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Selling the Self: Publishing and Marketing Autobiographies in the Nineteenth Century

Since 1986, the American talk show host Oprah Winfrey has given thousands of people the opportunity to step into the limelight via the medium of television; that is to say, those people willing to tell their often dramatic life stories. In the Netherlands, Oprah's show is being broadcast by one of the commercial television channels. They made their entry into the Dutch broadcasting system in the late 1980s (Beunders 12); ever since, these channels have been developing more and more formats to exploit life stories: from talk shows to reality programs like *Big Brother*. These programs have major auto/biographical elements, and it strikes me that media commercialization appears to run parallel with a rise in autobiographical performances.

This may not be a new phenomenon, for the nineteenth century experiences a rise of autobiography as well as a commercialization of the book industry in the Netherlands. Due to social and technical factors—such as better education and the introduction of the steam press—the book changed from being an elite product into a mass product (see Delft and Wolf 155–58). Moreover, as Hans de Valk and Gerard Schulte Nordholt have demonstrated, the inventory of printed Dutch ego documents—a term to describe various sorts of autobiographical texts (see Dekker)—reveals an enormous increase in the number of autobiographies and memoirs that were published.¹

Within autobiographical studies, it is generally taken for granted that most autobiographies appear in the shape of a book. However, American historian Michael Mascuch provides another view. In *Origins of the Individualist Self* (1997), he suggests a relation between the history of the book and the autobiographical genre. He argues that the idea of the “author” as a model of individual identity is related to the physical book, which became accessible to more people from the end of the eighteenth

¹ One aim of the Dutch research project *Controlling Time and Shaping the Self* was to research the rise of autobiography in the context of the commercialization of the Dutch book market in the nineteenth century (see Baggerman).

century onwards—to readers as well as to writers and publishers. Due to innovations like the Copyright Act, Mascuch contends, to be an author became something potentially valuable, both symbolically as well as commercially. As an author, one could master one's own life narrative in the public eye of readers. In addition, being the author of a published book could lead to public rewards such as recognition and money. According to Mascuch, this explains why so many "marginal" persons—like criminals, courtesan women, religious dissenters—found their way into the autobiographical genre from the end of the eighteenth century on.

Financial and symbolic appeal may explain why people wrote and published their autobiographies, but it does not explain why publishers were inclined to pay for these manuscripts and why readers wanted to buy the books. Therefore, it might be worthwhile to take a closer look at the material conditions in which autobiographical narratives took shape in the nineteenth century. I will do so by treating autobiography first and foremost as a book: a product that had to be sold on a market, in this case, the Dutch market. Since the Dutch book market started to commercialize largely from 1850, I will confine myself to the second half of the so-called long nineteenth century that ends with the First World War. I will examine what arguments seventy Dutch publishers used to sell autobiographical books in advertising materials that are stored in the archives of the Royal Association of the Book Trade in Amsterdam. As well, I will examine to what extent these marketing arguments struck a chord in the reception of autobiographies in six Dutch general culture magazines.² On the basis of this information on marketing and reception, I hope to provide an answer to questions concerning the commercial worth of autobiographies and what kinds of selves autobiographers were expected to present in order to sell their lives on the Dutch book market between 1850 and 1918.

"Looking for a novel? Then ask history"

In the recent past, many scholars have pursued the question of what, exactly, comprises an autobiography. This appeared to be a mission impossible. Bonnie J. Gunzenhauser states in the *Encyclopedia of Life Writing* that it is very difficult to delimit autobiography, since it is a "democratic"

² These journals are: the Protestant liberal magazines *Vaderlandsche Letteroefeningen*, *De Gids*, and *De Tijdspiegel*; the orthodox Protestant magazine *Stemmen voor Waarheid en Vrede*; the proto-feminist magazine *De Huisvrouw*; and *De Nieuwe Gids*, the vehicle of a literary and political avant-garde known as the Tachtigers (the Eighties Movement).

