Of Dust and Dollars

Branding Poetry in the Twenty-first Century – The Case of Ellen Deckwitz

Jeroen Dera

Abstract
This chapter explores the self-branding of the contemporary Dutch poet Ellen Deckwitz. Explicitly referring to herself as ‘the product Ellen Deckwitz’, this author uniquely defines her career as a poet in terms of branding. The chapter provides a vivisection of this self-proclaimed ‘product’ through an in-depth postural analysis. It shows how Deckwitz creates the posture of an authoritative yet relatable poetry-entrepreneur who considers herself to be the flag-bearer of the younger generation, a rhetorical strategy that enables her to blend economic and symbolic capital. This, in turn, makes it possible for Deckwitz to cater to both a highbrow and a mass audience, by effectively resisting the widespread clichés evoked by the term ‘poetry’.

Keywords: poetry branding, contemporary poetry, posture analysis, Ellen Deckwitz, brand credibility

Scylla and Charybdis

According to Robert Crawford, one of T.S. Eliot’s many biographers, the legendary author of The Waste Land (1922) was ‘a poet with a business brain’ (Crawford 2015: 442). This characterization is – especially in the case of a modernist writer like Eliot – at odds with twentieth-century stereotypes of poetry, a genre associated with dust rather than dollars. As Crawford’s account of Eliot’s marketing savvy shows, however, the so-called ‘Great Divide’ (cf. Huyssem 1986) between art and mart was already starting to
diminish in the first decades of the century. This chapter argues that this is even more the case for contemporary poetry.

For many, the niche genre of poetry is not easily linked to the commercial world of marketing and money. Brown and Wijland (2015: 559) borrow a metaphor from classical mythology in order to describe the oppositional nature of the two: they speak of ‘the Scylla of poetry’s elitist stigma and the Charybdis of managers’ utilitarian taint’. Indeed, even prominent literature sociologists like Gisèle Sapiro have tended to isolate poetry from the principles of the market. Even at the beginning of the twenty-first century (decades after Eliot sophisticatedly used his ‘business brain’), Sapiro (2003: 448) framed poetry as a ‘hermetic genre practiced in the most autonomous and closed segment of the literary field in opposition to the values of the market’.

The fact that poetry serves a relatively small audience in terms of sales figures, however, does not justify the hyper-autonomous image of the genre. Especially in the last decades, poets have become shrewder and more knowledgeable when it comes to personal branding (Brown and Wijland 2015: 552). In the case of contemporary poetry in the Netherlands, this trend is underlined by the ever-growing number of poets who combine their written work with all kinds of performances and ceremonial functions – from poet laureate of a soccer club to ‘house poet’ of television shows (cf. Dera, Posman, and Van der Starre 2016; Dera and De Strycker 2018). Without hesitation, one of the most eye-catching examples of ‘poetry branding’ in the Dutch literary field of the early twenty-first century concerns the poet Ellen Deckwitz (born 1982). In what follows, I will thoroughly analyse her posture as an authoritative yet relatable poetry-entrepreneur who considers herself to be the flag-bearer of the young generation. As I will demonstrate, this posture enables her to blend economic and symbolic capital, hence enabling her to serve both a highbrow and a mass audience, by effect resisting the widespread clichés evoked by the term ‘poetry’.

Ellen Deckwitz: An Omnipresent Product

Ellen Deckwitz officially debuted in 2011, publishing her poetry collection De steen vreest mij (‘The Stone Fears Me’) with the reputable Dutch editor Nijgh & Van Ditmar. It is appropriate to use the adverb ‘officially’ here, since Deckwitz managed to attain a promising position in the poetry field long before her debut in 2011. In 2009, she was crowned winner of the NK Poetry Slam, the Dutch national championships in performing poetry. In that same year, Deckwitz was the first recipient of the Meander Dichtersprijs, the
poetry prize of the widely read digital magazine *Meander*. Hence, before traditionally entering the literary field with a collection of poems in print, Deckwitz had already acquired a name in both the performing and the online circuit – a mechanism that I will address more thoroughly later in this chapter.

