



Jacques Presser's Heritage: Egodocuments in the Study of History

Rudolf Dekker

Erasmus Universiteit Rotterdam

Resumen: A mediados de los años cincuenta del siglo XX el historiador Jacob Presser introdujo una nueva palabra: egodocumento, término que venía a significar las autobiografías, memorias, diarios, cartas personales y otros textos en los cuales el autor escribe, explícitamente acerca de sí mismo, de sus propios asuntos y sus sentimientos. La palabra fue rápidamente al holandés, pero el momento no fue el más oportuno. Los colegas de Presser fueron más reticentes que nunca a utilizar tales textos. Desde los años ochenta, la nueva historia cultural ha vuelto a los egodocumentos. Los egodocumentos siempre han sido populares entre los lectores, lo que explica la paradoja del diario de Ana Frank, ampliamente leído, pero hasta hace poco tiempo, escasamente estudiado.

Palabras clave: Egodocumentos, Autobiografías, Memorias, Diarios, Jacques Presser., Nueva Historia Cultural.

Abstract: In the mid-1950s, the historian Jacob Presser introduced a new word: egodocument, meant as a term to indicate autobiographies, memories, diaries, personal letters and other texts in which the author writes explicitly about his or her own affairs and feelings. The word was quickly adopted in the Dutch language, but otherwise the timing was bad. Presser's colleagues were more than ever reluctant to use such texts. From the 1980s, the new cultural history has returned to egodocuments. Among the reading public egodocuments have always remained popular, which explains the paradox of the diary of Anne Frank, widely read, but, until recently, little studied.

Key words: Egodocuments, Autobiographies, Memories, Diaries, Jacques Presser, New Cultural History.

The term egodocument was coined by the Amsterdam historian Jacques Presser. That a historian should enrich the Dutch language with a new word, is a unique event. Historians generally tend to prefer

* Translation by Diederik van Werven



archaisms. Evidently, Presser needed a blanket term for the texts in which he was interested: autobiographies, memoirs, diaries, and personal letters. He defined egodocuments as ‘those historical sources in which the researcher is faced with an “I”, or occasionally (Caesar, Henry Adams) a “he”, as the writing and describing subject with a continuous presence in the text’.¹ Sometime later he formulated it more succinctly as ‘those documents in which an ego deliberately or accidentally discloses or hides itself...’² Presser’s useful neologism was generally accepted, to which its inclusion in the latest editions of the standard Dutch dictionary by Van Dale testifies, even though the explanation given there is somewhat too broad (‘documents concerning personal events and life experience’). The most simple definition would be ‘a text in which an author writes about his or her own acts, thoughts and feelings’.

Nearly 50 years after Presser’s introduction of the concept of egodocuments, the term is also becoming current outside the Netherlands. Peter Burke was probably the first historian to adopt the word in English³. Mary Lindemann introduced the word in her article on the sources for social history in the *Encyclopaedia of European Social History* published recently. She pointed out that egodocuments contribute to historical knowledge ‘by endowing ordinary lives with agency, dignity, and texture’. And she continued: ‘Egodocuments have demonstrated how the rigid categories constructed by historians

¹ Jacques PRESSER, “Memoires als geschiedbron” in *Winkler Prins Encyclopedie. VIII*, Amsterdam, Elsevier, 1958, repr.: ID., *Uit het werk van J. Presser*, Amsterdam, Athenaeum-Polak en Van Gennep, 1969, 277-282. This article was previously published in *Amsterdams Sociologisch Tijdschrift*.

² Jacques PRESSER, “Clio kijkt door het sleutelgat”, in ID., *Uit het werk ...*, 283-295, 286.

³ Peter BURKE, “Representations of the Self from Petrarch to Descartes”, in Roy PORTER (ed.), *Rewriting the Self. Histories from the Middle Ages to the Present*, London, Routledge, 1996, p. 21.



preoccupied with studying large groups and big structures might be less confining in practice...⁴.

In Germany the word was taken over by Winfried Schulze⁵. He edited the volume of conference papers titled *Ego-Dokumente. Annäherung an den Menschen in der Geschichte*. He interpreted Presser's concept more inclusively, however. In his view, judicial hearings, the curriculum vitae, and all kinds of other official records should be regarded as egodocuments. When the meaning is extended to such a degree, however, the concept loses its focus, as Benigna von Krusenstjern remarked in her reaction.⁶ The concept was also introduced into French and adopted by historians like Pierre-Yves Beaurepaire.⁷ Although the word is now generally used, little is known about the history of its origin.

1. Jacques Presser invents a word

Jacques Presser, born in 1899, as a secondary-school teacher at the Amsterdam *Vossius Gymnasium*, was already involved with what he

⁴ Mary LINDEMANN, "Sources of social history", in *Encyclopedia of European Social History*, Detroit, Scribner's Sons, 2001, I, p. 36.

⁵ Winfried SCHULZE (ed.), *Ego-Dokumente. Annäherung an den Menschen in der Geschichte*, Berlin, Akademie Verlag, 1996.

⁶ Benigna VON KRUSENSTJERN, "Was sind Selbstzeugnisse? Begriffskritische und quellenkundliche Überlegungen anhand von Beispielen aus dem 17. Jahrhundert", *Historische Anthropologie. Kultur. Gesellschaft. Alltag* 2, 1994, 462-472. cf. Gabriele JANCKE, "Die Quellengruppe der Selbstzeugnisse in Spätmittelalter und Früher Neuzeit". Zwei quellenkundliche Handbücher zum deutschsprachigen Bereich", *Herold-Jahrbuch*, NF III, 1998, 41-51.

