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Living History: The Reception of Autobiographies in Three Dutch Journals, 1850-1918

In 1728 the young Benjamin Franklin wrote an epitaph for himself. In this text, he compared his body to a book, without its decorations and contents:

The Body of
B. Franklin, Printer,
Like the cover of an old Book,
Its Contents torn out,
And stript of its Lettering & Gilding
Lies here, Food for Worms.
But the Work shall not be lost;
For it will, as he believ'd,
Appear once more
In a new and more elegant Edition
Corrected and improved
By the Author (quoted in Darnton 2001: 177)

Between 1771 and 1790 the same Benjamin Franklin wrote *The History of My Life*. The former printer apparently saw not only his own body as a book; he also shaped his own life as a book: his autobiography, which was published after his death. Nowadays, Franklin's autobiography is considered part of the 'classical age' of autobiography – together with other famous autobiographies such as those by Edward Gibbon, Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe.

Within autobiographical studies it is generally taken for granted that autobiographical texts appear in the shape of a book. But how self-evident is it that self-written life stories appear as a bundle of printed papers within a cover, marked with a title and (mostly) the author's name? In his stimulating study *Origins of the Individualist Self* (1997), Michael Mascuch suggests a link between the emerging concept of autobiographical identity and developments on the book market at the end of the eighteenth century. In his view, the idea of the 'author' as a model of individual identity is directly related to the history of the physical book, which became accessible to more and more people from the end of the eighteenth century onward – to readers as well as to writers and publishers. Due to innovations like the Copyright Act, Mascuch argues, being an author became something that had potential symbolic and commercial value. As an author, one could master one's own life narrative. In addition, being the author of a published life story could lead to public rewards such as money and recognition (cf. Mascuch 1997).

Within the research project *Controlling Time and Shaping the Self: Education, Introspection and Practices of Writing in the Netherlands, 1750-1914* we have identified a noticeable increase of printed memoirs and autobiographies in

the course of the nineteenth century.¹ A similar increase was found by Robbie Gray (2001) for England. However, the majority of these narratives from the nineteenth century are completely forgotten nowadays. When one takes into account the literary, aesthetic quality of these texts, this is understandable. Still, these texts are extremely interesting from the point of view of cultural studies, since "they may [...] illuminate, more clearly than celebrated canonical texts, the cultural norms against which the excluded struggled for narrative space", as Gray (ibid.: 289) points out. Following Mascuch, this struggle for narrative space can be situated in the very material site of the book market. Due to factors such as access to better education, the introduction of leisure time and technological innovations like the steam press, this market expanded enormously in the nineteenth century. Thus, more and more publishers competed with each other, trying to reach the growing reading public with their books.

In this context of a developing mass-media market, there apparently was room for a flood of autobiographical books. These obviously must have had some commercial value at the time. The rising memory genre of the autobiography can therefore not only be analyzed in terms of its contents or structure but also as a product that was produced (written), distributed (printed and traded), and consumed (read). My own research into the commercialisation of autobiographical writing in the Netherlands during the second half of the nineteenth century focuses on the book market in which the autobiographical genre rose. From this perspective, I hope to shed some light on the material and cultural conditions in which autobiographical narratives and identities took shape, and to explore what effect these conditions might have had on the shaping of these narratives and identities.²

In this article, I will focus on the way autobiographical books were received by a specific group of readers: Dutch literary critics in the nineteenth century. By analyzing the expectations and evaluations associated with these books in reviews, I hope to show that the conception of the autobiographical genre in the nineteenth century differs greatly from our own. Far into the nineteenth century, an autobiography was sold and seen as a historiographic public genre – rather than as an introspective, personal genre. And this perception may have had important consequences for the question of with what kinds of life-stories writers could (not) enter the public space of the book market.

¹ See Baggerman (2002a; 2002b). See also the issue of *Tijdschrift voor Sociale en Economische Geschiedenis* (2004), edited by Arianne Baggerman and Rudolf Dekker.

² In this respect, my research responds to Mark Freeman's call in his article "From Substance to Story: Narrative, Identity, and the Reconstruction of the Self" (2001: 293). See also Smith/Watson (2001: 77–80), where they call for more research into the reception of autobiographies, and the article by Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning in this volume, where they make a plea for considering the mediality of literature to understand the "role that literary works play as media in historical memory cultures" (14).

