CHAPTER TWO

OTTO’S DIARY

Mother: Look at yourself in the mirror.
Child: I am such a being as I see there.
Mother: Indeed! You are still small, and yet you are a complete human being.

This piece of wisdom appeared in a popular little book published in 1792 under the title ‘For a child, to acquire self-knowledge’, intended to teach children the first principles of good conduct. In the simple woodcut gracing the title page of this oft-reprinted publication, a mother stands her child on a table in front of a mirror to let it look at itself. But the mirror naturally reflects the mother as well: together they personify the combination of self-examination and control pervading Otto’s diary.

When Otto van Eck penned the first page of his diary at the age of ten, he was not beginning a journal intime on his own initiative. The diary was part of a comprehensive didactic regime to which he submitted – at times willingly, but more often with reluctance. In writing his very first entry – expressing, not without a tinge of melancholy, his desire to hear the nightingale sing on an early morning in May – he was following the advice to commit his innermost feelings to paper: advice given with great insistence by his parents, who later read his jottings and supplied them with commentary. The friction thus caused and the results – fruitful or otherwise – of this approach will be dealt with in detail. First, however, we must ask what prompted Otto’s parents to require him to write a diary subject to their supervision. Was it their own idea, or had they been inspired in this endeavour by contemporary pedagogical advice? If the latter was the case, where did the advice come from? This form of diary-writing by children – previously unstudied, since historians were unaware of it – necessitates an extensive search for the moral-philosophical and pedagogical works in circulation around 1800.
Fig. 25. TO GAIN SELF-KNOWLEDGE

‘Look at yourself in the mirror. / I am such a being as I see there. / Indeed! You are still small: / and yet you are a complete human being.’
From J.H. Nieuwold’s Voor een kind, 1792.