(77) genre which has shown itself capable of integrating many notions of the "self." Subsequently, research interests have shifted to investigating how people can communicate the "self" in specific times and places. Yet the field of auto/biography studies remains dominated by literary scholars and literary approaches to these texts. Nevertheless, when I was working my way through the marketing archives of Dutch publishers, I found that autobiographies were promoted as something essentially different from fictional literature or novels. Publishers stressed again and again that an autobiographer did not draw on imagination, but on reality.

So in 1863, when the publisher B.L. van Dam advertised the translated memoirs of the Polish nobleman Rufin Pitrowski (who escaped from imprisonment in Siberia), van Dam emphasized that this was a true story, in which "nothing is exaggerated, nothing invented." It was especially not a "work of imagination," consisting of "uncorrelated events, lumped together by some fashionable writer, mixed with all kinds of impossible adventures, and linked by one or more persons of the most hideous, or at least chimerical, character" (van Dam, prospectus). Though "reality often exceeded the wildest fantasies," and the reader might feel as if he were reading a novel, to van Dam these memoirs were history and, consequently, instructive. In 1877, another publishing house, the Kraay Brothers, used the slogan "Looking for a novel? Then ask history" to sell *Zes jaren te Tripoli in Barbarij: uit de gedenkschriften eener Nederlandsche vrouw* ("Six Years in Tripoli in Barbary: From the Memoirs of a Dutch Woman").

With this argumentation, publishers joined the general discourse on novels in the Netherlands. Up to the end of the nineteenth century, the prevailing view was that novels were immoral and addictive, leading to romantic expectations of life and subsequently to dissatisfaction, laziness, and depression (see Mathijssen). Among new groups of readers, however, historical and picaresque novels or adventure stories were very popular. This is apparent, as Willem van den Berg has shown, from the conduct of readers who obtained books via public libraries, which were founded since 1794 by the Maatschappij tot Nut van 't Algemeen, the Dutch Society for Public Welfare. Since these libraries were established for the edification of the people, the books on offer were morally and educationally well considered. In this respect, the management of the Utrecht library had in mind religious books, books on education, social problems, national economy, history, and biographies. The readers, however, according to a study by Ad van der Neut, were mainly interested in novels, and as early as 1847 almost half of all the books at the Utrecht public library were novels.

According to Dutch publishers, the one motivation need not, necessarily, exclude the other. Exciting adventures could also be found in autobiographies, which, at the same time, could pass for history. For instance, in 1856 the publisher of a cheap translation of Cellini's autobiography stated that the book would inform readers about "the mental and moral culture" of Italy in the sixteenth century. The account was hardly boring, because Cellini's story was peppered with "curious adventures, great dangers, terrible murders, dreadful prisons, apparitions, witchcraft, exorcism, and all other things which embellish the currently most-read novels" (Post, "Aanbieding"). In this way, autobiographies of contemporaries were recommended to the reading audience. In their marketing, nineteenth-century publishers always claimed that autobiographies combined the entertaining aspects of novels with the instructive side of history and were, therefore, interesting for both individuals and libraries. However, when publishers talked about history, in most cases this did not concern past eras like Cellini's sixteenth century, but contemporary history: the history which people experienced personally.

Journalism and Contemporary History

Several historians have pointed out that contemporary history in the nineteenth century was experienced as confusing. Peter Gay, for one, has stated that the European bourgeoisie was obsessed by the self, as the individual person was the only anchorage in a rapidly changing world (see Gay 3, 346). One of his arguments in favor of this proposition is the rise of autobiography in the nineteenth century. Other scholars, such as Arianne Baggerman and Peter Fritzsche, have related the increase of autobiographical texts to a change in historical consciousness. Following the German historian Reinhardt Koselleck, they argue that the French Revolution generated a new historical awareness: People felt they were landed in a "new time," a time in which historical examples were no longer valid. Autobiographical writing may have served to get a hold on the changing times (see Baggerman). According to Fritzsche, the feeling of a break between the past and the present resulted in a common historical field, in which people recognized themselves and each other as part of a specific generation of contemporaries. The shared sense of being part of a new historical era explains, to his mind, the major concern with contemporary history and autobiography in the nineteenth century.

