The Dutch *Magic Mountain*
Menno ter Braak’s Reworking of Thomas Mann

A mere four years after Thomas Mann’s novel *Der Zauberberg* was published, Menno ter Braak began work on a theoretical piece that took its main motif from the chapter “Walpurgisnacht.” Started in 1928 and finally published in 1931, Menno ter Braak’s *Het carnaval der burgers* takes more than its carnival-motif from Mann’s work. Woven through Ter Braak’s work are references to *Der Zauberberg*, both cited and uncited, as well as similar ideas, themes and questions. Using Mann’s masterpiece as his springboard, Ter Braak creates a work that lays out theoretically what Mann does literarily. In 1936, the attempt was made to publish Albert Thelen’s German translation of *Het carnaval der burgers*, and Thomas Mann had even promised to write the foreword for the piece, a promise that he never fulfilled. Unfortunately, a publisher for the German translation was never found, and the manuscript has been lost with the exception of a few fragments found in Thelen’s writings.

Despite this rocky beginning, Ter Braak and Mann finally met in 1937, the start of a friendship that would last until Menno ter Braak’s suicide in 1940, just four days after the Nazi invasion of the Netherlands. This meeting incited three years of correspondence, subsequent visits, and the exchange of literary ideas, works, and criticisms. Scholarship on the connections between Ter Braak’s work and that of Thomas Mann has been limited to one chapter in Léon Hanssen’s extensive biography on Menno ter Braak, written in 2000, and a republication of parts of this chapter in a German translation from 2005. Willem Bruls also wrote a monograph on the friendship between these two authors (1990), but nowhere mentions the parallels between Mann’s *Der Zauberberg* and Ter

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2 Ibid., 185.
Braak’s *Het carnaval der burgers*. In light of the paucity of current research on this subject, this paper will offer a more in-depth reading of Ter Braak’s piece, carefully comparing it to the work from which it drew its inspiration. In order to complete this task, it will be helpful to first look at the relationship between Menno ter Braak and Thomas Mann, especially focusing on their perceptions of each other. With this knowledge in mind, this reading of *Het carnaval der burgers* will show the great degree to which Ter Braak borrowed from *Der Zauberberg*, utilizing many of its themes and questions as the basis for his theoretical treatise. Ter Braak’s work must be understood in terms of its intertextuality, or its relationship with the text that it draws from—a device used without moderation by Mann throughout *Der Zauberberg*.

**Perception, Communication, Inspiration: Menno ter Braak and Thomas Mann**

It was, in fact, Ter Braak’s *Het carnaval der burgers* that brought him to Thomas Mann’s attention. Upon the request of Hendrik Marsman and Albert Thelen, Mann read through the piece, later writing the following: “... diese große Komposition zeigt mir einen Denker und dichterischen Essayisten von imponierender Freiheit und trotziger Eigenwilligkeit ...” (... this great composition shows me a thinker and poetic essayist of impressive license and defiant individualism ...).

Thomas Mann recorded nothing on the similarities between his text and Ter Braak’s piece, instead praising him for his skill and agreeing to write the foreword that he would never bring to completion. On August 3rd, 1937, Menno ter Braak visited Mann in Switzerland, this meeting to be the first of many, and the beginning of three years of correspondence. The purpose of the visit, according to Ter Braak, was to discover whether or not Mann was the man from his books. This was most certainly the case in Ter Braak’s opinion, as he described Mann afterward as such: “De eerste indruk, die ik van Thomas Mann kreeg, kan ik achteraf aldus formuleren: dit is de man van zijn boeken.... Hij is een oudere Hans Castorp (hoofdpersoon in *Der Zauberberg*), hij is de grote burger, die de cultuur van het humanistische Duitse stadspariciaat als een critische zoon vertegenwoordigt en daarmede een tendentie, die tegenwoordig, zonderling genoeg, in sommige streken ‘anti-Duits’ schijnt te heten.” (The first impression that I got from Thomas Mann can be formulated as so: this is the man from his books.... He is an older Hans Castorp (the main character in *Der Zauberberg*), he is the great bourgeois citizen, who...