⁷ Rudolf DEKKER, "Les egodocuments aux Pays-Bas du 16ième au 18ième siècle", in *Bulletin du bibliophile*, 1995, 317-333. Pierre-Yves BEAUREPAIRE is organising the conference 'Les ego-documents à l'heure de l'électronique, at Montpellier at the Université Paul-Valéry Montpellier 3, in 2002.

was later to call egodocuments in the 1920s.⁸ During the German occupation Presser was dismissed together with other Jewish teachers, worked at the Jewish Lyceum for a time, and then went into hiding. In 1947 he was appointed lecturer, and a year later professor at the University of Amsterdam. After the war, Presser stayed with another historian for a time, Jan Romein, who was later to become his colleague at the University of Amsterdam. Romein was also interested in the (auto)biographical approach to history. In 1946 Romein published *De biografie* [The Biography], a contribution to the historiography of the genre that is still regarded as informative and original.⁹ Shortly after the war, Jan Romein came across a special egodocument, a diary in which a Jewish girl had written about her life in hiding. Through a friend he had borrowed it from the father of the girl, the only member of the family to survive the war. Romein wrote an article about it in the daily newspaper *Het Parool*. A publisher was found, and Romein's wife, Annie Romein-Verschoor wrote an introduction. Anne Frank's diary appeared in 1947, titled *Het achterhuis*. Jacques Presser, who had also been one of the first readers, wrote about it in the magazine *De Vrije Katheder* immediately after it was published. He did so in more or less the same terms as Romein had used a year before, but with more explicit appreciation of Anne's style of writing.¹⁰ Later Presser himself was to write an introduction to another war diary, that by Philip Mechanicus.¹¹

⁸ Nanda VAN DER ZEE, *Jacques Presser. Het gelijk van de twijfel. Een biografie*, Amsterdam, Balans, 1988, 270-271.

⁹ Jan ROMEIN, *De biografie. Een inleiding*, Amsterdam, Ploegsma, 1946, repr. Amsterdam, Em. Querido, 1951. There is also a German translation.

¹⁰ Jacques PRESSER, "De kindermoord van Amsterdam. Anne Frank, 'Het achterhuis' (Contact, Amsterdam)", *De Vrije Katheder* 7, 1947 no. 16 (15 augustus 1947), p. 253.

¹¹ Jacques PRESSER (ed.). *In depot. Dagboek uit Westerbork*, Amsterdam, Polak en Van Gennep, 1964.



In 1949 Presser was officially commissioned to write the history of the Dutch Jews during the years of occupation. He based his findings partly on diaries, letters and other egodocuments. In addition he conducted interviews with other survivors of the Holocaust, and with people responsible for carrying out and organising 'the downfall', as he titled the book he wrote about it. His own estimate was that he conducted many hundreds of interviews.¹² In an entirely different way, then, he was again faced with the problems surrounding egodocuments and 'oral history'. He was confronted with people whose memories were so painful that they were unable or unwilling to recall anything, but also with people who deliberately falsified their past. *De ondergang* [Ashes in the Wind] was published in 1965, causing many reactions, mostly positive but also a few negative ones. Some critics regarded the book as being too subjective.¹³

P. Spigt told the egodocument scholar Ruud Lindeman that Presser used the concept of egodocument for the first time in a course for undergraduates, which he gave in the academic year 1956-'57.¹⁴ Spigt later wrote *Het ontstaan van de autobiografie in Nederland* [The

¹² Conny KRISTEL, *Geschiedschrijving als opdracht. Abel Herzberg, Jacques Presser en Loe de Jong over de jodenvervolgning*, Amsterdam, Meulenhoff, 1998, p. 64.

¹³⁰See in this connection, the controversy surrounding Friedrich Weinreb, whom Presser regarded mainly as a Jewish resistance fighter, and whose memoirs *Collaboratie en verzet 1940-1945* [Collaboration and Resistance] led to an official inquiry by the Netherlands Institute for War Documentation. The autobiography was analysed by Regina Grueter, who saw it as an expression of Weinreb's pathological tendency to fantasy. See: Regina GRUETER, *Een fantast schrijft geschiedenis. De affaires rond Friedrich Weinreb*, Amsterdam, Balans, 1997.

¹⁴ Ruud LINDEMAN, *Ego in Clivia. Korte en vermakelijke inleiding tot de studie van de vroeg-moderne Nederlandse egodocumenten alsmede de traditie der Kleefse reizen. Met een bijlage over het Kleefse reisjournaal van Willem de Clercq 1835*, Amstelveen, 1990). Amstelveense Gastcahiers no.1, 44, note 11.



Origins of Autobiography in the Netherlands], the only Dutch study on the subject.¹⁵ Egodocuments remained a fixed item in his courses when Presser transferred as a professor from the social sciences faculty to the faculty of arts. He never got around to writing a book, but his personal archives contain a large quantity of cuttings, reviews and notes on the subject. In his valedictory lecture he summarised what had been discussed. His lectures had centred on traditional high points of the genre, more especially Presser's own favourite authors, among whom were Stendhal and Henri-Frederic Amiel. Presser did not offer new theoretical insights, and he based himself largely on the great work on the history of autobiography by the German historian George Misch, and on that by the French philosopher George Gusdorf.