Deckwitz’s first collection of poems generated positive reviews and, more importantly, received the most distinguishing prize for a poetry debut in the Low Countries, the C. Buddingh’-prijs. Her next collections, *Hoi feest* (‘Hi, Party!’, 2012, crowned with the C.C.S. Crone Stipend) and *De blanke gave* (‘The White Gift’, 2015), also attained favourable criticism – the third collection having been published by Atlas Contact instead of Nijgh & Van Ditmar. Some quotes from prominent poetry critics in the Dutch language area might illustrate Deckwitz’s strong reputation in the field of symbolic production: her poetry is praised for its ‘evocative sentences’ (Monna 2012), ‘alive-and-kicking language’ (Menkveld 2012) and ‘subtle play with sounds’ (Gerbrandy 2015), which leaves critic Mario Molegraaf (2012) wondering: ‘Who could resist the poet Ellen Deckwitz?’

Next to her successes in print, Deckwitz further strengthened her reputation through other activities in the poetry field. She delivered numerous performances at all kinds of festivals (ranging from the literary stage of the Dutch pop phenomenon ‘Lowlands’ to a yurt festival in Mongolia), taught several poetry workshops per week at secondary schools, and participated in different television quizzes, including repeated appearances on the prime time show *De Slimste Mens* (‘The Smartest Human’) of the public broadcaster KRO-NCRV. The latter generated so much enthusiasm among people outside the Dutch literary field that the newspaper *nrc.next* offered Deckwitz a column to promote her ideas on poetry to a larger audience (cf. Kleijwegt 2015). This eventually resulted in the repeatedly reprinted essay book *Oliven moet je leren lezen: een cursus genieten van poëzie* (‘One Needs to Learn How to Read Olives: A Course in Enjoying Poetry’, 2016), also published by Atlas Contact. In 2015, this publisher was already responsible for both *De blanke gave* and *Zo word je een geweldige dichter* (‘This Is How You Become a Terrific Poet’), in which Deckwitz gives aspiring poets tips and tricks on reading, writing, and publishing poetry. The poet’s most recent collection of poems, *Hogere natuurkunde* (‘Further Physics’), appeared with yet another publisher – Pluim – in 2019. This publisher also distributed her

---

1 In Dutch: ‘beeldende zinnen’; ‘springlevend van taal’; ‘subtiel klankspel’; ‘Wie kan er weerstand bieden aan de dichteres Ellen Deckwitz?’ All translations of Dutch quotes are the responsibility of the author.
second collection of short essays on poetry, *Dit gaat niet over grasmaaien* (*This is not about mowing*, 2020).

Deckwitz’s diverse combination of activities – that also includes musical performances, literary reports on the Eurovision Song Contest, and numerous contributions to literary magazines – is striking, even in the ever-buzzling field of contemporary Dutch poetry. It is no wonder, then, that Elke Depreter (2016: 239) argues that Deckwitz is ‘omnipresent’. This pervasive position alone might justify the selection of Deckwitz as a case study in this chapter. Even more persuasive, though, is the fact that the poet herself seems to be aware of the branding mechanisms analysed in this volume. In a 2011 interview with fellow poet Maarten van der Graaff, who eventually became Deckwitz’s successor as laureate of the C. Buddingh’-prijs, she described the need of actively claiming a position in the literary field, referring to herself as ‘the product Ellen Deckwitz’ (Van der Graaff 2011: 108). In this quote, Deckwitz explicitly and uniquely defines her poetry career in terms of branding. The next sections will provide a vivisection of this self-proclaimed ‘product’ in terms of the central conceptual pairs in this volume: self-presentation versus image, economic versus symbolic capital, and resistance versus acceptance.

**Authority and Brand Credibility**

As noted in the first section, Deckwitz conveys the posture of an authoritative yet relatable poet-entrepreneur who considers herself to be the flagbearer of the younger generation. This multilayered posture contains four aspects that should be discussed in depth in order to fully grasp Deckwitz’s self-presentation: (1) authority, (2) relatability, (3) entrepreneurship, and (4) flagbearing.

