



The Written Portrait: Biographical and Autobiographical Publishing in the Nineteenth Century

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Abstract

The origins of modern autobiography are generally related to processes of introspection and individualization. Marijke Huisman argues there may also have been a connection between the rise of the genre and the commercialization of the book market. Assuming that their readers were interested in the lives of famous men and women, in the second half of the nineteenth century Dutch publishers presented an increasing amount of biographical and autobiographical narratives. However, few literary authors of standing published autobiographies. Those who did were either famous people in financial difficulty or marginal writers finding a way to capitalize on their name and fame in a commercial market.

Keywords

autobiography, authorship, celebrity, nineteenth century, Netherlands

On the thirty-first of January 2006, Alan Greenspan said goodbye to the Federal Reserve System; for eighteen years he had been president of the Central Bank of the United States. In this capacity he was one of the most powerful people in the world, and according to a newspaper report many people are interested in the tales men like him could tell. His lawyer accordingly consulted a number of publishers to estimate what Greenspan might get for writing his autobiography. In March, it was disclosed that the British-American publishing house of Penguin was prepared to pay more than 8.5 million dollars.¹

¹ '5 miljoen dollar voor memoires Greenspan', in: *de Volkskrant*, 15 February 2006; 'Uitgeverij Balans koopt rechten boek Alan Greenspan', press release publishing house Balans, 23 March 2006. Source: <http://balans.bookman.nl/nieuws.html> (29-05-2006); 'Miljoenenbod op memoires van Greenspan', in: *Dagblad van het Noorden*, 15 February 2006.

This is a relatively modest sum, considering that Bill Clinton received 12 million dollars for writing his autobiography. However, these amounts indicate that there is a lot of money to be earned from the lives of famous people, and the recent boom in autobiographies is often linked with the commercialization of the book business. Some critics argue that the financial stakes are today so high that publishers no longer select manuscripts for their contents but for the marketing value of the author: he or she must, preferably, be a well-known name before the book is published.²

Author marketing and commercialization of the book market are by no means new phenomena: publishers used writers' portraits as a marketing tool long before the invention of photography in the nineteenth century.³ Besides, a writer's portrait does not necessarily have to be visual: a biography can also be seen as a portrait of a writer, a written portrait. As early as the eighteenth century publishers included biographical sketches in complete works to make these more attractive to the reading public.⁴ Usually biographical portraits were written by others, but the publishers of Jean Jacques Rousseau and Johan Wolfgang von Goethe asked them to write a 'self-biography', that is: an autobiography.⁵

In the literature on the autobiographical genre, Rousseau and Goethe are regarded as two of the main founders of modern autobiography: the self-written life history of a unique personality.⁶ It is generally assumed that

² 'Wie bekend is schrijft een boek', in: *de Volkskrant*, 29 August 2003; Elsbeth Etry, 'Echt gebeurd als enig excuus', in: *NRC Handelsblad*, 29 December 2000.

³ Lisa Kuitert, 'The Writer's Portrait: Fame and Visibility at the End of the Nineteenth Century', in the present issue; Lisa Kuitert, 'De foto maakt de schrijver. Over schrijversportretten in de negentiende eeuw', in: *Boek & letter. Boekwetenschappelijke bijdragen ter gelegenheid van het afscheid van prof.dr. Frans A. Janssen als hoogleraar in de Boek- en bibliotheekgeschiedenis aan de Universiteit van Amsterdam*, ed. Jos Biemans, Lisa Kuitert & Piet Verkruijsse (Amsterdam 2004), pp. 495-513. For a general view of the Dutch book market in the nineteenth century: *Bibliopolis. Geschiedenis van het gedrukte boek in Nederland*, ed. Marieke van Delft & Clemens de Wolf (Den Haag/Zwolle 2003), chapter 4: 1830-1910. Groei van de binnenlandse markt.

⁴ Jan Fontijn, *De Nederlandse schrijversbiografie* (Utrecht 1992), p. 18. See also: Berry Dongelmans, 'The Prestige of Complete Works. Some Editions of Joost van den Vondel (1587-1679) discussed', in: *New Perspectives in Book History. Contributions from the Low Countries*, ed. Marieke van Delft, Frank de Glas & Jeroen Salman (Zutphen 2006), pp. 65-82, 80.