Presser did not find time to elaborate his studies of egodocuments, because until his death in 1970, his energies were mainly occupied by *Ashes in the Wind* and the ensuing discussion. Beside being a historian, Presser was also a poet and a novelist. This gave him an eye and an ear for the literary aspects that are more clearly present in egodocuments than in official records, which have a higher status in the hierarchy of historical sources. He also started to write his own autobiography, but because of his untimely death, this never got

¹⁵ P. SPIGT, *Het ontstaan van de autobiografie in Nederland*, Amsterdam, G.A. van Oorschot, 1985.



beyond childhood memories.¹⁶ Shortly before his death he did recount the story of his life in a documentary made by Philo Bregstein.¹⁷

That the word egodocument became current was remarkable, but it did not lead to greater popularity of this type of texts among historians. With the exception of a thematic issue of *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedens*, a major Dutch periodical, in 1970, historians preferred to give the anecdotal approach inherent in such texts a wide berth. Presser's preference for egodocuments did not enhance his reputation. The rather infelicitous title of his valedictory lecture, 'Clio peeps through the keyhole', did not promote more serious consideration of the subject. Presser found the general climate was against him. He knew that most historians were wary of egodocuments, and it was with some irony that he would quote the judgment by his colleague Romein from the latter's *De biografie*: 'the autobiography is the most dangerous of all sources'.¹⁸ What was worse, was that the rising discipline of social and economic history had no place for this type of source at all. The young French historian Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie had just prophesied that historians would thenceforth only be producing graphs at their computers. The then dominant Annales school regarded history as a social science, and the methods and techniques based on sociology did not leave room for a story, never

¹⁶ Jacques PRESSER, *Louter verwachting. Autobiografische schets, 1899-1919*, Amsterdam, De Arbeiderspers, 1985. There is a growing interest in autobiographical writing by historians, see: Jeremy D. POPKIN, "Historians on the autobiographical frontier", *American Historical Review* 104, 1999, 725-748; Michael DINTENFASS, " 'Crafting historians' lives: autobiographical constructions and disciplinary discourses after the linguistic turn", *Journal of Modern History*, 71, 1999, 150-165.

¹⁷ Philo BREGSTEIN, *Gesprekken met Jacques Presser*, Baarn, De Prom, 1999, 1st ed. 1972.

¹⁸ ROMEIN, *De biografie...*, p. 204.



mind a life story. In sociology itself the biographical approach, once an important method, had become controversial and marginal.¹⁹

2. Growing distrust among historians

How could things have come so far in the historical profession? Initially, in traditional political historiography, the main characters, the great men, received most attention. There was a general critical principle to the effect that the closer an author was to events, the more faithful the account was. Thus, egodocuments by the main players were regarded as the most reliable sources. Who had been closer to what actually took place in battles or during diplomatic negotiations? Who could better describe the life of a celebrity than the celebrity himself? The classic example was Caesar's *De Bello Gallico*.²⁰

People were their own best biographers, and if they did not take up their pens themselves, the best accounts were written by those who had known them well. Close personal ties between the biographer and his subject were deemed essential, as, for instance, those between Boswell and Johnson, or between Eckermann and Goethe. When such intimate relations were lacking, a good biography was not possible. That, at least, was the opinion of Voltaire, who thought it was simple fraud to pretend to be able to describe the life of someone with whom one was not personally familiar.

¹⁹ See the discussion in *Newsletter Biography and Society (Research Committee 38 of the ISA)* December 1996, with a discussion between Daniel Bertaux and Thierry Kochuyt, and December 1997, with a contribution by Kathy DAVIS, " 'Imagined communities'? Some reflections on biographical research", 2-5.

²⁰ On the older historiography, see: Rudolf M. DEKKER, "Egodocumenten: een literatuuroverzicht", *Tijdschrift voor geschiedenis*, 101, 1988, pp. 161-190, and Angenies BRANDENBURG, "Notities over de (auto)biografie", in Angenies BRANDENBURG, *Annie Romein-Verschoor, 1895-1978*, Amsterdam, Arbeiderspers, 1988, II, pp. 9-99.



In the 19th century, when historiography took on a more scientific aspect, Leopold von Ranke warned that many memoirs were unreliable (especially French ones, he added).²¹ Another German historian later spoke of dangerous 'romanhafte Elemente' to be found in autobiographies.²² In 1936 the British historian G.P. Gooch made a definitive judgment in his discussion of the memoirs of, among others, Richelieu, Frederick the Great and Talleyrand.²³ In all these texts the truth had been twisted by the authors themselves or by their editors. The publication of Hitler's *Mein Kampf* clinched matters in Gooch's eyes. Hitler's propaganda document was still read as an autobiography before World War II, as the title of the English translation indicated: *Hitler's autobiography*.²⁴ In short, by the middle of the 20th century egodocuments had become sources which were regarded as extremely unreliable by traditional, political historians, while for modern social and economic historians they were simply useless.

Only in the history of ideas had egodocuments retained some status. In Germany, at the end of the 19th century, Wilhelm Dilthey had advocated the use of autobiographical material. This was put into practice by his pupil Georg Misch. For Dilthey and Misch history was especially a matter of the ongoing development of the individual. This development could be traced most clearly in egodocuments. That is

²¹ Leopold VON RANKE, *Aus Werk und Nachlass IV*, ed. Walther Peter FUCHS, München-Vienna, Oldenbourg, 1964-1975, p. 112.

²² Hans GLAGAU, *Die moderne Selbstbiographie als historische Quelle: eine Untersuchung*, Marburg, N.G. Elwert, 1903.

²³ George Peabody GOOCH, "Political Autobiography", *Studies in Diplomacy and Statecraft*, London / New York / Toronto, Longmans, Green and Co., 1942, pp. 227-290. Earlier versions appeared in: *Royal Society of Literature Transactions*, 15, 1936 and *Contemporary Review*, 1941 (November).