If people could recognize themselves as participants in a new historical process, this cannot be detached from the expanding print culture. People,

after all, did more than experience history personally. They also read about it, for there was a strong increase in the circulation of newspapers and magazines during the nineteenth century. The American historian Vanessa R. Schwartz has argued that in the case of France, in particular, newspapers constituted an imagined community of observers of contemporary reality. This was even more the case when commercial publishers started a yellow press in which the topical news was personalized in new journalistic genres such as human interest stories, social reports, and interviews (see Schwartz 26, 39–40). In the Netherlands there was no yellow press to be found until the close of the nineteenth century. Only after 1870 did experiments with the content and style of reports begin, for until that time publishers were constrained by a heavy tax indexed to the format and size of newspapers (see Wijffes 18). Consequently, the news coverage was restricted to a minimum: There was, literally, no space for background information on the topical news, let alone for human interest stories. In spite of the constraints on Dutch journalism, there was an increase in supply and demand concerning news media in the second half of the nineteenth century (see Schneider and Hemels 181, 190).

Publishers also felt that the Dutch newspaper readers would be interested in getting personal background to current news stories. For instance in 1860, Henricus Nijgh, publisher of the newspaper *Nieuwe Rotterdamse Courant*, anticipated a great public for a translation of Giuseppe Garibaldi's memoirs because "his name is on everybody's lips" (Nijgh, circular). As the sale of newspapers rose steadily from 1870 onwards, ever more autobiographical books were published on topical news. By 1871, publisher J.P. Revers expected to find "thousands of eager readers" for a Dutch translation of the book *Le siège de Paris: impressions et souvenirs* by Francisque Sarcey. According to Revers, the French journalist had been an "eyewitness" of this "eternally memorable event," which made it possible for readers to "live through" the Franco-German War (Revers, flyer). Around the turn of the century another major event, the Boer War (1899–1902), generated a stream of autobiographical publications by both famous Boer leaders like Ben Viljoen, Paul Kruger or Christiaan de Wet and "common people" such as the Dutch jurist Hendrik Verloren van Themaat who traveled to South Africa in order to fight the Boers.

The key marketing point was that all these books made readers feel as if they themselves "experienced" history. I would, therefore, contend that Dutch publishers saw a market gap between the novel and historiography regarding stories of contemporary history. The sale of newspapers showed them that readers were interested in topical historical processes, but apart from the newspaper, this field was not as yet covered. It was only during

the First World War that professional Dutch historians took notice of the recent past (see Luykx 9–64). Accordingly, publishers appear to have created a supply of autobiographical books that matched the public interest in topical news. In their attempts to sell these books, publishers stressed that these narratives were written by eyewitnesses. It was, in fact, the personal involvement of these eyewitnesses which made autobiographies just as captivating as novels, although the former were not fiction but (contemporary) history.

“Building Materials” for a New Historiography

Dutch critics were very appreciative of the stream of autobiographies that were published. In celebrating these books, they also criticized academic historians for their conception of history. At least half a century before contemporary history came into existence as a Dutch discipline, magazine critics had argued for the necessity of studying the present. At the same time, they had carded academic historians for their singular occupation with political and military themes. Critics wished instead for a contemporary and broadly oriented historiography focusing on themes from daily life—such as culture, religion, and economics.³

Interestingly, magazine critics thought autobiographies could serve as “building materials” for such a broadly oriented history of the recent past. Therefore, they applauded all kinds of autobiographies—whether related to international political conflicts or to the national development of religious life, colonial government, the history of trade and industry, or developments in the fields of theater, science, and literature. Some critics explicitly wished for the publication of more Dutch memoirs, as did a reviewer of the above-mentioned *Zes jaren te Tripoli in Barbarije*:

We [...] hope that the example [...] may stimulate many Dutch people, who have experienced or seen something remarkable and who have the gift of imparting their memories to the public in an entertaining way, to overcome their reticence or fear of publicity. It is a longstanding observation that our literature is short of memoirs and we hold the view that it is self-evident that a rich memoirs history is a very appropriate means to enliven the mutual influence between literature and public; to give literary life a new impulse; to enrich our historical knowledge; and, last but not least, to sharpen our critical sense. (Anonymous)

Other critics agreed that memoirs contributed to history as well as to literature. Moreover, critics felt autobiographies fitted in with the “spirit of the age.” After the 1848 revolutions, one felt as if one was living in a tran-

³ For elaboration of this, see Huisman, “Autobiography and Contemporary History.”

sitional period, in which there was need for realistic stories that could offer guidance (see Streng 215–16). But until the 1880s, Dutch critics rejected the concept of literary realism. Even a leading Dutch critic such as Conrad Busken Huet thought that a novel should be more than a photograph of reality (see Praamstra 198–99). Autobiography, however, was seen as the genre for documenting contemporary historical reality.

The historical conception of autobiography meant that autobiographers were advised to confine themselves to historical reality and to present themselves as eyewitnesses of history. A sketch of one’s own personality was not appreciated. Consequently, in 1853 a comparison of the autobiography of Rousseau and that of the German theologist Claus Harms turned out in Harms’s favour. Whereas Harms had confined himself to a sketch of his “external life” and developments in his work as a vicar, Rousseau got stuck in the “unnecessary disclosure of ‘mysteries’” (J.H.S. 539). In 1888, a critic even went so far as to state that the best autobiographies were written by people who had “forgotten” themselves. Furthermore, it was a matter of indifference to him whether an autobiography was written by a well-known or unknown person:

Irrespective whether the writer is a man whose name fills people all over the world with awe, or an honest citizen who only attracts some publicity by recording his perhaps rather uneventful life, his story will arouse the interest of the readers, if only the writer takes care to accurately describe the time in which he lived. (Muller, “C.T. Stork”)

This pronouncement is not unique. Until the end of the century, critics were interested in all kinds of autobiographies as long as the autobiographer wrote as an eyewitness to history. It was not important whether the autobiographer was a celebrated personality, nor was literary talent required. A simple and unaffected style might even underline the historical truth of a life story.

Up to the 1890s, critics take the view that autobiographies stem directly from life, are by definition true, and therefore have a greater power of expression than novels and abstract dissertations or sermons. The crucial difference was that autobiographers did not draw from fantasy or theory, but from experience. That was important, for in the empirical philosophy of the nineteenth century, experience was the road to knowledge. As far as Dutch critics were concerned, then, anyone who could write and report as an eyewitness of contemporary history was basically suitable to be an autobiographer. From this perspective, one could say that autobiography was indeed a “democratic genre,” though it was far easier for men than for women to present themselves as eyewitnesses to history since men participated in the public domain where history was thought to be

made—and most women did not. But in light of this perception of autobiography, it seems plausible that publishers were prepared to pay for the manuscripts of all sorts of people who were able to connect their life story with the journalistic coverage and communal experience of contemporary history.

Romantic History, or, Autobiography as a Good Read

The historical and more or less democratic conception of the autobiographical genre changed at the end of the nineteenth century. In the 1880s, a few Dutch critics came to realize that the relation between sensory perceptions and knowledge of reality was problematic. The critic and former reverend Allard Pierson, for instance, stated that, because of the bias of many autobiographers and diarists, “merely from a historical point of view there was some objection to books of this kind” (Pierson 263–64). After reading *Mémoires du Prince de Talleyrand* (1891), politician and critic W.H. de Beaufort concluded that memories served not so much as a “source for history,” but rather as an “entry to the personality of the writer” (Beaufort, “Tallyrand’s”). Reading such a testimony was particularly interesting when written by someone who was well known prior to the publication of the life story. Consequently, most critics confined themselves to reviewing autobiographies of famous people such as politicians, scientists, musicians, and writers.