The issue of authority is important in Deckwitz’s posture, because she seeks to initiate the general audience in the domain of poetry – especially through her newspaper columns and her books *Zo word je een geweldige dichter* and *Olijven moet je leren lezen*. In the context of author branding, literary authority can be fruitfully analysed through the concept of ‘brand credibility’. Erdem and Swait (2004) define brand credibility as trustworthiness and expertise and show statistically that credibility increases the probability of a specific brand being included in the consideration set of consumers. In Deckwitz’s case, the mechanism is at work in the paratextual rhetoric of her blurbs that frequently underline her academic degree in the humanities. The blurb of the debut collection *De steen vreest mij* introduces
the poet’s education even before her achievements in the poetry field: ‘Ellen Deckwitz (1982) studied Literary and Cultural Studies and has published in, amongst others, *Bunker Hill, Dietsche Warande & Belfort*, and the anthology *Ik ben een bijl.*’2 The blurb of *Hoi feest* mentions this academic identity as well, even presenting Deckwitz as a ‘literary scholar’. Interestingly, the notion does not appear on the blurb of *De blanke gave*, the poet’s first book published by Atlas Contact, whereas this same publisher underlined Deckwitz’s academic grade in the paratextual presentation of *Zo word je een geweldige dichter*, which appeared only six months after *De blanke gave*. This difference might be explained through the specific educational nature of *Zo word je een geweldige dichter*, a didactically oriented book that needs to be marketed as the work of an expert in the field of literature, not just of any poet. To put it differently: the educational approach of this publication is legitimized through Deckwitz’s MA title. Additionally, the paratext of *Zo word je een geweldige dichter* highlights the poet’s achievement in literary prizes, mentioning both the C. Buddingh’-prize and the NK Poetry Slam, but also the Meander Dichtersprijs – the annual award of the digital literary magazine *Meander*. Together, these prizes cover Deckwitz’s widespread success, acquiring symbolic capital both in print, on stage, and online. Yet again, this contributes to the poet’s brand credibility: *Zo word je een geweldige dichter* is presented as a reliable product; its academically embedded author has mastered the trajectory of the modern poet herself by establishing a name in all important subfields of contemporary poetry. A similar device applies to *Olijven moet je leren lezen*, although Deckwitz’s academic achievements are replaced by her public appearances in this case: ‘Thanks to performances in television shows like *De Wereld Draait Door* and a column in *nrc.next*, Deckwitz has developed into one of our most transmissible ambassadors of poetry’.3 This time, the noun ‘ambassador’ does the trick, telling potential buyers that they are about to be guided by somebody who is famous for her enthusiastic ambassadorship.

The emphasis on Deckwitz’s authority, then, functions as a mechanism that increases her credibility as a brand; it implies a promise of the value that readers will receive. While this promise is virtually attached to the author, it is de facto made by the publisher, who holds the final responsibility for the paratextual representation of its authors in catalogues and blurbs.

---


3 ‘Dankzij optredens in televisieprogramma’s als *De Wereld Draait Door* en een column in *nrc. next* heeft Deckwitz zich ontwikkeld tot een van onze meest aanstekelijke poëzieambassadeurs.’
Interestingly, Deckwitz herself articulates a somewhat ambiguous position towards the authoritative aspect of her posture. On the one hand, she affirms her knowledge of literary theory and scholarly debates in literary studies; on the other, she downplays the importance of such repertoires. A striking example is provided by her comments on the oeuvre of Tonnus Oosterhoff, a postmodernist poet whose works received all major Dutch poetry prizes. Contending that a joke becomes less funny when explained, Deckwitz states: ‘The same often goes for the poems of Tonnus Oosterhoff, in spite of decennia of well-meant literary studies’ (Deckwitz 2016: 40). In this quote, Deckwitz implies that she is aware of the reception history of Oosterhoff’s poetry, hence demonstrating her posture as a literary scholar. At the same time, by framing literary studies as ‘well-meant’, she implicitly conveys the message that one does not need literary scholars (like herself) to enjoy or understand poetry.