²⁴ Werner MASER, *Hitlers Mein Kampf. Entstehung, Aufbau, Stil, Änderungen, Quellen, Quellenwert, kommentierte Auszüge*, München: Bechtle Verlag, 1966, photo p. 176. In Maser's analysis there is little reference to this aspect of the book, cf. p. 95.

the basic thought behind Misch's great work, *Geschichte der Autobiographie*.²⁵ Misch's work has been used as an example for much research on the history of ideas, and a canon has been formed consisting of a limited number of authors, from St Augustine, as an early medieval precursor, through Rousseau and other 18th-century writers such as Gibbon, Franklin and Goethe, to writers like Sartre and Leiris. In recent years, this approach has been increasingly criticised, especially for its teleological nature, the lack of reflection on what should be understood by individuality, and implicit eurocentrism. In his recent *Origins of the Individualist Self*, Michael Mascuch regards autobiographical writing as a cultural practice in which the text is a public exhibition of the writer's identity, the "self-identity".²⁶ With reference to the sociologist Erving Goffman and the philosopher Charles Taylor, Mascuch thinks the concept of "self-identity" is flexible, open to multiple interpretations, and historically determined. Moreover, Hugo Röling has recently pointed out that the 19th and the 20th century, besides that of individualisation, have shown a no less strong tendency towards collectivisation.²⁷

3. Reassessment

The reassessment of egodocuments started out in a new form of historiography, the history of mentalities. A groundbreaking work appeared in 1970. The English anthropologist and historian Alan

²⁵ George MISCH, *Geschichte der Autobiographie*, Bern, Francke, 1949-1970, 7 vols. [The last volume also contains later articles, among which "Die Autobiographie der französische Aristokratie des 17. Jahrhunderts", from *Deutsche Vierteljahrschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte* 1, 1923, 172-213]. Also: George MISCH, *Studien zur Geschichte der Autobiographie*, Göttingen, Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1954-1957, 3 vols.

²⁶ Michael MASCUCH, *Origins of the Individualist Self. Autobiography and Self-Identity in England, 1591-1791*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1997.

²⁷ Hugo RÖLING, 'Een ik in mijzelf. Individualisering in de Nieuwste Tijd', *Spiegel Historiae* 34, 1999, pp. 10-14 (special issue on history and individuality).



McFarlane published a study on the world of the English 17th-century minister Ralph Josselin, based on his diary.²⁸ His political, economic, social and mental worlds were carefully reconstructed. Reassessment for the egodocument was also promoted because in the mid-1980s, in reaction to the Annales approach, there was a revival of narrative historiography.²⁹

Just as in sociology, where the biographical method remained problematic during this period, for more sociologically oriented historians the use of egodocuments posed a recurring problem. The criticism that one egodocument could not possibly be representative, was countered by some through simultaneous comparison and presentation of many texts. An instance of this approach can be found in Linda Pollock, who studied over 500 English and American diaries from the 16th to the 19th centuries, focusing on the relationship between parents and children.³⁰ She used egodocuments as if they were standard archival sources from which 'facts' could be extracted. More seriously flawed were the conclusions she drew from the fact that writers of the diaries remained silent on certain matters. Parents would seldom write in their diaries that they hit their children, she found. This fact, combined with the assumption that if parents did hit their children they would certainly have recorded this, led to the conclusion that parents always and everywhere loved their children in accordance with modern, western norms.³¹

²⁸ Alan MACFARLANE, *The Family Life of Ralph Josselin. A Seventeenth-Century Clergyman. An Essay in Historical Anthropology*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1970.

²⁹ Lawrence STONE, "The revival of narrative", *Past and Present*, 85, 1979, 3-24.

³⁰ Linda A. POLLOCK, *Forgotten Children. Parent-child Relations from 1500-1900*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1983.

³¹ Elizabeth PLECK, *Domestic tyranny. The making of social policy against family violence from colonial times to the present*, New York, Oxford U.P., 1987, p. 205; Rudolf DEKKER, *Childhood, Memory and Autobiography*

In England, 19th-century autobiographies of labourers have been systematically collected and researched. On the basis of 142 autobiographies, David Vincent wrote an imaginative study on English labourers from the 19th-century focusing on themes like childhood, love and death.³² A recent attempt at a combination of quantitative methods and systematic analysis of 479 autobiographies is Andrew Miles' study on social mobility in England in the 19th and early 20th centuries.³³ Studies which analyse a large corpus of egodocuments by means of sociological methods are certainly interesting, but often show too little awareness of literary aspects of these texts and of their subtleties. One of the best examples of a historical analysis based on a large number of egodocuments is the recent study by James Amelang on the development of form and content of autobiographies of artisans in early modern Europe.³⁴ Arianne Baggerman went a step further who placed the egodocuments of the publishers' family Blussé that she had studied, in not just in the context of the family archive, but also took into consideration the entire material and oral memorabilia handed down in the family, from military uniforms to humorous anecdotes.³⁵ An original contribution was also made by Stuart Sherman in his book *Telling Time: Clocks, Diaries and English Diurnal Form 1660-1785*, in which he linked the rise of the clockwork and that of the diary.³⁶

in Holland from the Golden Age to Romanticism, London, Macmillan, 1999, pp. 85 and 128.

³² David VINCENT, *Bread, Knowledge and Freedom. A Study of Nineteenth-Century Working Class Autobiography*, London / New York, Methuen, 1982.

³³ Andrew MILES, *Social mobility in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century England*, London, Macmillan, 1999.

³⁴ James S. AMELANG, *The Flight of Icarus. Artisan Autobiography in Early Modern Europe*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1998.

³⁵ Arianne BAGGERMAN, 'Het geheugenpaleis van de familie Blussé', *Kunstschrift*, 44, 2000, nr. 2 (issue 'Egodocumenten', 39-44).

³⁶ Stuart SHERMAN, *Telling Time: Clocks, Diaries and English Diurnal Form 1660-1785*, Chicago, Chicago University Press, 1997.