1. Searching beyond the canon

Nowadays, autobiography is primarily regarded as a genre consisting of retrospective prose narratives written by real persons on their own life, particularly on the development of their personality.³ This memory genre is generally thought to have appeared in the Western world around 1800, as an expression of a growing historical consciousness. The notion that each individual has his or her own history is seen as the basis of the concept of 'modern man'. That idea is supposed to have started giving meaning to life via a narrative based on a personal, autobiographical memory. Mark Freeman and Jens Brockmeier (2001: 78–79), for instance, perceive in the nineteenth-century Western world the rise of an autobiographical identity as a "sociopsychological gestalt". At this point in history the individual self became the meaning-center of life, and an interlocking discursive configuration of historicity, autobiographical memory and narrative identity came into existence.⁴

Though autobiography as a genre is sometimes regarded as one of the most democratic forms of writing, the studies of autobiography written by literary scholars generally do not reflect this democratic potential (cf. Gunzenhauser 2002a). Again and again, scholars turn to the same set of autobiographies written by professional, white, male writers such as Rousseau, Goethe, Wordsworth, Newman, Edmund Gosse and Henry Adams. Self-representations by non-professional writers and so-called marginal groups (such as women, the working class or blacks) are accordingly interpreted either as 'challenges' to the genre or simply dismissed as not interesting or non-literary.⁵ This is true for many so-called memoirs, in which a real person describes not the development of his own personality but rather his public life and/or social circle.

Historians neglected all ego-documents, such as autobiographies, memoirs, diaries and letters for a long time, rejecting these sources as unreliable because of their inherent subjectivity. From the 1980s onward, there has, however, been an increasing historical interest in ego-documents. This tendency can be accounted for by the emergence of new branches within historiography, such as the history of mentalities and the study of daily life and women's history (cf. Dekker 2002a; 2002b). One of the most famous historians working with autobiographies and other ego-documents is Peter Gay. In his book *The Naked Heart* (1995) he uses autobiographies to support his central thesis that the nineteenth-century bourgeoisie was obsessed with itself. He stresses the rise and popularity of autobiographies in the nineteenth century, but bases his claim exclusively on well-known autobiographers such as

³ Cf. the well-known definition by Philippe Lejeune in *Le pacte autobiographique* (1975).

⁴ For this thesis Freeman and Brockmeier rely heavily on Charles Taylor's *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (1989) and Weintraub (1975). See also Weintraub (1978).

⁵ See for example Shumaker (1954: 136), Pascal (1985 [1960]: 55), Stull (1985: 165), Gunzenhauser (2002a; 2002b).

Rousseau, George Sand, John Stuart Mill, Goethe, Theodor Fontane and Henry Beyle Stendhal.

In passing, though, Gay does note that a great number of 'ordinary' people also wrote autobiographies. Although he considers these autobiographies as additional evidence for the nineteenth-century urge to give a testimony of oneself, Gay also concludes that 'ordinary' people rarely succeeded in writing an explicit self-analysis.⁶ This raises the question of whether such an explicit self-analysis was in fact the goal of autobiography in the nineteenth century and, for that matter, in autobiography as a genre. Recently, Paul John Eakin (1999) stressed that all identity must be seen as relational. In his view, every assertion of individual autonomy is dependent on the recognition of that autonomy by others. Therefore, Eakin calls for expanding both the definition and the history of autobiography. And, interestingly, he asks specifically for a recognition of "the hitherto neglected class of narratives we often call memoirs" (ibid.: 43, 56).

Within the research project *Controlling Time and Shaping the Self* we take into account both autobiographies and memoirs. Our aim is not to study what we would today regard as an autobiography, but to determine what exactly people in the nineteenth century wrote or published as an autobiography. Therefore, we employ a definition that is as broad as possible, namely that of Philippe Lejeune, who regards a text as autobiographical if the reader is drawn into an 'autobiographical pact'. The minimal criterion for this is that the proper name of the author is also the name of the narrator and main character of the book or manuscript (cf. Lejeune 1975). Based on this criterion we compiled a database of all published and unpublished Dutch ego-documents of the period from 1814 to 1914. Based on this data, the research focuses on the contents of these books and manuscripts, and possible explanations for the increase of ego-documents in this period.