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4 Ibid., 11. All translations are my own unless otherwise noted.
5 Ibid., 11.
6 Ibid., 10.
7 Ibid., 19.
represents the culture of the German humanistic elite city bourgeois as a critical son, and thereby now, oddly enough, there appears to be a tendency in some circles, to call him “anti-German.”

Mann on the other hand, simply notes in his journal, “Der Holländer recht angenehm” (the Dutchman quite likeable), and three weeks later, after reading one of Ter Braak’s essays, sets off their steady correspondence. After numerous harsh criticisms Mann made about Ter Braak’s next theological piece, Afscheid van domineesland, their friendship hit rocky ground, but nonetheless remained intact. Their next meeting would not be until the summer of 1939, followed by several more meetings until their last in August 1939. Thomas Mann was greatly shaken by Menno ter Braak’s suicide in 1940 after the German invasion of Holland, commemorating him as a creative critic, which, according to Mann, was even rarer than the pure poet. This was extremely high praise from one of Ter Braak’s biggest influences, unfortunately praise that he would never hear.

It is in one of Menno ter Braak’s descriptions of Thomas Mann that we see the ideal bourgeois citizen that Ter Braak was fighting for in Het carnaval der burgers, the synthesis between a self-conscious middle-class man and a poet. This synthesis he found in Mann’s character Hans Castorp, the ideal model (based on his interpretation of Castorp), and a model that he saw in Thomas Mann himself after each visit. Ter Braak writes: “. . . hij kent zichzelf als de representant van de burgerlijke maatschappij, die, zelfs waar hij de grenzen der burgerlijkheid nadert en overschrijdt, door en door een burger blijft” (. . . he recognizes himself as the representative of the middle class, who, even where he approaches and oversteps the boundaries of bourgeois society, remains bourgeois through and through). Ter Braak believed that it was impossible to be a pure poet, but that one could come close after recognizing one’s bourgeois nature and then distancing oneself from it, consciously choosing to live more like the poet. It was this same choice that Hans Castorp explained to Clavidia in Mann’s Der Zauberberg—the choice between the path of the bourgeois and the path of the poet.

In order to determine the extent to which Mann influenced Ter Braak in his written work and the level of intertextuality truly present in the text, it would now be profitable to consider more closely Ter Braak’s reworking of Thomas Mann’s masterpiece.

8 Ibid., 19-20.
9 Ibid., 22.
10 Ibid., 27-29.
11 Ibid., 81-90.
12 Ibid., 96.
13 Ibid., 89.
14 Mann, Der Zauberberg, 816.
Life, Disease, and Art: Shared Motifs and Themes in *Het carnaval der burgers* and *Der Zauberberg*

Ter Braak’s *Het carnaval der burgers* is a series of seven essays totaling approximately one-hundred and fifty pages. This book of essays is best described as an allegory, as the subtitle “Een gelijkenis in gelijkenissen” (an allegory in allegories) makes clear, or as Léon Hanssen puts it, the allegorical description of “een wereld-inverval” (a world in decay),\(^{15}\) intended to lead the reader to informed political action. The first essay introduces the allegory, the middle five essays develop different aspects of the allegory, and the final essay explains the allegory and offers a moral. Incorporating Mann’s carnival motif from the chapter entitled “Walpurgisnacht,” Ter Braak builds an extended allegory that he uses to inform his readers of the manner of life toward which they should strive. The first chapter, entitled “Wij carnavalsgangers” (We carnival-goers), addresses the role of Carnival, the day of celebrations before Ash Wednesday, in the life of the bourgeoisie. Ter Braak explains that this one night—a night in which the bourgeois can live out their secret desires without inhibition—is really an illusion, because they all know that tomorrow will come and that they will go back to living their bourgeois life. He also discusses the distinction between bourgeois man and poet, the latter an impossible goal due to the fact that one cannot always live without inhibition. The bourgeois citizens who call themselves poets are really no poets at all, but tools of capitalism to mechanize and normalize art, losing any sort of grounding in the artistic here and now.\(^{16}\) He views Carnival as a constant repeating of the Fall, after which the true nature is lost and history becomes a cycle that has not yet been broken. The bourgeois carnival is the one moment in which the synthesis between bourgeois and poet is possible, and Ter Braak demands that Carnival be spread out over the entire year, in order that this phenomenon of synthesis becomes a part of everyday life.\(^{17}\) Ter Braak poses the question, “Is het leven een ziekte der materie?” (Is life a sickness of matter?)\(^{18}\) almost a direct translation of the question posed by Mann in the chapter “Forschungen” (Research), “War es [das Leben] vielleicht nur eine infektiöse Erkrankung der Materie . . .?”\(^{19}\) (Was it [life] perhaps only an