A Relatable Mediator

The latter is also important with regard to the second aspect of Deckwitz’s posture: relatability. Being relatable is crucial in the personal branding of cultural mediators: in order to persuade consumers to pursue an active interest in a specific cultural phenomenon (such as poetry), cultural mediators should present themselves and their ‘product’ in an approachable manner. Although they are authorities who have acquired the legitimacy to shed their light on cultural matters, participating in public discourse often requires a relatable image. In Deckwitz’s case, this mechanism is at work on both the institutional and the discursive level. Institutionally, she presented herself in popular media (such as the daily talk show De Wereld Draait Door and the television quiz De Slimste Mens), talking about poetry in contexts that people usually do not associate with the genre. Such television performances definitely help to strengthen the Deckwitz brand because of their outreach in terms of audience ratings, but they also underline that author branding is a collective process. Presenting herself in popular media indeed helps Deckwitz to relate to a large(r) audience of (possible) readers, but she relies on television producers and directors to do so effectively.

The author has relatively more control on the discursive level, for instance by adopting an accessible writing style that does not chase non-poetry readers away. This strategy breaks with a tradition that might be described

4 ‘En decennia van goedbedoelde literatuurwetenschap ten spijt: hetzelfde geldt vaak voor de gedichten van Tonnus Oosterhoff.’
in terms of ‘branding the inaccessible’: for many, poets are associated with mystery and inscrutability rather than relatability. Deckwitz also deconstructs such a distance between poet and (general) audience by addressing popular phenomena in pop culture (e.g. the tv series Game of Thrones and the Eurovision Song Contest), as well as by incorporating the ordinary in the discourse on poetry. For instance, she reveals that one of her poems resulted from a phone call with her mother (Deckwitz 2015: 37), while at the same time asserting that one does not need an elitist Moleskine notebook to write poems: ‘A Hema-notebook sometimes works better, for this makes writing poetry somewhat less official’ (Deckwitz 2015: 39). 5

To some extent, Deckwitz’s emphasis on popular and ordinary events mirrors classic teleological ideas about taste development. ‘You will think Stravinsky sounds terrible if you haven’t heard the Lord of the Rings soundtrack first’, she claims in Olijven moet je leren lezen (Dohmen 2013). 6 The poet seems to defend a logic in which cultural taste is acquired in a stepwise process – a vision common to Dutch cultural mediators from the interwar period onwards (Dera 2017a). With this attitude goes a strong ambition. Claiming that we live ‘in a time in which media and politicians excel in blazing abroad claptrap’ (Deckwitz 2016: 10), she asserts that precise reading is crucial to maintain a healthy democracy. 7 Poetry, with its often dense and hermetic character, is especially suitable for training such a critical reading ability. Deckwitz’s teleology of ‘reading up’, then, ideally fosters the general audience to use popular culture like Game of Thrones as a steppingstone to more complex genres like poetry – and, concomitantly, to become more critical citizens. In this respect, the posture of the relatable poet is closely intertwined with Deckwitz’s ambitions as a cultural mediator. Hence, the postural aspect of relatability is more than a piece in the broader puzzle of brand credibility.

An Entrepreneur in a Gift Economy

However, a contemporary poet cannot live off this kind of idealism alone. This fact is underlined by the third aspect of Deckwitz’s posture,

---

5 ‘Een Hemaschriftje werkt soms beter omdat dat het dichten allemaal iets minder officieel maakt.’ The ‘Hema’ is a Dutch commercial store chain which sells everything from affordable clothing to bakery products.

6 ‘Stravinsky vind je ook teringherrie als je niet eerst de soundtrack van Lord of the Rings hebt gehoord.’

7 ‘In een tijd waarin media en politiek uitblinken in het rondbazuinen van holle frasen.’
entrepreneurship. While the Deckwitz personal brand is certainly not singular for her authority and relatability, it is – at least in the field of Dutch poetry – quite unique that a poet is able to make a living out of her poetry. Even more unique is that Deckwitz frequently emphasizes this economic situation, hence turning her financial independency into a trademark that further strengthens her brand credibility. Even before she officially debuted, Deckwitz could already pay her bills thanks to four to five poetry readings per week, plus an average of two weekly workshops at secondary schools and universities (Dohmen 2013). While this might also be the case for other contemporary poets in the Netherlands, at least hypothetically, Deckwitz's success in moneymaking was even mentioned on the blurb of *De steen vreest mij*: 'Deckwitz lives off her writing.'