2. Reviews of autobiographies

Based on the database of autobiographical texts produced in the Netherlands, I try to understand the specific material and cultural context in which the increasing number of autobiographical books was produced, distributed and consumed. To investigate the consumer's expectations with respect to autobiographies in the period from 1850 to 1918, I focus on the reception of autobiographies in literary criticism. From a commercial perspective, literary reviews are relevant because nineteenth-century publishers tended to use reviews to market their products. It has also been suggested by the Dutch book historian Lisa Kuitert that, from 1850 onward, readers used literary criticism as a kind of guide in the forest of newly released books. Favourable reviews might thus have led to increased purchase by readers, but also to a more prominent display in bookshops. Furthermore, publishers might sooner

⁶ See the chapter "Exercises in Self-definition", esp. 109-111 in Gay (1995).

issue reprints of books that received good reviews, or they might decide to acquire similar books or to translate successful books from other countries to offer to their readers. Writers, or potential writers, might be inspired to imitate successful books. In this respect, reviews can offer some insight into the commercial conditions under which published autobiographical narratives were produced (cf. Kuitert 2002: 9). Reviews can also offer information on genre conventions. What contents did critics expect when they read an autobiography? What did these nineteenth-century readers think of the rising genre of autobiography, and what people should (or should not) write autobiographies, according to the literary critics?

So far, hardly any research has been done on the reception of autobiographies in the nineteenth century. The exception is Keith Rinehart's article on "The Victorian Approach to Autobiographies" (1954). From reviews in a number of English newspapers and magazines he concludes that, until far into the nineteenth century, the value of autobiographies was seen in terms of their morals. The autobiography was seen as a genre that could offer lessons on life and was, in that respect, not so different from a biography. Towards the end of the 1870s, however, Rinehart notices a turn. The attention shifted to the motives of the authors and the deficiency of memory. This coincided with a split of the autobiography and the biography into different genres. And because now less emphasis was placed on moral lessons, more attention was given to the aesthetic, literary value of autobiographies.

In order to probe the 'Dutch approach to autobiographies', I systematically analyzed three Dutch general cultural journals: *De Gids* (The Guide), *Vaderlandsche Letteroefeningen* (Dutch Letter Practices), and *Stemmen voor Waarheid en Vrede* (Voices for Truth and Peace). *De Gids* was founded in 1834 and still exists today. Started as a progressive journal providing innovative and aesthetically oriented literary criticism, in the period between 1850 and 1918 it was a highly esteemed liberal journal (cf. Aerts 1997). Far more mainstream was *Vaderlandsche Letteroefeningen*, founded in 1760, in which a wide range of books was reviewed from a more ethical perspective until 1876. Founded in 1864 as a Protestant alternative to *De Gids*, the journal *Stemmen voor Waarheid en Vrede* offered its readers various articles on religious matters as well as book reviews from an orthodox Protestant perspective.

In total, I found almost 200 reviews of both Dutch and foreign (translated and non-translated) autobiographies. What is most striking is the fact that Dutch critics did not seem to praise autobiography for its moral value, as Rinehart observed for England, but for its historical value.⁷ Moreover, critics did not seem to make a distinction between autobiographies and memoirs as we do; that is, they did not separate a more introspective text from a text in which a person describes his public actions and/or social circle. In my view,

⁷ See for example the review of H.N.C. Baron van Tuyll van Serooskerken's *De lichtblauwe hussaren van Willem Boreel* (Den Haag 1868), by W.J. Knoop in: *De Gids* 1869. 2: 1-26.

this has to do with the fact that critics did not expect personal memories, introspection, or the history of a personality in autobiography. They rather thought of autobiography as a text of historical importance.