⁵ Karl Weintraub, *The Value of the Individual Self and Circumstance in Autobiography* (Chicago/London 1978), pp. 297, 340.

⁶ Roy Pascal, *Design and Truth in Autobiography* (New York/London 1985 [1st edn. 1960]); William C. Spengemann, *The Forms of Autobiography. Episodes in the History of a Literary Genre* (New Haven 1980); Bonnie J. Gunzenhauser, 'Autobiography: General Survey', in: *Encyclopaedia of Life Writing. Autobiographical and Biographical Forms*, ed. Margaret Jolly (Chicago 2002). See

modern autobiography originated around 1800 and matured in the nineteenth century. This development is often linked to processes of introspection and individualization, but there might be a connection between the autobiographical genre and the commercialization of the book market in the nineteenth century.⁷ In this article I argue that the blossoming of autobiography is partly due to a commercial publisher's policy that exploited the private life of public personae. To elaborate this proposition I shall concentrate on the Dutch situation. Because commercializing of the Dutch market occurred mainly after 1850, I shall focus on the second half of the nineteenth century.

The Written Portrait

In the nineteenth century the number of printed autobiographies rose sharply, as an inventory database of Dutch autobiographical documents, such as diaries, memoirs, autobiographies etc. shows.⁸ All sorts of people published their autobiographies, but only a small proportion of these books were written by

for a discussion of the literary debates on origins and history of the autobiographical genre: Sidonie Smith & Julia Watson, *Reading Autobiography. A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* (Minneapolis/London 2001). For a historical perspective on autobiographical writing: *Egodocuments and History. Autobiographical Writing in Its Social Context since the Middle Ages*, ed. Rudolf Dekker (Hilversum 2002).

7 See for the rise of autobiographical writing in the context of a developing book market: Michael Mascuch, *Origins of the Individualist Self: Autobiography and Self-Identity in England, 1591-1791* (Cambridge 1997); Arianne Baggerman, *Controlling Time and Shaping the Self: Education, Introspection and Practices of Writing in the Netherlands, 1750-1914* (Rotterdam 2001).

8 *Repertorium van egodocumenten van Noord-Nederlanders uit de negentiende eeuw*. This inventory database can be visited at the website of the Instituut voor Nederlandse Geschiedenis: <http://www.inghist.nl/Onderzoek/Projecten/Egodocumenten>. The database is part of the research project 'Controlling Time and Shaping the Self: Education, Introspection and Practices of Writing in the Netherlands, 1750-1914', led by Dr Arianne Baggerman of the Erasmus University, Rotterdam. Information: <http://www.fhk.eur.nl/onderzoek/egodocumenten/>. In this article, I use the term 'autobiography' in the broadest possible sense, including memoirs. I follow Philippe Lejeune, who regards a text as autobiographical if the reader is drawn into an 'autobiographical pact'. The essential criterion is that the proper name of the author is also the name of the narrator and the main character of the book. Employing this definition, without any criterion about the contents of a book, makes it possible to study what people in the nineteenth century read, wrote and published as autobiographies instead of finding in history what we think an autobiography is or should be. Philippe Lejeune, 'The Autobiographical Pact', in: id., *On Autobiography* (Minneapolis 1989), pp. 3-30. See also Paul John Eakin, *How Our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves* (Ithaca/London: Cornell UP 1999), pp. 43, 56, where he argues in favour of stretching the definition and history of autobiography by including memoirs.



Harriet Beecher Stowe

1. Harriet Beecher Stowe (1811-96). Source: Museum of History, Hall of Women, <http://images.virtualology.com/ac/5/i/encyo341.jpg>.

literary authors. My research into the Dutch reception of autobiographies shows, however, that there was great interest in autobiographical backgrounds of famous writers, e.g. Harriet Beecher Stowe (1811-96) (illus.1). According to a critic in 1854, fame aroused people's curiosity and he was accordingly very appreciative of a collection of essays by Stowe: 'When someone has achieved more than the average amount of fame, curiosity and interest, it leads to everyone being eager to know this person and to learn what he has said and done.'⁹

Though the critic thought the essays were not all equally interesting, the collection as a whole was 'well nigh indispensable' because the Dutch publisher, P.N. van Kampen, had included a biographical sketch of the authoress.

9 Review of Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Nieuwe schetsen en verhalen van Mrs. Harriët Beecher Stowe, voorafgegaan door een Levensbericht der beroemde Schrijfster* (Amsterdam 1854), in: *Vaderlandsche letteroefeningen* (1854:1), pp. 426-9.

