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

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.

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. 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. 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.

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. It is generally assumed that

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