This conception of the genre had consequences for what subject matter was considered appropriate for an autobiography. First of all, the author must have been an eye-witness of an important event. Should a writer fail to stress his presence at such an important event, he could expect negative reviews.⁸ The same thing applied if the autobiographer moved in circles the critic thought historically unimportant, so that his writing was about historically unimportant figures or events.⁹ Scathing criticism was also the autobiographer's lot when he wrote too much about himself. This is, for example, the fate of Major General Nahuys, who published his memoirs in 1858. According to the critic, Nahuys' self-satisfaction is 'revolting and annoying' to the reader. Also, Nahuys conveniently forgets that he owes his achievements not merely to himself, but to his social position.¹⁰

A person should be known from the social outside and not from the psychological inside, the critics seem to suggest. Thus, in 1853, a reviewer applauds the autobiography of the German theologian Claus Harms, precisely because Harms simply offers a description of his public life and experiences. This is the right way to gain a good insight into his character, according to the critic. This presentation of the self was deemed much better than a revelation of the 'history of his heart', such as Rousseau had provided.¹¹ It is remarkable that this 'founding father' of the genre is seldom mentioned in reviews and that when he is it is always in a negative tone. As late as 1894, a critic characterizes Rousseau as an autobiographer obsessively occupied with himself, with no eye for social reality: a pretentious, vain and insincere writer.¹²

In spite of this, critics in *De Gids* and, to a lesser degree, *Vaderlandsche Letteroefeningen* often complain about the lack of 'personal literature', such as autobiographies, diaries and letters, within Dutch literature. But, as early as 1872, the chief editor of *Stemmen voor Waarheid en Vrede* warns against an

⁸ Review of S.A.Q., Bellona. *Het militaire leven van een Veteraan, tijdens den laatsten Europeeschen oorlog* (Rotterdam 1854), by an anonymous critic in: *De Gids* 1855. 2: 280.

⁹ See for example the review of Senora Pepita, *Gedenkschriften uit het leven eener danseres. Door haar zelve beschreven* (Utrecht 1856), by an anonymous critic in *Vaderlandsche Letteroefeningen* 1857.1: 638-639; review G. Ludw. C. Lentz, *Erinnerungen aus meinem Amtsleben, besonders in Amsterdam* (Amsterdam 1895), by A.W. Bronsveld in: *Stemmen voor Waarheid en Vrede* 1896: 299-300; review of Anna de Savornin Lohman, *Herinneringen* (Amsterdam 1909), by A.W. Bronsveld in: *Stemmen voor Waarheid en Vrede* 1910: 87-89.

¹⁰ Review of *Herinneringen uit het openbare en bijzondere leven (1799-1858) van Mr. H.G. Baron Nahuys van Burgst* (Den Bosch 1858), by an anonymous critic in: *Vaderlandsche Letteroefeningen* 1859.1: 76-77.

¹¹ Review of *Levensbeschrijving van Dr. Claus Harms, door hem zelve meegedeeld* (Alkmaar 1852), by J.H.S. in *Vaderlandsche Letteroefeningen* 1853.1: 535-539.

¹² Review of S.A. Naber, *Vier tijdgenooten. Indrukken en beschouwingen* (Haarlem 1894), by an anonymous critic in *De Gids* 1894.2: 530-540. See also Groskurth (1978).

'inquisitiveness, verging on indiscretion'. Nevertheless, all three journals regard the publishing of ego-documents as something that is of historical importance. On the one hand, the critics long for autobiographies, diaries and letters by famous people such as well-known writers. Yet on the other hand, they are not solely interested in whether an autobiographer is an important figure or not, for the critic's need for published ego-documents is mainly fuelled by an interest in history. As long as autobiographers succeed in relating their own life to the times and circles in which they lived, critics are satisfied with their books.¹³

3. Living history

Following from the conception of autobiography as a genre of historical importance, a number of recurring themes can be identified in the reviews. First, there is the value of the autobiography for contemporary history and discussions of current affairs. In this context, knowledge obtained by experience is regarded as highly important. For example, in the 1850s, autobiographies of former slaves as well as those written by slave owners are recommended to readers in order to enable them to discuss the 'discourse of the day' and to acquire 'knowledge' of both sides of the debate on the controversial issue of slavery.¹⁴ And in 1888, a well-received autobiography by businessman and parliamentarian C.T. Stork is recommended because of its insights into the discussion about the freedom of trade. Moreover, the reviewer sets great store by the fact that in this book no 'scientific oracular utterances' are delivered but that a businessman simply expresses his experiences and thoughts on this question.¹⁵

Many more examples could illustrate my point that the reception seems not so much concerned with the individual autobiographer, but with his – or sometimes her – experience with particular topics or events. On the one

¹³ See for example the review of C.T. Stork, *De Twentsche katoennijverheid – hare vestiging en uitbreiding. Herinneringen en wenken* (Enschede 1888), by P.N. Muller in *De Gids* 1888.1: 409-424.