In that same year 1854 publisher A.C. Kruseman sent a questionnaire to living Dutch poets, asking them to send in a visual portrait plus an autobiographical sketch:

1. Does a portrait of you exist, or more than one, and, if so, might we receive this from you to duplicate?
2. Please send us some information about your life history; statement of time and place of birth, education, social and literary relations and such details as might appear to be suitable to submit.¹⁰

Both portraits were to be used in an anthology of poetry and it seems plausible that this publisher thought that the visual as well as the written portrait would contribute to the commercial value of this anthology.

For the moment, this questionnaire is my only indication that Dutch publishers directly stimulated their authors to write autobiographically. But this does not mean that there is no more to be said about the relationship between autobiographical publishing and commercialization of the book market. When I worked my way through the archives of Dutch publishers, it struck me that after 1850 publishers increasingly offer complete works with the promise of a writer's portrait. And in most cases this was not a visual portrait, but a written one. As observed above, a biographical sketch was not unusual in complete works. In the nineteenth century, however, publishers considered a written portrait of the writer a guarantee of good sales. In 1868, for instance, one publisher thought that an outline of the life of the Dutch poet E.A. Borger (1784-1820) would lead to sales of ten thousand copies of his collected poems.¹¹

For publishers aiming at such large sales figures a photographic portrait was not feasible. The book, after all, had to be affordable for a large part of the reading population and reproducing photographs was expensive. So the written portrait might have been an alternative to the visual portrait. The written portrait was simple and cheap to realize and at the same time it would give the reader an insight into the life of a writer – even more, perhaps, than a photograph.¹²

¹⁰ Library of the Koninklijke Vereniging van het Boekenvak (KVB), collection Personalia en Prospectussen (PPA): 531-6: circular on *De dichters van Nederland*, January 1854.

¹¹ KVB, PPA 517-4: flyer on *Gedichten van E.A. Borger*, 6 October 1868.

¹² Kevin J. Hayes, 'Poe, the Daguerreotype, and the Autobiographical Act', in: *Biography*, 25:3 (2002), pp. 477-92.

Human Interest

The idea that a biographical or autobiographical sketch of its writer will make a book more interesting and thus lead to larger sales comes from the supposition that among the public there is a demand for human interest. Indeed this seems to have been the case in the second half of the nineteenth century, for people were fascinated by photographic portraits of famous contemporaries.¹³ Their fame, however, was not a result of photography, but of the printed media. For instance Harriet Beecher Stowe owed her fame to the novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), which was read worldwide. The contents of the book and the name and features of the writer were also circulated through countless magazines and papers – forms of printed matter which were cheaper than novels and as such accessible to more people. According to historians it was, in fact, these media which gave a new meaning to the notion of fame, for through the mass media public persons became visible to large groups of people to such a degree that they grew into true celebrities.¹⁴

One such celebrity was Giuseppe Garibaldi (1807-82), and in 1860 the Dutch publisher H. Nijgh counted on great public interest in a translation of the *Mémoires de Garibaldi*, written by Alexandre Dumas (illus. 2 & 3). The name Garibaldi, after all, was known by 'everyone' – as he stated in a flyer: 'The life history of this remarkable man and his efforts to liberate the Italian people will arouse general interest. [...] Throughout Europe, yes even beyond, his name is mentioned by everyone.'¹⁵

In this case, 'everyone' should be understood as the readers of newspapers and magazines who kept up with the reports on the Italian war of independence. In 1860 this was, admittedly, a large part of the Dutch reading public, but by no means 'everyone'. It was only from 1870 that newspapers in the Netherlands became real mass media.¹⁶ From that time on, the general public was informed about current affairs and the people who figured in these events.

¹³ Kuitert, 'De foto maakt de schrijver', art. cit. (n. 3).