\(^{15}\) Léon Hanssen, *Want alle verlies is winst: Menno ter Braak 1902-1930* (Amsterdam: Balans, 2000), 413.


\(^{17}\) Ibid., 27.

\(^{18}\) Ibid., 26.

\(^{19}\) Mann, *Der Zauberberg*, 392.
infectious disease of matter . . .).\textsuperscript{20} That life could simply be a disease of matter, perhaps an infectious synthesis of the inorganic with disease, is another example of the importance of synthesis that Ter Braak saw in Der Zauberberg. He viewed Mann’s character Hans Castorp as the intermediary between and the synthesis of two poles—the bourgeois intellectual and the poet.\textsuperscript{21} Along with the synthesis of these two poles, Ter Braak sought a synthesis of “leven en materie, licht en donker, goed en kwaad” (life and matter, light and dark, good and evil), ultimately concluding that these syntheses were only possible with the extension of Carnival over the entire year.\textsuperscript{22} In his allegory, Carnival was the lost paradise that disappeared after the Fall, the time during which these poles were fused.\textsuperscript{23} Der Zauberberg is filled with the same oppositions that intrigue Ter Braak. In Clowdia we see a sort of synthesis of some of these oppositions, for Hans is fascinated with both the negative and positive images of her—the X-ray photograph and Behrens’ painting of her. Eric Downing notes the possibility of seeing in Clowdia a synthesis of light and dark, “earthly and intellectual together.”\textsuperscript{24} Settembrini and Naphta function as opposing sides—sides which, according to both Mann and Ter Braak, must come together in order to form a whole. Each of these characters, as Eric Downing points out, only offers half of the picture. Hans requires a “more complete logic—photographic logic—of ongoing inversion and exchangeability. He comes more and more to learn to take together the dark and the light, the negative and positive . . . to learn that . . . they are not even or ever truly distinct or separable to begin with.”\textsuperscript{25} This becomes the stance that Ter Braak wishes his readers to take, the stance he first saw in the character of Hans Castorp as he read Der Zauberberg.

Ter Braak’s next chapter, “Het carnaval der kinderen” (The Children’s Carnival), introduces children as the “toekomstmuziek” (music of future), but also as the objects of their parents.\textsuperscript{26} In the child Ter Braak saw “het animale, het pure, richtingloze leven” (animalistic, pure, directionless life), a life that was a pure synthesis—paradise.\textsuperscript{27} Through bourgeois education, their paradisiacal state is destroyed and replaced with the mythical beliefs of their parents. The children lose the synthesis of