Egodocuments should not only be regarded as a source from which facts can be extracted, but the function of such texts within their social context should also be taken into account. Rebekka Habermas has described, for instance, how reading aloud of letters and diaries was an important form of sociability among the German bourgeoisie during the decades around 1800.³⁷

In the 1980s another approach arose in the history of mentalities, called micro-storia by Carlo Ginzburg and other Italian historians who developed the genre.³⁸ The question of the representativeness of individual egodocuments was of minor importance to them, or none at all, for the analysis of an individual text was in itself valuable according to them. Initially, such studies were based on judicial documents, especially interrogations, which also have an autobiographical aspect. In his well-known *The Cheese and the Worms*, Ginzburg studied the ideas of the 16th-century heterodox miller Menocchio through reports of his interrogation by the Inquisition.³⁹ Later he was to elaborate on the problematic situation of a historian confronted with 'just one witness'.⁴⁰ Another example of micro-history on the basis of judicial archives is the study by Natalie

³⁷ Rebekka HABERMAS, *Frauen und Männer des Bürgertums. Eine Familiengeschichte (1750-1850)*, Göttingen, Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 2000.

³⁸ Carlo GINZBURG, "Microhistory: Two or three things that I know about it", *Critical Inquiry*, 20, 1993, 10-35; Giovanni LEVI, "On microhistory", in: Peter BURKE (ed.), *New perspectives on historical writing*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1991, 93-113. See also Florike EGMOND and Peter MASON, *The mammoth and the mouse. Microhistory and morphology*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins U.P., 1997.

³⁹ Carlo GINZBURG, *The cheese and the worms: the cosmos of a sixteenth-century miller*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins U.P., 1980, 1st Italian edition 1976

⁴⁰ Carlo GINZBURG, "Just One Witness", in S FRIEDLANDER (ed.), *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the Final Solution*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992.

Davis, *The Return of Martin Guerre*.⁴¹ This movement in historiography was inspired by anthropology, which had more to offer these historians than sociology.⁴² Its followers occasionally also refer to it as historical anthropology.

Micro-historians, after their explorations of judicial archives, plunged into egodocuments. P.S. Seaver sketched the world picture of a 17th-century London artisan on the basis of his personal papers.⁴³ Another example is the study, with text edition, by Daniel Roche on the 18th-century French glazier Jacques-Louis Menetra, on the basis of his autobiography.⁴⁴ Jeroen Blaak conducted comparable research into the life conditions of the Amsterdam artisan, Harmannus Verbeeck, on the basis of his manuscript autobiography.⁴⁵ Studies based on the micro-history approach often show a greater awareness of the literary aspects of the egodocuments studied, than those which

⁴¹ Natalie Z. DAVIS, *The return of Martin Guerre*, Cambridge Mass.: Harvard U.P., 1983.

⁴² Natalie Z. DAVIS, "Anthropology and History in the 1980s. The possibilities of the past" *Journal Interdisciplinary History* 12, 1981, 227-252; Peter te BOEKHORST, Peter BURKE, Willem FRIJHOFF (eds.), *Cultuur en maatschappij in Nederland 1500-1850. Een historisch-antropologisch perspectief*, Amsterdam/Meppel, Boom, 1992, especially the introduction by Willem Frijhoff.

⁴³ Paul S. SEAVER, *Wallington's World. A Puritan Artisan in Seventeenth-Century London*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1985. A comparable study: Thomas Max SAFLEY, *Matheus Miller's memoirs. A Merchant's Life in the Seventeenth Century*, Basingstoke, Macmillan, 2000.

⁴⁴ Daniel ROCHE (ed.), *Jacques-Louis Menetre 'Journal de ma vie'*, Paris, Montalba, 1982; transl.: *Journal of My Life*, transl. Arthus Goldhammer, introduction by Robert Darnton, New York, Columbia University Press, 1986.

⁴⁵ Jeroen BLAAK, "Worstelen om te overleven. De zorg om het bestaan in het Memoriaal van Harmannus Verbeeck (1621-1681)", *Holland*, 31, 1999, 1-19.

tackle several, and often large numbers of egodocuments at the same time.

In historiography many subjects have been studied exclusively on the basis of sources that had little or nothing to say about historical practice. In book history, for instance, the possession of books was studied in notarial records, but not what and how people actually read. Reading practices, however, are sometimes reflected in diaries. Arianne Baggerman was the first to do this, on the basis of a late 18th-century diary kept by a young boy, Otto van Eck.⁴⁶ She compared the diary entries with the pages in the books mentioned, thus adding the dimension of reception to this type of research. Jeroen Blaak is currently engaged on comparable research, through analysis of, among other texts, the diary of a schoolmaster at The Hague from 1624.⁴⁷ Luuc Kooijmans conducted research into the meaning and the function of friendship in the past on the basis of the diary of a 17th-century Dutch regent.⁴⁸ Judith Pollmann studied religious practice around 1600 on the basis of egodocuments of a Utrecht scholar.⁴⁹ And there are many other examples that could be mentioned. Examples of

⁴⁶ Arianne BAGGERMAN, "The Cultural Universe of a Dutch Child: Otto van Eck and his Literature", *Eighteenth Century Studies*, 31, 1997, 129-134; ID., "Lezen tot de laatste snik. Otto van Eck en zijn dagelijkse literatuur (1780-1798)", *Jaarboek voor Nederlandse boekgeschiedenis*, 1, 1994, 57-89.

⁴⁷ Jeroen BLAAK, "Reading and writing in the diary of David Beck (1624)", in Rudolf DEKKER (ed.), *Egodocuments and history*, Hilversum, Verloren, 2002. Reeks Publikaties van de Faculteit der Historische en Kunstwetenschappen, forthcoming.