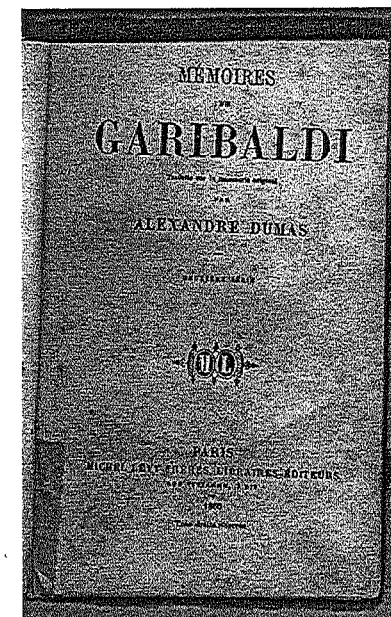
¹⁴ Charles L. Ponce de Leon, *Self-Exposure. Human-Interest Journalism and the Emergence of Celebrity in America, 1890-1940* (Chapel Hill/Londen 2002); Leo Braudy, *The Frenzy of Renown: Fame and its History* (New York 1986); Vanessa R. Schwartz, *Spectacular Realities. Early Mass Culture in Fin-de-siècle Paris* (Berkeley/Los Angeles/Londen 1998).

¹⁵ KVB, PPA 506-2: circular on *De onafhankelijkheids-oorlog in Zuid-Italië* and *De Gedenkschriften van Garibaldi*, 1860.

¹⁶ Maarten Schneider with Joan Hemels, *De Nederlandse krant 1618-1978. Van 'nieuwstydninghe' tot dagblad* (Baarn 1979); Huub Wijffjes, *Journalistiek in Nederland 1850-2000. Beroep, cultuur en organisatie* (Amsterdam 2004).



2. Giuseppe Garibaldi (1807-82). Source: Ferragus, *Nos Contemporains: Garibaldi* (Paris 1870).



3. Title page of *Mémoires de Garibaldi* (Paris 1860), translated from the Italian original by Alexandre Dumas. Source: The Anthony P. Campanella Collection of Giuseppe Garibaldi, www.sc.edu/library/spcoll/hist/garib/garib.html.

These were not only political and military leaders, because newspapers paid more and more attention to cultural subjects, such as literature and theatre. Moreover, illustrated magazines showed photos of celebrities, photos that also could be bought loose in bookshops.

The result of the reading public becoming acquainted, in word and image, with public persons, was, according to the publishers Nijgh & Van Ditmar, an enormous 'inquisitiveness' of readers about personal information about public figures such as royalty, politicians, actors, scientists, writers and musicians.¹⁷ During the nineteenth century publishers also presented increasing numbers of biographies of public persons. In 1870 publisher Kruseman even started the biographical series *Mannen van beteekenis in onze dagen* [Men of Consequence

¹⁷ KVB, PPA 507-6: flyer on *De Staats-hoofden der wereld*, 1902.

in Our Days]. The series was a big success: evidently many readers agreed with the publisher's opinion that it was essential to be acquainted with the life history of 'men... whose names are on everybody's lips'.¹⁸

However, one critic felt that the readers' demand for human interest was not first and foremost satisfied by biographies. According to him, memoirs and letters ranked among the best-read books of his time.¹⁹ At the same time, other critics complained that in the Netherlands the autobiographical genre was less well represented than abroad.²⁰ The Dutch, supposedly, had a close-mouthed nature and accordingly would not be inclined to write memoirs. According to one critic, the lack of memoirs from writers was a particular shame, because they could give the 'general reader' an insight into the life and character of the writers, the circumstances during which their work was created, and hence the history of literature.²¹

The Commercial Use of Posthumous Papers

In order to gain insight in the lives and characters of writers, one was not solely dependent on memoirs or autobiographies. Letters and other posthumous papers could serve as well, and in the course of the nineteenth century there appeared many compilations of letters and other autobiographical documents by well-known writers. Some critics even felt that letters were more important than memoirs, because in work which was written for the purpose of being published, one never showed one's real feelings and thoughts.²² To get to know someone really well it was important to enter into the private sphere. That is why one critic was very enthusiastic about letters written by Charles Dickens (1812-70), which were published in 1880 by his sister-in-law and daughter:

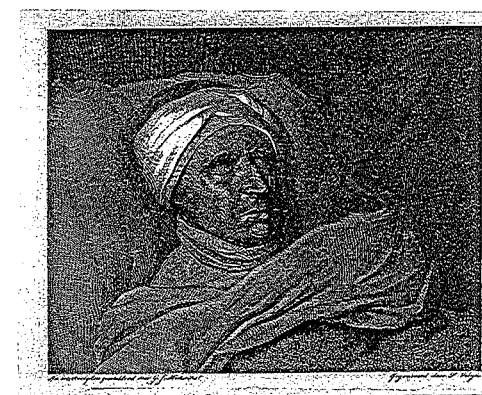
¹⁸ KVB, PPA 531-2: circular on *Mannen van beteekenis in onze dagen*, October 1871.