This process of postural position-taking through economic success is remarkable, especially in the case of poetry. As Ailsa Craig (2007) put it, poetry practice is often a ‘career without a job’. Following Bourdieu, Craig holds that poets function at the pure pole of the literary field, where economic success is secondary (and sometimes even inferior) to symbolic value. The formative tension of the literary field is, in this view, that between commercial and non-commercial pursuits. Deckwitz’s case at least raises questions about the tangibility of such a tension in the twenty-first-century poetry field, where poets apparently can reside as cultural entrepreneurs who proudly present their career as a job (and, by implication, refer to themselves as ‘the product Ellen Deckwitz’ without the slightest hint of irony).

Such a focus on entrepreneurship, with branded authors explicitly emphasizing their own brands, moves beyond the habitus of the literary field that dominated auctorial position-takings throughout the twentieth century. Whereas poets of older generations generally claimed an autonomous orientation, centring their identity myths around the idea that poets were not interested in money and market, poets like Deckwitz actively maintain personal brands that enable them to take part in the larger media system. Their poetry (career) is most certainly not governed by the ideology of art for art’s sake but is rather enmeshed in the larger macrolevel of a business-oriented society. In this sense, the postural aspect of the entrepreneur shifts away from the logic as described by Wilson (1990: 171) a couple of decades ago: ‘A poet who consciously plots his career in terms of worldly goals, e.g. a certain income, a certain reputation, is generally scorned.’

A possible reason why Wilson’s remark does not apply to contemporary poets like Deckwitz, is because they have no problem with sharing their

---

8 ‘Deckwitz leeft van haar schrijverschap.’
recipe for success with their peers. Especially in small countries like the Netherlands and Flanders, poets tend to know each other. Nowadays, many poetry careers in the Low Countries, like Deckwitz’s, start in the subfield of poetry reading. Craig and Dubois (2010: 442) argue that these readings, ‘as a social space of activity and relations’, ‘are key to both poetry economies and careers’. Their central argument is that such meetings are structured by the logic of offering; that is, the giving and receiving of poems, opportunities, and friendships. For instance, poets regularly attend each other’s performances and contribute to the gift economy by mentoring or being available to be mentored. Actively maintaining a broad network in the contemporary poetry scene, both in real life and online, Deckwitz holds a central position in the Dutch literary gift economy. Zo word je een geweldige dichter even might be interpreted as a ‘gift’ to aspiring poets, while some of the poems included in Olijven moet je leren lezen were written by young, unestablished poets (e.g. Maarten Buser, Vicky Francken, Johanna Geels) who had just debuted or had not even published a collection of poetry yet. By turning her readers’ attention to their work, Deckwitz offers them a place in the literary spotlights.

An Ambivalent Flagbearer

Yet the act of giving implies benefits for the giver as well. In the context of branding, one could argue that Deckwitz’s generosity contributes to her own brand value, because audiences will perceive her as social rather than egocentric. Such ambivalent altruism also manifests itself in the context of the final aspect of Deckwitz’s posture, flagbearing. In an interview, the poet uses the term to mark her leading position in the contemporary poetry scene, referring to herself as ‘flagbearer of the young generation’ (Dohmen 2013). On the one hand, this rhetoric undeniably has its social side, since it affirms collectivism rather than the poetics of the individual genius. On the other hand, the metaphor of the flagbearer places Deckwitz on top of the pyramid: she might be part of a collective, but she is the spokesperson or even the icon of this group that, speaking of which, remains unspecifed throughout the interview. It goes without saying that this rhetorical strategy works well when maintaining a brand. By underlining that she is in front of the pack without explicitly claiming that she is the leading poet of her generation (hence risking an arrogant image), Deckwitz conveys the message that her brand value should be taken for granted.

