joseph] had wanted to preach reason, the kingdom of reason, of the Messiah.... [I]t is sweet and honourable to preach nothing but the cause of one's own people, of one's nation. A prophetic calling of that kind sustains a person, inwardly and outwardly. It gives one fame and inner satisfaction.

'He [Feuchtwanger] rediscovers himself in the characters of his novels,' observed a Dutch journalist who interviewed the author in 1939, 'and through them solves his own predicaments.'¹⁸

The figure of Joseph, as mediated by Feuchtwanger, conforms in some measure to Ter Braak's stereotyping of a certain category of assimilated Jewish writers, albeit ages removed in time: adepts at adaptation — although Joseph is hardly mediocre or unoriginal — who, consciously or unconsciously, helped push culture in the direction of internationalism. But however positive the spin, Ter Braak's musings on the Jewish question in literature in the end does not leave us much the wiser and demonstrates the

¹⁸ H. B. Fortuin, 'Lion Feuchtwanger over zijn eigen werk,' *De groene Amsterdammer*, 23 September 1939, pp.16-17.

extent to which a rarefied form of antisemitism had penetrated the deepest layers of culture. Critics live to critique, by their own lights, but to insert a racial construct where none is called for is problematic to say the least. To avoid any misunderstanding as to where he stood, Ter Braak concluded ‘The Jewish Spirit and Literature’ with an emphatic yeah! on behalf of the Jews, and an equally emphatic nay! for their detractors.

In *The Devil in France*, Feuchtwanger’s account of his internment in the south of France and subsequent escape to the United States, Feuchtwanger writes that the Nazis could hardly wait to get their hands on him. His Dutch critic was similarly at risk. Anticipating a likely fate, Menno ter Braak killed himself on the day Holland fell to the German invader, May 14, 1940.