¹⁹ A.W. Bronsveld, 'Onbevredigend', in: *Stemmen voor waarheid en vrede* (1891), pp. 276-88. See also A.W. Bronsveld, 'Mr. Is. da Costa en Mr. Groen van Prinsterer', in: *Stemmen voor waarheid en vrede* (1872), pp. 128-51.

²⁰ See for example the review of *Vijftig jaren in de beide halfronden. Herinneringen uit her leven van een voormaligen koopman* (Middelburg 1855), in: *Vaderlandsche letteroefeningen* (1856:1), pp. 479-83; W.J. Knoop, 'De Huzaren van Boreel', in: *De Gids* (1869:2), pp. 1-26.

²¹ Review of S.A. Naber, *Vier tijdgenooten. Indrukken en beschouwingen* (Haarlem 1894), in: *De Gids* (1894:2), pp. 330-40.

²² See for example T.C. van der Kulk, 'Cd. Busken Huert en zijn brieven', in: *De Tijdspiegel* (1891-3), pp. 73-100. Review of *Brieven van Cd. Busken Huert, uitgegeven door zijne vrouw en zijn zoon* (Haarlem 1890).



4. Willem Bilderdijk (1757-1831) on his deathbed. Drawing by Ph. Velijn after a painting by G.J. Michaelis. Source: R.A. Kollewijn, *Bilderdijk: zijn leven en zijn werken* (Amsterdam 1891).

Letters, letters, more letters all the time! It is the wish of everyone searching for reality in literature and history. Artificial though they might be, they nevertheless remain a mirror of the writer, or they finally become such. [...] To get to know this man intimately, in his private letters, by the outpourings of his mind: not for a long time has a literary meal been dished up which made our mouths water so much.²³

This critic was obviously enthusiastic about letters, but most Dutch critics were ambivalent about the publication of letters and other private papers. On the one hand they considered it indelicate to read documents not meant to be published. Concerning the correspondence between the well-known Dutch poet Willem Bilderdijk (1756-1831) and Professor Tydeman, a reviewer wrote in 1867: 'One does not appear in public in dressing gown or house coat, though one may be seen in one and may receive one's friends wearing one'. On the other hand, this same critic felt that the public had a right to receive personal information concerning these well-known contemporaries, because:

²³ Allard Pierson, 'Korte mededeelingen uit het gebied der nieuwere letterkunde', in: *De Tijdspiegel* (1880-1), pp. 495-502. Review of *The Letters of Charles Dickens, Edited by His Sister in Law and His Eldest Daughter*, 3 vols. (London 1880).

'Bilderdijk and Tydeman must be counted among those people who belong first and foremost to themselves, but also to the public'²⁴ (illus. 4).

The fact that these people belonged to the public cannot be detached from the expanding printing culture. Writers and other public persons achieved their fame by means of the media and obviously this involved an urge for public disclosures. But as long as writers themselves continued not to write autobiographies, the curiosity had to be satisfied by the publication of their letters. Thus, in 1872 a critic stated that there existed a sort of 'inquisitiveness verging on indiscretion on the part of our generation, which would like to open all cases as well as archives and to buy a portfolio with letters of famous persons, even at the cost of delicacy and piety.'²⁵

In this remark I consider the word 'buy' to be interesting. Might this critic have meant that publishers were willing to pay for the private documents of public persons? That would mean that managing the legacy of writers could become a lucrative business. And that might, possibly, explain why in the nineteenth century surviving relatives were prepared to publish a writer's personal papers after his death.