\textsuperscript{21}Hanssen, Want alle verlies is winst, 410.
\textsuperscript{22}Braak, Het carnaval der burgers, 26.
\textsuperscript{23}Ibid., 28.
\textsuperscript{24}Eric Downing, After Images: Photography, Archaeology, and Psychoanalysis and the Tradition of Bildung (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2006), 49.
\textsuperscript{25}Ibid., 48.
\textsuperscript{26}Braak, Het carnaval der burgers, 32.
\textsuperscript{27}Ibid., 33.
bourgeois intellectual and poet, reduced to living a bourgeois life.\textsuperscript{28} Instead of being allowed to create their own world, the world of their educators is forced upon them.\textsuperscript{29} They are taught to live out clichés and follow “de natuurlijke weg” (the natural way), never allowed to play or create for themselves.\textsuperscript{30} In every child a poet exists, but normalizing education crushes this poet.\textsuperscript{31} Just as Hans Castorp is forced to abandon his artistic endeavors for technical drawing, so here is the child forced to give up his poetic abilities for a normal, natural life, a life in which art becomes mechanized and is no longer really art. Settembrini argues: “Der begabte junge Mensch ist kein unbeschriebenes Blatt, er ist vielmehr ein Blatt, auf dem gleichsam mit sympathetischer Tinte alles schon geschrieben steht, das Rechte wie das Schlechte, und Sache des Erziehers ist es, das Rechte entschieden zu entwickeln, das Falsche aber, das hervortreten will, durch sachgemäßige Einwirkung auf immer auszulöschen.”\textsuperscript{32} (The talented young man is no blank page, but is rather a page where everything has already been written, so to speak, in appealing inks, the good with the bad. And it is the educator’s task explicitly to foster the true—and by appropriate practical persuasion forever to eradicate the false when it tries to emerge.)\textsuperscript{33} Such is the function of bourgeois education in \textit{Het carnaval der burgers}; the poet must be driven out, suppressed, erased forever, while the intellectual remains. Ter Braak suggests that education must begin anew and the adult must learn to reach back to his poet-self and fuse it with his bourgeois life.

The third chapter, “Het carnaval der minnaars” (The Lovers’ Carnival), shows a world in which real love has disappeared, replaced by the need to find a partner and reproduce. Only when one falls in love does one experience “het gevaar der poëzie, der ‘onnatuur”’ (the danger of poetry, of the unnatural).\textsuperscript{34} Through bourgeois eyes, the poet is demonic, must be controlled, and must be transformed into the bourgeois intellectual. The demonic poet in each of us must be suppressed and made bourgeois.\textsuperscript{35} Hans Castorp experiences this forbidden, demonic love with Hippe and Clawdia. Only in the chapter “Walpurgisnacht” does Hans dare to first approach Clawdia and share his feelings with her, a night in which the poet within is truly allowed to escape.

\textsuperscript{28} Ibid., 33-35.  
\textsuperscript{29} Ibid., 39.  
\textsuperscript{30} Ibid., 36.  
\textsuperscript{31} Ibid., 43.  
\textsuperscript{32} Mann, \textit{Der Zauberberg}, 139.  
\textsuperscript{33} Mann, \textit{The Magic Mountain}, 98.  
\textsuperscript{34} Braak, \textit{Het carnaval der burgers}, 55.  
\textsuperscript{35} Ibid., 61.
In the chapter, “Het carnaval der gelovigen” (The Carnival of the Believers), Ter Braak criticizes religion as something that masks the dead state of the world. By constantly looking toward an afterlife, the bourgeoisie can simply ignore this world, its problems, and death. Because the bourgeois does not wish to think about death or even die his “natuurlijke’ dood” (natural death), he turns to religion. Death is something that defies the bounds of understanding, knowledge and life—something that the bourgeois intellectual feels he must possess, control and annex. Only the poet is fascinated with death, approaches death, and chooses to look it in the face, just as Hans Castorp does when he chooses for the way of genius that leads through death. Ter Braak writes: “De vruchtbaarheid verbindt zich met de dood: ziedaar het gevaar!” (Fruitfulness binds itself with death: see the danger there!). Only the poet who binds himself with death, who chooses the more dangerous way, is a true poet. And it is this poet that bourgeois society cannot tolerate except in small, masked doses reserved for Carnival. Ecstasy is the enemy of religion, and ecstasy is also the mark of the poet. This too disappears, along with love, as Ter Braak showed in the previous essay. Then comes the danse macabre, the “Totentanz” to which Mann also devotes a chapter in Der Zauberberg. Here we see the poet linked with decay and death: “Op het carnaval der gelovigen leert men de dichterlijkheid kennen onder die wonderlijke, koele naam: Dood. En omdat de burger die wonderlijke koele naam alleen erkent, wel moet erkennen, aan het einde der dagen, bij de wegrutting van het lichaam, daarom danst hij de angst weg in een danse macabre . . . En aldus wordt de dood gebannen uit het leven, slechts erkend waar hij als lichamelijke verrotting verschijnt.” (At the Carnival of the believers one gets to know the poetic nature under the wonderful, cool name: Death. And because the bourgeois intellectual only recognizes, rather must recognize, this wonderful, cool name at the end of his days, with the rotting away of his body, he therefore dances the fear away in his danse macabre . . . And so Death is banned from Life, only recognized where bodily rotting appears.) The poet must continue on in life, going from Carnival to Carnival. He must “volwassen worden, en kind blijven” (grow up and remain a child), “een moraal huldigen, en liefhebben als een amorele magiër” (honor a moral and love like an amoral magician), “een overtuiging aanvaarden, en elke vorm van overtuiging vernietigen”