⁴⁸ Luuc KOOIJMANS, *Vriendschap en de kunst van het overleven in de zeventiende en achttiende eeuw*, Amsterdam, Bert Bakker, 1997; Luuc KOOIJMANS, "De dagboeken van Joan Huydecoper", *Nederlands archievenblad*, 100, 1996, 59-69. Cf. Luuc KOOIJMANS, *Liefde in opdracht. Het hofleven van Willem Frederik van Nassau*, Amsterdam, Bert Bakker, 2000.

⁴⁹ Judith POLLMANN, *Religious choice in the Dutch Republic. The Reformation of Arnoldus Buchelius*, Manchester, Manchester U.P., 1999.

explorations of new fields with the aid of egodocuments include that written by Peter Burke, who attempted to answer the question whether people in the 17th century dreamt differently from their modern counterparts, and a study by Roy and Dorothy Porter into the experiences of illness in early modern Europe.⁵⁰ It is remarkable that there are more examples of such research from the early modern period, than from after 1800. What must be mentioned in this context, is Peter Gay's major study of *The Bourgeois Experience*, especially the volume *The Naked Heart*.⁵¹ More recently he has also published a study on middle-class culture based on Arthur Schnitzler's diary as the main text.⁵² The application of Freudian theories in the interpretation is also quite exceptional among historians.

4. Egodocuments as objects of study.

In recent years historical research has been promoted, as in several countries cataloguing projects have been set up, partly following the Dutch example.⁵³ Surveys are being compiled for instance for

⁵⁰ Peter BURKE, "The Cultural History of Dreams", in IDEM, *Varieties of Cultural History*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1997, 23-43 (= "L'histoire sociale des rêves", *Annales E.S.C.*, 28, 1973, 329-340); Roy and Dorothy PORTER, *In Sickness and in Health: The British Experience*, London, Fourth Estate, 1988.

⁵¹ Peter GAY, *The Bourgeois Experience. Victoria to Freud. I. Education of the Senses*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1984; *II. The Tender Passion*, New York, Norton, 1986; *III. The Cultivation of Hatred*, New York, Norton, 1993; *IV. The Naked Heart*, New York: Norton, 1995; *V. Pleasure Wars*, New York: Norton, 1998.

⁵² Peter GAY, *Schnitzlers' Century. The Making of Middle-Class Culture, 1815-1914*, London: Allen Lane/ The Penguin Press, 2001.

⁵³ Arianne BAGGERMAN - Rudolf DEKKER - Gerard Schulte NORDHOLT, "Inventarisatie van in handschrift overgeleverde egodocumenten 1814-1914", *Archievenblad*, 103, 1999, 18-21; J.P. de VALK, "Inventarisatie van gedrukte en ongedrukte egodocumenten, 1814-1914", *Documentatieblad voor de Nederlandse Kerkgeschiedenis na 1800* nr. 53, December, 2000, 45-52, also

Switzerland⁵⁴, Germany⁵⁵, Austria⁵⁶ and Denmark.⁵⁷ The French literary historian Philippe Lejeune fulfills a stimulating and coordinating role

in *Tijdschrift voor Nederlandse Kerkgeschiedenis*; Results concerning the period 1500-1814: Rudolf DEKKER - Ruud LINDEMAN - Yvonne SCHERF, *Egodocumenten van Noord-Nederlanders uit de zestiende tot begin negentiende eeuw. Een chronologische lijst*, Rotterdam, Erasmus Universiteit Rotterdam, 1993 and *Reisverslagen van Noord-Nederlanders uit de zestiende tot begin negentiende eeuw. Een chronologische lijst*, Rotterdam, Erasmus Universiteit Rotterdam, 1994. Conclusions based on this inventory: Rudolf DEKKER, "Egodocuments in the Netherlands from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century", in Erin GRIFFEY (ed.), *Envisioning Self and status. Self-representation in the Low Countries 1400-1700*, Hull, Association for Low Countries Studies in Great Britain and Ireland (ALCS) c/o University of Hull, Department of Dutch Studies, 2000, 255-285. (Crossways Vol. 5). IDEM, 'Dutch Travel Journals from the Sixteenth to the Early Nineteenth Centuries', in *Lias. Sources and Documents relating to the Early Modern History of Ideas*, 22, 1995, p. 277-300. An edition of these manuscripts, *Egodocuments from the Netherlands, 16th Century-1814 Part I: Manuscript Travel journals in Languages other than Dutch, 16th Century-1814*, Lisse, MMF Publications, 1996, ed. R. M. DEKKER (335 microfiches).

⁵⁴ Sebastian LEUTERT - Gudrun PILLER, "Deutschschweizerische Selbstzeugnisse (1500-1800) als Quellen der Mentalitätsgeschichte. Ein Forschungsbericht", *Schweizerische Zeitschrift für Geschichte* 49, 1999, 197-222; Kaspar VON GREYERZ, "Deutschschweizerische Selbstzeugnisse (1500-1800) als Quellen der Mentalitätsgeschichte. Bericht über ein Forschungsprojekt", in Klaus ARNOLD - Sabine SCHMOLINSKY - Urs Martin ZAHND (ed.), *Das dargestellte Ich. Studien zu Selbstzeugnissen des späteren Mittelalters und der frühen Neuzeit*, Bochum, Winkler, 1999, 147-163.

⁵⁵ Benigna VON KRUSENSTJERN, *Selbstzeugnisse der Zeit des Dreissigjährigen Krieges*, Berlin, Akademie Verlag, 1997, inventory of egodocuments from the Thirty Years War.