Autobiography as Counterattack

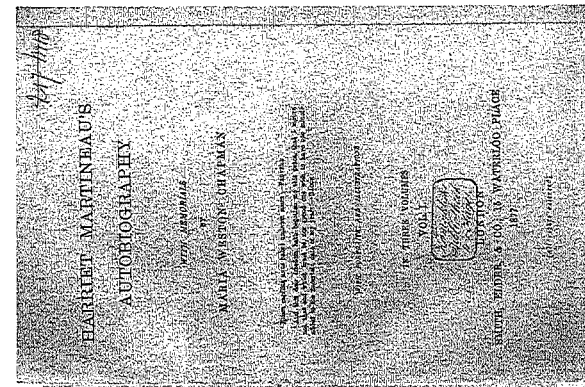
The public demand for biographical and autobiographical writings by famous writers and other persons may have resulted in a new, autobiographical consciousness among authors. At least the very famous Dutch authoress A.L.G. Bosboom-Toussaint (1812-86) was certain that after her death there would be a demand for a biographical sketch. She thus stipulated in her will that her letters could be used for the writing of her biography.²⁶ The English journalist and writer Harriet Martineau (1802-76), on the other hand, stipulated that under no circumstances might her letters be published (illus. 5).²⁷ To fill the need for

24 Ch., 'Grooten in huisgewaad', in: *De Tijdspiegel* (1867-1), pp. 444-7. Review of *Briefwisseling van Mr. W. Bilderdijk met de Hoogleeraaren en Mrs. M. en H.W. Tydeman, gedurende de jaren 1807 tot 1831* (Sneek 1866).

25 A.W. Bronsveld, 'Mr. Is. da Costa en Mr. Groen van Prinsterer', in: *Stemmen voor waarheid en vrede* (1872), pp. 128-51. Review of *Brieven van Mr. Isaac da Costa, medegedeeld door Mr. Groen van Prinsterer. Twee afleveringen (1830-1849), uitgegeven door de Vereeniging ter bevordering van christelijke lectuur* (Amsterdam 1872).

26 KVB, PPA 562-16: flyer on *Anna Louisa Geertruida Bosboom-Toussaint. Levens- en karakterschets door Dr. Johs. Dyserinck*, 1911. See also: Johs. Dyserinck, *Anna-Louisa-Geertruida Bosboom-Toussaint. Levens en karakterschets* (Den Haag 1911), p. xii.

27 *Harriet Martineau's Autobiography* (London 1877), pp. 3-7. See also: A. Pierson, 'Harriet Martineau', in: *De Gids* (1878: 3), pp. 1-38.



5. Title page of the English edition of *Harriet Martineau's Autobiography* (London 1877). The mottos are: 'Etiam capillus unus habet umbram suam', a proverb attributed to the former slave Publius Syrus who lived in the first century BC. Translation: 'Even a hair has a shadow'; 'And this dear freedom hath begotten me this peace, that I mourn not that end which must be, nor spend one wish to have one minute added to the uncertain date of my years' – Bacon.

information on her person she wrote an autobiography to be published after her death. You might say that the situation on the book market induced Harriet Martineau to write an autobiography. She had not been directly invited to do so by a publisher, but, expecting publishers to be prepared to publish her personal papers, she preferred to take control over her own life story.



6. Title page of *Mijn leven* [My Life] (1877) by Mina Kruseman. The motto is part of a letter on women's rights which she published in 1872 in protest against Alexandre Dumas' *L'Homme-Femme* (1872).

Martineau's autobiography was published only after her death, as was customary in the nineteenth century.²⁸ People publishing their autobiography during their lives ran the risk of being called conceited. To prevent this by all means, critics advised autobiographers to avoid writing about themselves and to concentrate instead on describing the times in which they had lived.²⁹ However, given the situation of readers being curious about the private



7. Portrait of Mina Kruseman (1839-1922), published in her autobiography.

²⁸ Rudolf Dekker, 'Dat mijn lieven kinderen weten zouden...' Egodocumenten in Nederland van de zestiende tot de negentiende eeuw', in: *Opossum. Tijdschrift voor historische en kunstwetenschappen*, 3 (1993), pp. 5-22; Arianne Baggerman, 'Het einde van de autobiografie', in: *Het leven van een doodsbericht. Necrologie & biografie*, ed. Hans Renders (Amsterdam 2005), pp. 89-102.

²⁹ Marijke Huisman, 'Beter dan Thucydides en Wagenaar... Autobiografieën en de geschiedenis van de eigen tijd, 1850-1918', in: *Tijdschrift voor geschiedenis*, 118:4 (2005), pp. 513-32. An English translation will be published in: *Proceedings of the conference 'Controlling Time and Shaping the Self. The Rise of Autobiographical Writing since 1750', held in Rotterdam, 15-17 June 2006*, ed. Rudolf Dekker & Arianne Baggerman (Leiden: Brill forthcoming).

circumstances of public personalities, writing and publishing autobiographically could also be a way to earn money during one's life. Public persons in financial trouble appear to have been particularly aware of this.