9 ‘[V]aandeldrager van de jongeren.’
The metaphor of the flagbearer is also interesting from another point of view, since it resembles the avant-garde discourse with its many military topoi. Indeed, in an early interview in her career, which appeared in the academic journal *Vooys*, Deckwitz applies a typical avant-garde strategy when discussing her position in the literary field, presenting herself as the ‘new’ and earlier generations as the ‘old’. She especially resists the so-called baby boom generation in the Netherlands, who ‘currently still have a hegemonic position in the academic and literary world’ (Van der Graaff 2011: 107). Mentioning the leading critics Piet Gerbrandy and Elsbeth Etty as striking representants, the new product named Ellen Deckwitz reveals herself as the logical successor of this generation. This position-taking goes hand in hand with distinction and some controversy, with Deckwitz stating that Dante’s *La Divina Commedia* is ‘boring as hell’ (Van der Graaff 2011: 108).

This statement on Dante brings us back to the issue of authority again. Deckwitz legitimizes her view through her own academic distinction: ‘I received my MA in literary studies with honours, plus I took specialist courses in medieval studies, so I know what I’m talking about when I say that *La Divina Commedia* bores me’ (Van der Graaff 2011: 108). Interestingly, this remark is at odds with the school of literary studies adopted by the faculty who educated Deckwitz at her alma mater, the University of Groningen. Chaired by Professor Gillis Dorleijn, Dutch Studies in Groningen laid emphasis on institutional analysis, following Bourdieu’s basic insight that the value of literary texts is not intrinsic but attributed by several actors in the literary field. From an institutional point of view, it would be a fallacy for literary scholars to claim that they ‘know what they are talking about’ when calling a canonical text ‘boring as hell’, for this would imply that such an evaluation could result from an objective academic analysis. In that sense, Deckwitz risks to damage her brand credibility, at least for academics who read the interview. There is an alternative interpretation of the ‘boring as hell’ quote, though. To some extent, it might also be a self-reflective statement. Its irony is apparent in the use of the word ‘hell’ in an evaluation of Dante’s inferno, but the poet’s remark that she knows what she is talking about, could also be ironical. In that case, the phrase would reveal that Deckwitz is aware of using Dante as a means of strategic

---

10 ‘[M]aken op het moment van schrijven nog steeds de dienst uit in de academische en literaire wereld.’
11 ‘Ik heb een cum laude master in literatuurwetenschap plus een specialisatie in mediëvistiek, dus ik weet wel wat ik zeg als ik zeg dat ik *De Goddelijke Komedie* saai vind.’
position-taking, ironically admitting that she is adopting an avant-garde logic throughout the interview.

It is important to mention this ambiguity, because it demonstrates how complicated it is to assess the effects of a posture on the audience (compare Dera 2015). Where some readers of the interview will doubt Deckwitz’s brand credibility based on the Dante quote, others will take her authority seriously. The ‘product Ellen Deckwitz’, then, cannot function outside the mindset of her audience – which should not be conceptualized as a homogeneous mass, but as a heterogeneous network of individual consumers who eventually share beliefs and values that make reading Deckwitz a plausible option.

Charging Economic Capital with Symbolic Value

As we have seen, the author Deckwitz inhabits a posture that in many respects functions as a brand, in the sense that it promises the reading public that they will receive good value when purchasing a Deckwitz book: the poet is an authority, she is relatable, she is a successful entrepreneur, and she is the frontrunner of a new, young generation. This identity myth is not only constructed by the poet herself, though. Although Deckwitz certainly evokes a strong self-presentation, her image is also shaped by other actors in the branding process, especially her publishers and the media. The effectiveness of Deckwitz’s posture is also underlined by statements of her fellow poets. Ingmar Heytze, for example, compares the initiation phase of Deckwitz’s and his own career as follows: ‘She really is a cultural entrepreneur. When I started as a poet, in the late 1980s, I took a job at the post office, since it was impossible to make a living out of poetry. I didn’t come up with the idea to participate in poetry slams’ (Bekkering 2012). The latter is not really a surprise, because the infrastructure of the poetry field in the eighties differed significantly from that in the first decades of the twenty-first century. The point is, though, that self-presentation and image are enmeshed in this case – Deckwitz’s posture seems to be that strong that even her fellow poets enforce her brand value.