⁵⁶ Harald TERSCH, *Österreichische Selbstzeugnisse des Spätmittelalters und der frühen Neuzeit (1400-1650): eine Darstellung in Einzelbeiträgen*, Vienna, Böhlau, 1998.

⁵⁷ Harald ILSØ, *555 danske Selvbiografier og Erindringer. En kronologisk fører med referater til trykte selvbiografier forfattet af personer født før 1790*, København: C.A. Reitzels Forlag, 1987.

in this process.⁵⁸ In this fashion many unknown but valuable texts have been brought to light. In Germany, Switzerland, France and the Netherlands publication series have been set up in which such texts are published.⁵⁹ In this way a better insight can be gained into the development of autobiographical writing in Europe since the Middle Ages.

Currently there is a tendency to view egodocuments not only as sources to egodocuments but also as study objects in themselves. Egodocuments no longer serve only to answer questions, but call up questions themselves. The word 'source' has become increasingly discredited among historians in recent years. Egodocuments are not 'clear' texts from which facts can be gathered. Although historiography did take a 'linguistic turn', historians never went so far as some literary critics who completely severed the link between text and reality. In the discussion about egodocuments much attention is currently being paid to the complexity of autobiographical writing, such as the tension —itself subject to historical change— between the public and private character of such texts, and the aspect of self-fashioning which egodocuments possess by definition.⁶⁰ It is such

⁵⁸ Philippe LEJEUNE, "Les inventaires de textes autobiographiques", *Histoire, économie, société*, 15, 1996, 299-322, also translated: "Verzeichnisse autobiographischer Texte", *Bios*, 11, 1998.

⁵⁹ *Egodocumenten* (Hilversum: Verloren) ed. Rudolf DEKKER - Gert-Jan JOHANNES; *Selbst-Konstruktion* ed. Kaspar VON GREYERZ e.a., Basel, Schwabe; *Selbstzeugnisse der Neuzeit* ed. Hartmut LEHMANN - Alf LÜDTKE, Hans MEDICK - Jan PETERS - Rudolf VIERHAUS; *Dire l'histoire. Autobiographies du XVIIIe, XIXe et XXe siècles*, Bonnes, Editions les Gorgonnes, ed. Nicole PELLEGRIN. Twentieth-century texts: *Damit es nicht verlorengelht...* ed. Michael MITTERAUER - Peter Paul KLOSS, Wien, Böhlau (48 vols.).

⁶⁰ See for instance Gadi ALGAZI, "Constructing model persons: Reshaping the scholarly habitus 1480-1560" in Rudolf DEKKER (ed.), *Egodocuments and history*, Hilversum, Verloren, 2002. Reeks Publikaties van de Faculteit der Historische en Kunstwetenschappen, forthcoming.



aspects that are also central to Arianne Baggerman's research project into the development of the genre in the Netherlands: 'Controlling time and shaping the self: education, introspection and practices of writing in the Netherlands 1750-1914'.⁶¹

Eventually egodocuments refuse to be submitted to the rules of historiography. These are texts not so much in need of editing or processing, but accounts which must be read and reread, and whose interpretation will vary over time. On the one hand there is a growing awareness that egodocuments have literary, even fictional sides, in which truth is bent, consciously or unconsciously, by the autobiographer himself. On the other hand one of the attractive sides of such texts is that the reader is, or at least seems to be, in direct contact with someone from the past.

That egodocuments can be read in this empathizing way is a conviction that is more generally found among the reading public than among professional historians. As a case study that shows how function and meaning of a specific egodocument can change over time, Anne Frank's diary is a good example, perhaps for no better reason than that Jacques Presser was without a doubt one of the first readers of the typescript that Otto Frank had made of his daughter's diary, and immediately became aware of this aspect of her text.

5. The paradox of Anne Frank

The story is well-known. Anne Frank had fled Germany with her sister and parents because her father had foreseen that for Jews there were hard times ahead. In 1940 the Netherlands did not turn out to be as safe as they had hoped. In July 1942 the family decided to go into

⁶¹ Arianne BAGGERMAN, "Autobiography and family memory in the 18th and 19th centuries", in Rudolf DEKKER (ed.), *Egodocuments and history*, Hilversum, Verloren, 2002. Reeks Publikaties van de Faculteit der Historische en Kunstwetenschappen, forthcoming.



hiding. A month earlier Anne had received a poetry album for her thirteenth birthday, which from that day on she used as a diary. She kept the diary throughout the more than two years that she spent in the annex of her father's office and warehouse.

On 28 March 1944 Anne heard through a radio broadcast from London by the Dutch government-in-exile that diaries would be collected after the war as they were thought indispensable for later historians to learn about daily life in Holland during the German occupation. Anne decided to work her diary into a more literary form, so that it could be published after the war. She kept on writing until August 1944, when the Sicherheitsdienst raided the annex of the Amsterdam canal house. The family was deported, Anne and her elder sister Margot died in Bergen-Belsen in late February or early March of 1945. Only her father survived and returned to Amsterdam. There the diary was returned to Otto Frank, and convinced of its emotional and literary value he showed it to friends, among whom was Jan Romein. Anne's second version, lightly edited by Otto Frank, was published in 1947, titled *Het Achterhuis* [The Annex] with a preface by the historian Annie Romein-Verschoor. Translations into German, French, and English followed. Theatre and film adaptations made the diary into a bestseller, first in America, and later all over the world. In addition, Otto Frank was indefatigable in the presentation of his daughter as the personification of all that is good in humanity. The image of Anne Frank changed from a Jewish victim of the holocaust, into that of a humanist saint. As what is sometimes called an 'icon of the Holocaust', Anne Frank also became a typically Dutch historical cliché, which is remarkable, because she was not in fact Dutch. As Jacques Presser casually, but not without meaning, wrote in his 1947 review, she was a stateless refugee when she died. It was to take her father years to gain the Dutch nationality after his return in 1945.