As anonymous eyewitnesses lost ground in the review columns, they could no longer find favor in the eyes of professional historians. As both Jo Tollebeek and Bonnie G. Smith have argued, starting with the turn of the century, a new generation of academic historians was busy with a thematic and chronological broadening of historiography. According to the rules of the discipline, they worked as objectively as possible on themes and periods that had been previously covered by autobiographers. As a result, autobiographers were pushed out of the field of historiography: Memoirs and autobiographies were deemed unreliable. The majority of autobiographers were driven even further into a corner when a small group of progressive critics began to regard autobiography as a literary genre. From the middle of the 1880s, an avant-garde of Dutch writers and critics known as the Tachtigers (the Eighties Movement) took the view that literature should not be idealistic and moralistic, but “naturalistic” and “psychological.” For this avant-garde, the boundaries between novel and autobiography became fainter. This also meant that writing and publishing autobiography came to require literary talent and something like “authen-

ticity” (see Huisman, *Publieke levens* 192–96).

In the meantime, Dutch publishers continued to print all kinds of autobiographical books that were neither academic history nor modern literature. And the interesting thing is that publishers and conservative critics presented autobiography as an alternative to the modern novel. Autobiographies met the new requirements that literature must be personal, but the best autobiographies did not overindulge in “effeminate psychological reflections”—as one critic wrote (Quack 610–11). Moreover, autobiographers like Helen Keller and Booker T. Washington showed, according to publishers and critics, that humans were not passive victims of hereditary and social circumstances as naturalist writers propagated. At the same time, these autobiographies were a good read, to be compared with the no longer fashionable adventure stories. Such readable and positive literature was much anticipated by some Dutch publishers, who found the new fashion in literary writing detrimental to the sale of literature. In 1907, C.A.J. van Dishoeck stated that the general public wanted not realism but romanticism:

Although for some time realism has asserted its rights in literature, the fact is that the general public has never been pleased with it. Readers kept asking for the old-fashioned novel or wanted the fantastic story, exciting reading which appealed to the imagination, however much they were pushed towards realism by supporters of that movement. (van Dishoeck, from 1907 flyer)

As for Dutch publishers, romanticism was to be found in autobiography: a genre providing exciting stories resembling old-fashioned adventure novels while not being fiction. However, autobiography was no longer promoted as history per se, but as “romantic history.” In the early twentieth century, publishers made a sharp contrast between the detached or “dull” historiography of professional historians and the personal stories by both celebrated and unknown people who succeeded in connecting their lives with topical events. This is particularly evident in a flyer for a series called Romantic History consisting of “fragments from history, biographies, memoirs etc.” Publisher P.M. Wink felt these fragments would meet the need that hard-working intellectuals who wanted to “enrich the mind” had for relaxation. Other genres were hardly appropriate for this purpose: The literary psychological novel had, “in nine out of ten cases, only little attraction for the reader who was looking for relaxation”; the reader of historical novels, “involuntarily, would try to tell fact from fiction”; and detective stories had too many implausibilities (see Wink, prospectus).

The first part of Wink’s series, a Dutch translation of *Yashka: My Life as Peasant, Exile and Soldier* (1919), informed the intellectual reader about the fight of the Russian Maria Botchkareva against Bolshevism in

1918. Thus, her life story—ghostwritten by the Russian American journalist Isaac Don Levine—added personal background facts to topical world news. Professional historians and progressive literary critics rejected this kind of “faction,” but I would argue that Dutch publishers nevertheless saw a gap in the market between the (modern) novel and (professional) historiography. Consequently, they kept the road clear for eyewitnesses of contemporary history. Actually, this is still the case. Anyone browsing in a modern bookshop will see tall stacks of autobiographical books, many of which are written by authors, both famous and obscure, who know how to sell their lives by linking their stories to developments in contemporary reality, such as life in Islamic countries or terrorism. Evidently, this attracts a large public of readers who prefer history to fiction but do not appreciate the academic works of professional historians.

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Sonderdruck aus

Auto/Biography and Mediation

Edited by
ALFRED HORNUNG

Universitätsverlag
WINTER
Heidelberg
2010