¹⁴ See for example the review of *Levensgeschiedenis van den Amerikaanschen slaaf W. Wells Brown, afgevaardigde bij het Vredescongres te Parijs, 1849 door hem zelve beschreven* (Zwolle 1850), by Schüller in *De Gids* 1851.1: 135-136; the review of Brandtz Mayer, *Twintig jaren uit het leven van een slavenhandelaar* (Den Haag 1856), by M. in: *De Gids* 1856.2: 415-416; the review of *Levensgeschiedenis van den Amerikaanschen slaaf W. Wells Brown, afgevaardigde bij het Vredescongres te Parijs, 1849 door hem zelve beschreven* (Zwolle 1850), by an anonymous critic in *Vaderlandsche Letteroefeningen* 1850.1: 321; the review of A. Kappler, *Zes jaren in Suriname. Schetsen en tafereelen uit het maatschappelijke en militaire leven in deze kolonie* (Utrecht 1854), by an anonymous critic in *Vaderlandsche Letteroefeningen* 1854.1: 652-655; the review of *Een slavenleven, of korte levensbeschrijving van eenen Amerikaanschen slaaf door hemzelve medegedeeld* (Leiden 1853), by J.H.S. in *Vaderlandsche Letteroefeningen* 1853.1: 526-527.

¹⁵ Review of C.T. Stork, *De Twentsche katoennijverheid – hare vestiging en uitbreiding. Herinneringen en wenken* (Enschede 1888), by P.N. Muller in *De Gids* 1888.1: 409-424.

hand, that experience could be used to help shape public opinion on contemporary issues. On the other hand, that experience could be useful in writing a contemporary history. For instance, the autobiography of the well-known Dutch clergyman O.G. Heldring (1882) was regarded as a possible basis for a still-to-be-written history of the Réveil, a pietistic Protestant movement which originated in the 1820s.¹⁶

Another very interesting point is the appreciation of ego-documents as sources for writing a different kind of history – one that is no longer dominated by wars and politics, but that focuses on people. Thus, in 1858 a critic in the *Vaderlandsche Letteroefeningen* praises the book *Mary Seacole's Adventures in the West and in the Crimean, or the Interesting Life of a Heroine of Mercy, told by herself*. During the Crimean war, Mary Seacole organised a trade in snacks, wine and lemonade for the soldiers. That in itself was remarkable enough, but, according to the critic, above and beyond that her tale has a 'peculiar importance':

Genoeg anderen hebben het hoofdbeloop van den oorlog, de wapenfeiten der aanvoerders, de wereldkundige gebeurtenissen met meer of minder sierlijkheid te boek gesteld. Zij bemoeit zich volstrekt niet met die officiële of openbare zijde der gebeurtenissen; zij geeft eenvoudig weder wat zij zelf heeft gezien, maar dat zijn juist van die details, die men nergens anders vinden kan. Geen Thucydides, geen Livius, of Robertson, Gervinus, Thiers, Wagenaar of Van Meteren geven u een zoo juist begrip van wat de oorlog eigenlijk is, als deze vrouw met haar onbevangen hart en helder oordeel.¹⁷

In my view, this appreciation must be seen as the desire for something like a 'history with a human face'. This longing for a new, more human and living history could well be a reaction to the professionalisation in academic history in the second half of the nineteenth century.¹⁸ More and more attention was paid to the rise and fall of nation-states, and ordinary people gradually 'fell out of history'. All the same, this perspective on autobiographies again is at odds with the assumption that autobiographies should be narratives on per-

¹⁶ Review of O.G. Heldring, *Leven en arbeid* (Leiden 1881), by J. van der Have in *Stemmen voor Waarheid en Vrede* 1881.1: 382-403, 603-648; in *De Gids* reviewer A. Pierson took Heldring's autobiography in 1882 to start a series 'Oudere tijdgenooten' (Older contemporaries) on men involved in the Réveil that was published in the volumes 1882-1886.

