Resistance to the Avant-Garde
Criticism of the Avant-Garde in Dutch
Literary Periodicals

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Although the historical avant-garde in the Netherlands was in step with that in other countries, it was a rather marginal phenomenon. There is a thorough awareness of developments in the avant-garde abroad, but it is generally regarded with lack of interest, disdain or even derision. This contribution offers an explanation for that resistance, analyzing the reception of the avant-garde in Dutch periodicals from different parts of the literary field: the liberal, Protestant, Roman Catholic, socialist circles, and the quarter of the younger neutral authors of the ’20s. The avant-garde was kept at arm’s length for what could be called negative, conservative motives, the influential poet and critic Martinus Nijhoff could be called progressive for the way in which he cut off the march of the avant-garde, propagating a neoclassical modernism that was much more up-to-date, when the avant-garde was already losing its lustre.

1. Rejection

– Wir?
Das gehört (beiläufig) nicht hierher.
Wer bist Du, ungezählter [sic] Frauenzimmer? Du bist
– bist Du? – Die Leute sagen Du wärest. – Lasz
Sie sagen, sie wissen nicht, wie der Kirchturm steht.
Du trägst den Hut auf Deinen Füszen und wanderst
Auf die Händen, auf den Händen wanderst Du.
Hallo, Deine roten kleider, [sic] in weisze Falten zersägt.
Rot liebe ich, Anna Blume, rot liebe ich Dir! – Du
Deiner Dich Dir, Du mir. – Wir?
Das gehört (beiläufig) in die kalte Glut.

These lines are quoted by the anonymous editor of the Roman Catholic review Boekenschouw that wanted to show that the Dadaists are entirely depraved (Anonymous 1920/1921: 94). It is 1920. The Dada campaign is not yet underway in the Netherlands, but this Jesuit critic is wise to the ways of the world, but also to its aberrations. His reaction is characteristic for the attitude taken in the Dutch periodical press at the time. There is a thorough awareness of developments in the avant-
garde abroad, but it is generally regarded with disdain or even derision. As early as September 1909, Greshoff expresses his ironic excitement about futurism: “Oh, the exaggerations of the iconoclast Mr F.T. Marinetti are wonderful, magnificent, grotesque! [We hear him] breathlessly gasping the strangest imprecations [...] ‘une automobile rugissante, qui a l’air de courir sur de la mitraille est plus belle que la Victoire de Samotrace...!’”. And there are numberless other critics to be quoted, all rejecting the new as bizarre (see also J.H.A. Fontijn and I. Polak 1986: 182-207). Resistance against the avant-garde is the attitude most generally taken.

In this contribution we wish to offer an explanation for that resistance, without falling back on vague generalizations, such as the following: New developments only reached the Netherlands fifty years later, only with the Fifties Movement did the Netherlands start to play a part in the avant-garde. For the Netherlands were not later at all, as we now know. There is general agreement among literary historians that the historic avant-garde in the Netherlands was in step with that in other countries (The Style group, including Theo van Doesburg and Piet Mondriaan), but it was, at least compared to the situation in France or Germany, a particularly marginal phenomenon.

The literary field in the Netherlands was not uniform, however. For the period starting in 1900, various well-defined circles of critics, periodicals and authors can be distinguished. Prominent among them was the so-called neutral circle, which was, however, subdivided into several sub-circles. In addition, there were the circles which resulted from denominational divisions in society: Protestant Christians and Roman Catholics.¹ There was even a socialist circle, although its development was not very strong. It is interesting to see how representatives of these circles responded to the avant-garde. Their reactions can be found in some of the periodicals that were representative of the various circles.

2. The Neutral Circle

One of the most authoritative magazines from the neutral circle was *De Gids*.² This venerable periodical, which at the time was still struggling against the conservative odium of having failed to recognise the importance of the new generation of the 1880s, the Eighties Movement, an-