The identity myth which results from this interplay between various actors embodies a fundamental tension between symbolic and economic capital. The focus on authority and flagbearing presumes an orientation towards symbolic capital, whereas relatability and entrepreneurship are rather more linked to economic capital. As aforesaid, then, the strict opposition between the Bourdieuan subfields of restricted and large-scale production is not tangible in the case of this contemporary poet. Deckwitz
effectively mixes activities aimed at gathering symbolic capital with strategies aimed at economic capital, hence communicating her brand to both the poetry niche and a broader audience.

An important benchmark in this respect are Deckwitz’s publishers, who contribute significantly to the author’s symbolic brand value. As Dubois and François (2013: 515) explain, publishing houses act as aesthetic signals understood by all actors in the poetry field. Recognized authorities like critics, booksellers, and librarians use publishers as major markers to determine a poet’s position in the constantly shifting production space. This is also true for the field of contemporary Dutch poetry, despite the emergence of digital literature and bottom-up oriented publishing initiatives (Dera 2017b). Deckwitz’s first publisher, Nijgh & Van Ditmar, is a reputable actor in Dutch literature, thus laying the foundation for the poet’s symbolic capital. Her second publisher, Atlas Contact, has an even higher position in the literary hierarchy. Taking the symbolic capital of her publishers as a reference point, then, Deckwitz’s career seems to follow a linear path.

Yet, being a relatable poetry entrepreneur who does not confine to a classic publishing model, Deckwitz does not simply resemble the so-called ratchet effect, conceptualized by Giuffre (1999) as the logic that actors who have moved up to a certain status are not likely to go back down to an inferior class. To some extent, her attitude towards her position as a performance poet hints at the ratchet effect, for Deckwitz frames her highly successful slam career as a steppingstone in her career. She literally calls the national championships in poetry slam ‘a push on occasion’ (Bekkering 2012) for aspiring poets who have plenty of work ready for publication, implying that poetry readings have a peripheral position and in-print publications a central function in the poetry field. At the same time, in 2013, having acquired a name as a publishing poet as well, Deckwitz refers to herself as ‘stage poet pur sang’, hence deconstructing the hierarchy by suggesting that poetry readings are more defining for a career than poetry collections in print. This rhetoric strongly corresponds with the poet’s behaviour in the field, with Deckwitz being a highly active contributor at literary festivals and a frequent host of poetry slam activities. Still, the authoritative brand Deckwitz is fully aware of the need of traditional publications in order to maintain her position, having experienced the impact of symbolic capital herself. In Zo word je een geweldige dichter, she admits that a certain literary magazine had rejected her poetry before she debuted but suddenly accepted her work after she won the C. Buddingh-prize for De steen vreest mij (Deckwitz 2015: 126).

12 ‘[E]en duwtje in de rug.’
While Deckwitz’s career is strongly governed by symbolic capital, then, the poet actively strives for economic capital as well. As shown in the previous paragraphs, she fruitfully engages with popular media and brands herself as a successful cultural entrepreneur, even framing herself as ‘the product Ellen Deckwitz’. Such a combination of position takings aimed at both symbolic and economic capital is, quite frankly, not something to be surprised about in the context of the literary field, in which the interplay between different kinds of capital works as a structuring principle. It is typical of twenty-first-century authors like Deckwitz, however, that they tend to deny the binary opposition between *pecunia* and prestige. ‘The product Ellen Deckwitz’ constantly demonstrates how the symbolic is interwoven with the economic, at the same time charging economic capital with symbolic power.