36 Ibid., 70.
37 Ibid., 70.
38 Mann, Der Zauberberg, 817.
39 Braak, Het carnaval der burgers, 76.
40 Ibid., 76.
41 Ibid., 82.
(adhere to a belief and destroy every form of belief), and live “alsof er geen dood was, en ieder ogenblik de dood erkennen in het leven” (as if Death does not exist and at every moment recognize Death in Life).\footnote{Ibid., 82-83.}

Léon Hanssen words Ter Braak’s philosophy of love and life as such:

De liefde waarnaar Ter Braak verlangde, was een \textit{demonische} liefde: de vereenzelviging met de dood, het toelaten van de dood in het leven. Dit was \textit{zijn} droom van een dichterlijke ontgrenzing: het loslaten van alle zekerheden en het doordringen tot het mysterie van het leven. Op ieder moment, meende hij, kan er onder de burgers een dichter opstaan, die alle verworvenheden waaraan ijverig is gewerkt, kan vermorselen tot wat onaanzienlijk gruis. Maar Ter Braak beseefte dat dit proces van ‘scheppend vernietigen’ wel eens zou kunnen uitmonden in krankzinnigheid. Ontgrenzing betekent immers een opheffing van alle onderscheid, van alle verschillen waarmee ‘wij’ burgers de wereld kenbaar en leefbaar hebben gemaakt.\footnote{Hanssen, \textit{Want alle verlies is winst}, 409-410.}

The fifth chapter, “Het carnaval der burgers” (The Bourgeois Carnival), is a direct attack on a society ruled by consumerism and mass production and in which individual identities are made to disappear. Forced conformation to bourgeois societal rules required that magic and passion be banned from life. To the bourgeois man, any form of poet is a
danger to this strict societal imprinting and must either be transformed to serve society or be destroyed.\textsuperscript{44} A taming of the poet must occur and the individual must be forced to dissolve into the masses.\textsuperscript{45} Despite this, the poet will not die out, for Ter Braak believes that the bourgeois intellectual cannot deny the fact that he is an individual and thus will not let himself disappear into the mass illusion.\textsuperscript{46} He even offers hope for the future: “ook de braafoeste kinderen wijken af van de zo zorgvuldig ingeprenten stelregels der ouders” (even the best of children deviate from the so carefully imprinted rules of their parents),\textsuperscript{47} hoping his readers would see the effects bourgeois society has on them and walk away from it.

“Het carnaval der dichters” (The Carnival of the Poets), which is the sixth chapter in this essay, begins with a description of a man beginning his day mechanically, just as he always does. As usual, he reaches into his pocket and taking out a box of matches. This time, however, he looks at the box of matches. A vague childhood memory suddenly overcomes him and the monotony of his everyday routine is broken. He finds this momentary rupturing good and enjoyable despite the fact that it is not productive. After this brief distraction by a faint memory of the freedom he had as child, he slips back into his routine. It is at this moment that the bourgeois man becomes a poet, but the inability to remain a poet is conditioned by a society that forces individuality and creativity out, replacing it with mechanical productivity. The hope, for Ter Braak, is that once one recognizes the poetic potential in oneself, one will wake up and bring others to do the same: “De dichter is burger, om anderen tot dichter te kunnen maken; hij . . . is tevens de bevrijder, die zijn medeburgers oproept tot dichterlijkheid, als zij die oproep verstaan kunnen” (The poet is a bourgeois citizen in order to be able to turn others into poets; he . . . is also the liberator who calls his fellow citizens to the poetic profession, if they can hear the summons).\textsuperscript{48}