¹⁷ Translation: "Many other writers have, with a greater or lesser degree of elegance, raised the matter of the war, the feats of the leaders, the public events. She does not concern herself at all with this official or public side of the events; she quite simply records what she herself has seen, but those are the very details which are to be found nowhere else. Not Thucydides, Livius or Robertson, Gervinus, Thiers, Wagenaar or Van Meeteren offer you as clear an insight into what war really is about as this woman with her unprejudiced heart and lucid judgment." Review of *Mary Seacole's avonturen in de West en in de Krim, of het belangwekkend leven eener helding der barmhartigheid door haar zelve verhaald* (Rotterdam 1857), by an anonymous critic in *Vaderlandsche Letteroefeningen* 1858.1: 777-781.

¹⁸ Cf. Smith (1998), Grever (1994).

sonal identity – an assumption on which, after all, a significant part of the literary history of autobiographies is based.

This might well be the consequence of the fact that many studies on the development of the autobiographical genre deal exclusively with autobiographies written by more or less professional and literary writers. Precisely this type of autobiography can be expected to be more personal, according to the reviews I analyzed. But still: the critics only expect personal background in as far as this information can be related to the work on which the person's fame is based. In reviewing the collected letters and autobiography of Darwin, for instance, the reviewer appreciates the insight we are given into the genesis of his 'Herculean task'. But he does not criticize the fact that the editor Francis Darwin has omitted information about Darwin's family life.¹⁹

Here, again, it is remarkable that in the reviews it is not the personal or intimate side of the autobiographer that counts, but his public life: the things he does and what he stands for. And the 'what he stands for' may vary from an important scientific or artistic achievement to religious and ecclesiastical developments of recent times, the state of the theatre, the situation in the colonies, medical practices, business life, and so on. The exemplary aspect of autobiographies now and then is explicitly interpreted by critics as a lesson or a model for the readers. Sometimes, such models serve a certain social purpose, such as the abolition of slavery, fighting cutbacks in the army, or a better management of the Dutch colonies. Sometimes, a life serves as a kind of career guidance. For example, an autobiography written by a civil servant is appreciated because it offers good insights into the various posts in the Dutch East Indies. Here, the critic refers to the passages about the writer's youth and education as being of 'less interest'.²⁰ That is, those passages that we, nowadays, would consider the essence of the autobiography, those in which the growth of a personality is described, appear to be hardly relevant to contemporaries.

4. Reconsidering autobiography

Autobiographical narratives and identities did not appear in a material and cultural vacuum. From the late eighteenth century onward, these configurations increasingly took the shape of published books. And as autobiography

¹⁹ Review of *The Life and Letters of Charles Darwin, including an autobiographical chapter, edited by his son, Francis Darwin* (London 1887), by A.A.W. Hubrecht in *De Gids* 1888.2: 382-415, 546-563.

²⁰ Review of C.C.L. van Coeverden, *Uit den loopbaan van een Ned.Ind. ambtenaar* (Leiden 1873), by an anonymous critic in *Vaderlandsche Letteroefeningen* 1874: 84-88; see also review of A.J. Dieperink, *Tien maanden op zee. Schetsen uit het leven van een kajuitsjongen* (Amsterdam 1852), by an anonymous critic in *Vaderlandsche Letteroefeningen* 1852.1: 659-660; review of Jhr. H.J.L.T. Vajnes van Brakell, *Zestien zeereizen. Herinneringen uit een veertigjarige loopbaan bij de Nederlandsche Marine* (Amsterdam 1870), by C.A. Jeekel in *Vaderlandsche Letteroefeningen* 1871: 101-104.

is thought to mark the age of a new self-perception, the book is said to have changed the world from the sixteenth century on. According to the book historian Robert Darnton (2001: 177), the printed book "did not simply supply more information. It provided a mode of understanding, a basic metaphor of making sense of life". It might be an interesting perspective on the genre of autobiography to combine these two visions, and to raise questions about the conditions of production and reception that shaped autobiographical narratives and identities.

From a perspective on autobiography as a book that was read and reviewed, I have shown that Dutch literary critics in the second half of the nineteenth century had a conception of autobiography that differs greatly from our own. They did not conceive of autobiography as a genre of personal history or self-analysis. Only in the case of famous men such as writers and scientists did they expect the autobiography to be somewhat personal – but only in so far as this personal information had something to do with the more public life and fame of the autobiographer. However, these works by famous men were but a small part of the autobiographical corpus in the second half of the nineteenth century. Many autobiographies by more or less 'ordinary' people circulated on the book market.