Some examples taken from Deckwitz’s essays might illustrate this point. In *Olijven moet je leren lezen*, she states: ‘To me, giving poetry workshops is almost as much fun as making money’ (Deckwitz 2016: 45). This quote is somewhat misleading (or ironic at the least), suggesting that Deckwitz gives workshops for free, whereas the seventy to a hundred classes she teaches annually are of great importance to her financial situation. Moreover, the poet positions moneymaking slightly higher in the hierarchy than the didactic activities she employs, hence blurring the traditional lines between economic capital and the symbolic value attached to cultural mediation. Such a reversal of values is also apparent in a second example, in which Deckwitz demystifies the aura of publishing in print while celebrating the benefits of on-stage performances: ‘As poetry collections almost always end up in a clearance sale, their spiritual parents are raking the money in with their performances’ (Deckwitz 2016: 143). A similar reassessment of the poet as a viable moneymaker is made manifest in a third example, with Deckwitz joking that Tonnis Oosterhoff could afford a lifelong holiday on the Dutch island Vlieland based on his literary prizes alone (Deckwitz 2016: 39). In this case, a classic indicator of symbolic capital (the institution of literary prizes) is explicitly loaded with economical capital, thus blurring the line between these two.

Deckwitz’s deconstruction of the opposition between economic and symbolic capital might be interpreted against the background of the third conceptual pair in this volume: resistance versus acceptation. In many

---

13 ‘Ik vind het geven van een workshop bijna even leuk als geld verdienen.’
14 ‘Waar poëziebundels bijna altijd in de ramsj belanden, verdienen hun geestelijk ouders goudgeld met optreden.’
ways, Deckwitz’s focus on poets’ business brains resists the cliché image of poetry as a niche for vagabonds who would turn down every penny for the sake of art. The rewriting of the poet as an entrepreneur is a necessary step in the popularization of the genre – it might even be considered a key mechanism in poetry branding in general. According to Deckwitz, then, a poet is not a chosen one whose accomplishments are achieved through spontaneous overflows of powerful feelings: they can be anyone who got awarded grading points for writing ‘a bullshit story on an exam sheet’ (Deckwitz 2015: 81).

The branding of poetry as an economical commodity is also visible in Deckwitz’s account of why poetry is useful. In her defence of poetry, two of the classic answers to this question – reading poetry facilitates intellectual flexibility and fosters a multifaceted conception of reality – are not first in line. Instead, Deckwitz opens her plea noticing that poetry objects have a decorative function in interior designs and that poetry performances on television – for instance Nico Dijkshoorn’s contributions to the daily talk show *De Wereld Draait Door* – are a form of amusement (Deckwitz 2016: 112). Although she spends far more words on the intellectual benefits of reading poetry, it is meaningful that Deckwitz addresses the more approachable uses of poetry first.

Concluding Remarks

The first paragraph of this chapter used the metaphor of Brown and Wijland (2015: 559) in order to describe the common conception of the relationship between branding and poetry. The opposition between ‘the Scylla of poetry’s elitist stigma and the Charybdis of managers’ utilitarian taint’ seems inapplicable to the case of Ellen Deckwitz. Deckwitz unifies Scylla and Charybdis: her brand addresses both the elitist niche of the Dutch poetry scene and the large-scale interests of a more general audience. Embodying entrepreneurship rather than autonomy, Deckwitz seems to reinvent the image of the modern poet. It would be interesting to carry out more research on the posture Deckwitz conveys in order to (co-)communicate her brand image to the heterogeneous audiences she addresses. Other contemporary poets in the Netherlands and Flanders, such as Charlotte Van den Broeck, Ramsey Nasr, and Maud Vanhauwaert, show similar patterns, raising the hypothesis that the model of the entrepreneur is widely present in the field of contemporary Dutch poetry. Like T.S. Eliot, they all seem to be poets with a business brain.
References

Anne Dohmen. 2013. ‘Ik zie mezelf als vaandeldrager’. NRC Handelsblad, 3 April.


**About the Author**

**JEROEN DERA** (1986) holds a PhD in literary studies from Radboud University Nijmegen. He currently works as an assistant professor at the same university. His research concerns contemporary poetry, literary education, and the relation between literature and the media industries. Dera is the programme director of the dual MA ‘Education in Language and Cultural Studies’ at Radboud. He also works as a poetry critic for the Flemish newspaper *De Standaard*. 