One example is the German entrepreneur Henry Strousberg (1823-84), who published his autobiography in 1876. A sensation in his own time, Strousberg achieved international fame as a railway builder, coming to be known 'the Eisenbahn-König or Railway King'.³⁰ In 1875 he was declared bankrupt, and according to the Dutch publisher Sijthoff, Strousberg's autobiography was the result of his 'involuntary idle hours'.³¹ The bankruptcy meant, of course, that Strousberg had no money; the only thing left to him was his name, and I believe he tried to exploit this name on the new market for the autobiographies of those in the public eye. That there was indeed money to be earned from autobiographies was proved by the self-supporting Dutch actress, writer and feminist Mina Kruseman (1839-1922) (illus. 6 & 7). In 1877 she received a thousand guilders from her publisher for her autobiography in letters: quite a sum in those days.³² The publisher, J.P. Revers, expected the book to sell well: Mina Kruseman would be one of the most-discussed women in the Netherlands, about whom much was written in newspapers and magazines, and it was the publisher's expectation that this autobiography would appeal to the public.³³

What is remarkable about these two examples is that the publishers recommend both books with the promise that in their autobiographies Strousberg and Kruseman would reveal their 'selves'. By doing so, they could not expect to stand a good chance with the critics, for critics as a group expected autobiographies to be historical, not personal documents. However, there was not a lot to be earned from critics. In order to reach the masses it was necessary to present personal details. And public figures in financial troubles, such as Strousberg and Kruseman, appear to have taken advantage of a new readers' demand for human interest and sensational private information.

30 Ralf Roth, 'The Rise and Fall of the Railway King Henry Bethel Strousberg: Difficulties of International Railway Investments in Germany in the 1860s'. Paper presented at the first congress of the International Association for Railway History, 17-19 September 2004 in Vienna, <http://www.ffe.es/ai/pdf/05.pdf>, 8 June 2005.

31 KVB, PPA 523-5: circular on *Het leven van Bethel Henry Strousberg*, 1876.

32 City Archive Dordrecht, Archive of Publisher J.P. Revers (258), 2.

33 KVB, PPA 508-6: circular on *Mijn leven* by Mina Kruseman, 1877. Fia Dieteren, 'Wilhelmina Jacoba Pauline Rudolphine Kruseman', in: *Biografisch woordenboek van Nederland*, vol. 3 (Den Haag 1989).

Authorship

Though critics had long thought of autobiography as a historical genre, in the eighteen-eighties this changed. More and more critics came to realise that the relation between sensory perceptions and knowledge of reality was problematic. During the nineties, then, many critics came to the view that an autobiography should be regarded not as a historical document, but as a subjective testimony mainly serving as an 'entry to the person of the writer'.³⁴ Reading such a testimony was particularly interesting when written by someone who was well-known before the publication of their life story. Consequently, most critics confined themselves to reviewing autobiographies of famous people like politicians, scientists and writers.

The new critical attitude towards autobiography marks a blurring of the boundaries between fact and fiction, between autobiography as history and as literature. This coincides with a psychologising of literature and the rise of semi-autobiographical prose, both of which were propagated by a literary avant garde known in the Low Countries as the *Tachtigers*.³⁵ From the middle of the eighteen-eighties, some influential Dutch writers and critics took the view that literature should not be idealistic or moralistic, but 'psychological'. This meant, among other things, that authors had to be in contact with their 'inner selves' if they were to produce original and authentic literature. From this stance, a new generation of writers produced an increasing amount of autobiographical fiction.

The Flemish literary critic Marysa Demoor has argued that the fading boundaries between autobiography and novel should be seen in the light of the book market. According to her, modern writers such as Oscar Wilde and, later, Virginia Woolf, searched for ways to compete with popular autobiographies of public personalities. In order to gain the favour of the public, they created a public persona which they tried to exploit both inside and outside their prose.³⁶ If this is true, then you might say that literary writers were pretty late in discovering that it was worth the trouble to take advantage of their

34 Huisman, 'Beter dan Thucydides en Wagenaar...', art. cit. (n. 29).

35 M.G. Kemperink & W. Schönau, 'De Nederlandse literatuur en de psychologie. Een terreinverkenning', in: *Psychologie en maatschappij*, 16:3 (1992), pp. 294-309; Garrit Stuijveling, *De Nieuwe Gids als geestelijk brandpunt* (Amsterdam 1981 [1st edn. 1935]); Peter J.A. Winkels et al. *Ten tijde van de Tachtigers. Rondom de Nieuwe Gids 1880-1895* (Den Haag 1985); Frans Ruiter & Wilbert Smulders, *Literatuur en moderniteit in Nederland 1840-1990* (Amsterdam 1996).