The final chapter, entitled “Carnavalmoraal” (The Moral of Carnival), brings together all of the themes brought up in the essay in order to explain how the allegory is to be understood. Prefaced by the following quote from Thomas Mann’s \textit{The Magic Mountain}, Ter Braak sets up very clearly what he feels is the proper way to live: “Zum Leben gibt es zwei Wege: Der eine ist der gewöhnliche, direkte und brave. Der andere ist schlimm, er führt über den Tod, und das ist der geniale Weg!”\textsuperscript{49} (There are two ways to life: the one is the regular, direct, and good way. The

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{44} Ibid., 90.
\item \textsuperscript{45} Ibid., 91.
\item \textsuperscript{46} Ibid. 94.
\item \textsuperscript{47} Ibid., 101.
\item \textsuperscript{48} Ibid., 130-31.
\item \textsuperscript{49} Mann, \textit{Der Zauberberg}, 816.
\end{itemize}
other is bad, it leads through death, and that is the way of genius.)50 Menno ter Braak transcribed this quote in the back of his agenda for the year 1929, presumably as a reminder for how he wished to live life.51 Just as Hans Castorp does, Ter Braak proposes the life that strives for a synthesis of the bourgeois intellectual and the poet. One cannot exist without the other. He describes Carnival as a fusion of the mystical and the intellectual, the fusion of the poet and the bourgeois man, a fusion in which the better way of life can be realized. Ter Braak recognized that it was impossible to fully rid oneself of the bourgeois nature, but in order to shift the balance more toward the mysticism of the poet, one had to recognize the bourgeois nature in oneself: “Overwinnen betekent hier niet vernietigen van het verkeerde, om er het goede voor in de plaats te stellen; overwinnen betekent hier voor alles: zichzelf herkennen in de meest verharde burger . . .” (Here overcoming does not mean destroying what is wrong in order to replace it with what is good; here overcoming means above all recognizing oneself in the most hardened bourgeois citizen . . .).52 Only when this nature is recognized can one come nearer to that of the poet, without which the bourgeois nature cannot exist: “[H]eilig is de dichter, omdat hij de burger het leven schenkt, vervloekt is de dichter, omdat hij de burgerlijke vormen met het bederf der vergankelijkheid bedreigt” (Holy is the poet, for he gives the bourgeois life, cursed is the poet, for he threatens bourgeois forms with the putridness of ephemerality).53 The poet flirts with danger and destruction, the bourgeois intellectual stays with safety and possession. The two ways of life that Hans Castorp describes are reworked in Ter Braak’s *Het carnaval der burgers*, in which he proposes that all follow Castorp in the decision for the way that leads through death. But Ter Braak remains pessimistic, for Ash Wednesday will always come and the bourgeois will always come back. The poet is never allowed to be, but when one recognizes oneself, one comes closer to the poetic, and thus one step closer to the synthesis between intellectualism and mysticism a la Hans Castorp—and that is all Ter Braak can hope for.

**Conclusion**

Menno ter Braak has reworked and incorporated many elements of Thomas Mann’s *Der Zauberberg* in his essay collection, *Het carnaval der burgers*. These elements range from the motif of Carnival, to marked and unmarked quotations, to similar thematic dichotomies. In doing so, Ter Braak has created an allegorical work that, for the most part, mirrors the

51 Hanssen, *Want alle verlies is winst*, 410.
52 Braak, *Het Carnaval der burgers*, 142.
53 Ibid., 152.
themes, ideas, and morals of Mann’s work. The extensive intertextuality, perhaps not visible at first glance, most certainly becomes clear upon a close reading of the text. There is much more to Ter Braak’s series of essays than simply a reworking of Mann’s Der Zauberberg, but the connections between these works cannot be ignored. Het carnaval der burgers became Menno ter Braak’s playground for the many epistemological questions he was facing. The solutions he came up with, often under the tremendous influence of Thomas Mann’s Der Zauberberg, can be traced through the rest of his work.