

Summary

The spotlights of criticism

Divergences and patterns in the attention of literary criticism for authors and their works

Underlying the study presented here is the view that the institution of literary criticism plays a crucial part in the symbolic production of literature. The attention which some texts belonging to the category of fiction receive from members of this institution is taken to be constitutive of their social recognition as *literary* works of a certain standard. The complementary activities of reviewers, essayists and academic critics determine to a great extent what texts in a given period are held to be legitimate forms of literary fiction, what rank they are supposed to occupy within the hierarchy of literary works and what statements count as proper ways of characterizing these texts. The choices and statements of journalistic critics represent a first phase in the constitution of the repertory of literary works and in their ranking according to quality.

As yet little empirical research has been done into the *modus operandi* of literary reviewers and the conditions under which they perform their task of judging recently published works of fiction. This book scrutinizes the way daily and weekly reviewers deal with the supply of new book titles. Usually, the involvement with literature, whether it concerns the reading, appreciation or discussion of texts, is taken to be a highly individual affair. This also holds for the activities of literary reviewers and critics. Their selection and valuation of texts is generally presented as a personal matter, in which the intrinsic properties of the texts under consideration are focused on.

My study puts this view in perspective by considering the choices and statements of literary reviewers – and the resulting literary reputations of authors and works –, in connection with the social context in which they come about. The starting point of my research, i.e. the assumption that the activities of literary reviewers are regulated by the standards, ideas and practices that prevail within their institutional environment, is theoretically elaborated upon in Chapter II. In the following chapters the institutional nature of the choices and statements of literary reviewers is explored through a number of empirical investigations. These studies pertain to the Dutch reviewing situation and cover the period since 1965.

In the third chapter I analyse the selection made by literary reviewers from

the supply of new Dutch works of poetry and narrative prose in the seventies and nineties. The reviewing community's attention is found to be divided very unequally over the stock of new titles, which implies that reviewers, to a considerable extent, made similar choices. The repertory of titles on which reviewers' attention was focused, appears to consist almost exclusively of titles by authors whose previous work had already received a good deal of attention from critics. These results support my view that – failing clear and unequivocal criteria for assessing literary works – critics take due note of each other's achievements and are inclined to adjust their choices to the ones made by fellow experts. In doing so, they reduce the uncertainty as to which works are worthy of their attention, and, at the same time, reduce the risk of making the 'wrong' choices, i.e. choices that might jeopardize their status of literary expert.

Chapters II and III stress the dominant role of the actions of critics in the establishment of literary reputations. In the fourth chapter I consider the influence authors might exercise upon the reception of their work. Following a theoretical discussion of the role of certain activities on the part of the author, I examine the relationship between the attention reviewers paid to new book titles and the extent to which the authors of these titles combined their creative work with other literary activities and took an active part in the Dutch literary scene. My analysis indicates that when it comes to the formation of judgement about a literary work, the author is an important actor as well. The critical reception of a work appears to be linked to the way the author manifests himself within the literary world.

As mentioned above, the findings in Chapter III show that reviewers to a great extent reproduce previous choices and judgements by members of the reviewing community. Of course, this does not imply that the critical valuation of specific authors and their works is a more or less fixed entity. Apart from authors who are accorded increasing interest and appreciation by critics, there are others who seem to have fallen out of favour with reviewers as their work receives less and less attention and praise. By means of a number of case studies (Chapters V till VIII) I continue exploring what factors contribute to such divergent developments in the critical appreciation of literary works. These case studies provide a detailed and differentiated picture of the way in which the critics' institutional environment affects their formation of opinion about literary works and of the part individual critics and the author may play in this process.