Though these books are now forgotten, they were written, published and sold back then. In my view, it is too easy to dismiss these texts as uninteresting because they lack an explicit self-analysis or literary qualities, for they were read and reviewed, and must have formed in some way the horizon of autobiographical expectations in their time. In that respect, these books and their reviews can shed some light on the material and cultural context in which the genre of autobiography rose. Surprisingly, the reviews show that literary critics were interested in the historical value of autobiographies rather than any self-analysis or personal history. Therefore, an autobiographer had to be an eye-witness to some kind of historical event, a participant in some contemporary social network or movement, or an expert by experience in some current debate.

In my view, these findings on the reception of autobiographies by contemporaries call for a reconsideration of the status canonical autobiographers like Rousseau have been assigned in literary history. Furthermore, the border between memoirs and autobiography needs to be reconsidered. Until the end of the nineteenth century autobiography seems to have been seen much more as an historical genre than as a literary genre. And precisely this fact might explain the autobiographical impulse various scholars have identified among 'ordinary' people. When autobiography did not require literary skills, many people could enter the public space of the expanding book market – as long as they were able to present themselves as an eye-witness or an expert by experience. Only at the end of the nineteenth century does this situation seem to change. In the year 1896, I found the first review which raised some questions about the historical value of autobiographies. The critic suggests there is

always some fiction in one's own life story.²¹ At this point, autobiography begins to evolve into a less historical and more literary genre. Exactly this literary conception of autobiography might well have blocked the way into the genre for autobiographers who did not narrate an elaborate history of their personality: the so-called 'ordinary' autobiographical writers.

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²¹ Review of H.J. Schimmel, *Jan Willem's Levensboek* (Schiedam 1896), by an anonymous critic in *De Gids* 1896.2: 533-537.

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Ansgar Warner

"The Heroes of Toledo" – A Case Study in Fascist Radio Play and the Making of National Memory during the Spanish Civil War

The siege of the Alcázar, a fortress near the city of Toledo, is one of the central myths that helped to construct the official memory of the Spanish Civil War during the Franco regime. At the beginning of the war, the fortress, held by troops supporting Franco, was surrounded by Republican territory. Within a few weeks, the battle of the Alcázar became a transnational media event. Especially in Germany the weeklong struggle of the defenders inside the Alcázar against the Republican attackers received broad media coverage. The Spanish Fascists' struggle for power perfectly matched the ideological framework of the Nazis, since they shared as a central *raison d'être* the defence of western civilization against the threat of Eastern European bolshevism. With the help of Roland Strunk and some other journalists and writers, the Fascist version of the Alcázar story was added to the Nazis' arsenal for propaganda.

The manuscript of the radio play about the 'Heroes of Toledo' is one of the few fictional texts written by Strunk, as he mainly wrote for newspapers and magazines. Born in Austria in 1892, he served as an officer in the Austrian army during the First World War and then moved to Germany. In the 1920s Strunk travelled through Turkey, the Middle East and Asia and successfully published his travel reports, such as "Achtung! Asien marschier!" ("Beware! Asia is marching!") about the civil war in China. After the Nazis came to power in 1933, Strunk became a correspondent and war reporter for the *Völkischer Beobachter*, the central organ of the National Socialist party. His journalistic fame was especially fostered by his regular articles on Mussolini's African campaign in the mid-1930s, which made Ethiopia an Italian colony. Having made the acquaintance of the famous German journalist Gunter D'Alquen, who also worked for the *Völkischer Beobachter* and in 1936 founded the SS magazine *Das schwarze Korps*, Strunk began to write for this intellectual flagship of the SS and finally even entered the Nazis' elite order in the rank of an officer ('Hauptsturmführer').

As a war reporter, Roland Strunk was present in Spain at the outbreak of the armed conflict, and he produced both a journalistic version of the story of the Alcázar and, later, a radio play dedicated to this event. In the following, I will look at these two versions of the same story, since in this way it will be possible to show how the representation of factual experience as well as fictitious propaganda was transformed into a narrative structure that, transmitted via state-controlled mass media, took part in the construction of collective memory and national identity in Nazi Germany.

Ansgar Nünning / Marion Gymnich /
Roy Sommer (Eds.)

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