36 Marysa Demoor, 'Introduction', in: *Marketing the Authorial Personae. Narrative Selves and Self-Fashioning, 1880-1930*, ed. Marysa Demoor (New York 2004), pp. 1-18.

personality. Publishers and surviving relatives had realised much sooner that the name and fame of well-known authors could be profitable in the form of written portraits: biographies and compilations of autobiographical documents such as letters.

This brings me to the question of what prevented literary writers from producing autobiographies. In the first place, this may have to do with the status of authorship. After the introduction of copyright in 1817 writing had become a profession in the Netherlands, but literary writers distanced themselves from hacks.³⁷ Popular though autobiographies may have been, literary writers possibly did not want to yield to any pressure from public and publishers to reveal themselves in written portraits. The reluctance to publish autobiographies may also have to do with the fact that autobiography was not recognized as a literary genre. Until the eighteen-eighties novelists were expected to describe reality in an authentic and sincere way, but writers were supposed to be more than autobiographers. According to a critic in 1858, for example, an autobiographer was unable to step outside himself. Consequently, he would paint a one-sided picture that would detract from the universal truth expected from novels.³⁸ In 1860, this was exactly the problem with Multatuli's *Max Havelaar*. Nowadays this book is recognized as a landmark in Dutch literature; contemporary critics, however, had serious problems with Multatuli's mixing of his autobiography into a novel and a political pamphlet.³⁹ Some critics recognized the literary quality of the book: as Rousseau had done with *Les Confessions*, Multatuli had written 'a human being instead of a book'. At the same time, contemporary critics argued that these works of self-obsessed men had nothing to do with some universal truth that was to be expected from literature.

37 Lisa Kuitert, 'The professional author in the Netherlands in book historical research. A case study', in: *Quaerendo*, 33: 3/4 (2003), pp. 317-35. On the history of copyright in the Netherlands: C.F.J. Schriks, *Het kopijrecht, 16de tot 19e eeuw* (Zutphen 2004), and especially in the nineteenth century: C.F.J. Schriks, 'Nadruk, geoorloofd of diefstal? Frederik Muller en het letterkundig eigendomsrecht', in: *Frederik Muller (1817-1881). Leven en werken*, ed. Marja Keyser, J.F. Heijbroek & Ingeborg Verheul (Zutphen 1996), pp. 127-43.

38 Cited by Toos Streng, *'Realisme' in de kunst- en literatuurbeschouwing in Nederland tot 1875* (Amsterdam 1995), p. 107. See also: Toos Streng, "'Waar waarachtige poëzij mij aangrijpt'". "Oprecht-heid" in de Nederlandse kunst- en literatuurbeschouwing rond het midden van de negentiende eeuw', in: *Tijdschrift voor Nederlandsche taal- en letterkunde*, III (1995), pp. 230-40.

39 P.J. Veth, 'Multatuli versus Droogstoppel, Slijmering & Co', in: *De Gids* (1860:2), pp. 58-82, 233-69; H. des Amorie van der Hoeven, 'Multatuli's grieven', in: *Bataviaasch Handelsblad*, 24, 27 and 31 October 1860. On the reception of *Max Havelaar*, see Nop Maas, "'Dat boek is meer dan een boek – het is een mensch'". Reacties op *Max Havelaar* in 1860', in: *Over Multatuli*, 29 (1992), pp. 13-60.

It may have been easier for public figures beyond, or at the margins of, the literary domain to exploit their own histories. Unlike highbrow literary writers they did not have to observe literary codes, and could therefore take the best possible advantage of the readers' and publishers' demand for human interest. To my mind, it might even be conceivable that hack writers and public figures, especially those in financial difficulty, tended to give to the autobiographical genre a more than usually personal interpretation. By doing so, they created an autobiographical practice which literary writers at the end of the nineteenth century could use to their own profit by creating literary self-portraits.

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