Presser was to mention the diary in his valedictory lecture in 1969, but in fact it had little influence on Dutch historiography. Until recently, it drew little scholarly attention, except as to the question of how the diary of a young girl could turn into such a media success. The fact that in 1986 an integral critical edition was published is



mainly due to political factors.⁶² From extreme right and neo-Nazi circles the authenticity had been called into question, and this was countered by a thorough technical examination of the manuscript. The edition shows three parallel texts: Anne's original diary, her own edited rendering, and the text edited by Otto Frank. Moreover, these textual problems are typical for diaries, which are often handed down in various editions by the authors themselves, or by later editors. It is an open question whether the oldest version of the text is always the best, most reliable or most authentic one.

The discrepancy between the lack of attention paid to it by historians, and the success among the wider public of the diary is striking. Even before its publication, Jan Romein had already understood what was behind the public reaction: 'To me, however, this seemingly insignificant diary of a child, this "de profundis" stammered by a childish voice, embodies all the horror of fascism, more so than all the case records of the Nuremberg trials taken together.' A serious discussion on the person of Anne Frank and her work did not start until the mid-1980s.⁶³ Finally, interest arose in the author herself.⁶⁴ More attention was paid to her Jewish background, which until then had been consciously underplayed. This problem is complicated by the fact that Anne herself hardly regarded her Jewishness as an essential element of her identity. It is typical that

⁶² *De dagboeken van Anne Frank* ed. David BARNOUW - Gerrold VAN DER STROOM, Amsterdam: Bert Bakker, 2001, 6th impr. English translation: *The Diary of Anne Frank: The Critical Edition, prepared by the Netherlands State Institute for War Documentation*, New York, Viking, 1989. On the growing reference to the egodocument as a form in the 'genre' of the historical falsification: Rudolf M. DEKKER, "De conjunctuur van de historische vervalsing", *De Gids* 146, 1983, 461-466.

⁶³ David BARNOUW, *Anne Frank voor beginners en gevorderden*, Den Haag, SDU, 1998.

⁶⁴ Melissa MUELLER, *Das Mädchen Anne Frank: die Biographie*, München, Claassen, 1998; Carol Ann LEE, *Roses from the Earth. The Biography of Anne Frank*, London, Viking, 1999.

only in the recent past publication took place of a detailed history of the Jewish Lyceum, the secondary school she attended, partly the result of 'oral history' consisting of interviews with former pupils.⁶⁵

The diary must also be placed in a literary tradition. Only recently has the diary been scrutinised by literary scholars.⁶⁶ The childhood diary has a long tradition. Already in the late 18th century, parents were advised to have their children keep a diary.⁶⁷ In the 19th century the writing of diaries became especially popular with young women, as Philippe Lejeune has found.⁶⁸ The best-known is that by the Russian born Marie Bashkirtseff, who started writing when she was 15. After her premature death, her diary was published in 1887.⁶⁹ The publication caused a stir, first in France, then in England and America, because of the candid tone the writer took, and her wish to become famous. Like Anne Frank's, this diary had also been published and

⁶⁵ Dienke HONDIUS, *Absent. Herinneringen aan het Joods Lyceum Amsterdam 1941-1943*, Amsterdam, Vassallucci, 2001.

⁶⁶ Philippe LEJEUNE, "Comment Anne Frank a réécrit le Journal d'Anne Frank", in ID., *Les brouillons de soi*, Paris, Seuil, 1998, 331-367.

⁶⁷ Arianne BAGGERMAN - Rudolf DEKKER, "Otto's horloge: Verlichting, deugd en tijd in de achttiende eeuw" in Maria GREVER - Harry JANSEN (ed.), *De ongrijpbare tijd. Temporaliteit en de constructie van het verleden*, Hilversum, Verloren, 2001. Reeks Publikaties van de Faculteit der Historische en Kunstwetenschappen XXXVIII, 97-113. Arianne BAGGERMAN - Rudolf DEKKER, "Otto's Uhr. Zeitbewusstsein im achtzehnten Jahrhundert" in *Von der dargestellten Person zum erinnerten Ich. Europäische Selbstzeugnisse als historische Quellen (1500-1800)* ed. Kaspar VON GREYERZ, Hans MEDICK, Patrice VEIT, Koeln, Boehlau Verlag, 2001, p. 113-135 (Selbstzeugnisse der Neuzeit. Quellen und Darstellungen zur Sozial- und Erfahrungsgeschichte).

⁶⁸ Philippe LEJEUNE, *Le moi des desdemoiselles. Enquête sur le journal de jeune fille*, Paris: Seuil, 1993.

⁶⁹ Integral French publication in several volumes from 1995: *Mon journal: texte integral. I. (11 Janvier - 10 Aout 1873)*, Montesson, Cercle des Amis de Marie Bashkirtseff, 1995.

edited by her father. The edition was intended as a monument for a young person who had died a premature death, which in many other cases was also the reason why a child's diary was to survive. In the 20th century, the writing of a diary as an aid to the development of self-awareness was still propagated by educationalists like Charlotte Bühler. Especially in Germany this tradition was strong.⁷⁰ Along these lines, Anne Frank's diary also has an important function, for today it is often given to young people to read for pedagogical reasons.

During World War II, as will happen in times of crisis, more people kept diaries than in happier times. Thus, a diary by a fellow pupil, Ellen Schwarzschild, has been conserved and published.⁷¹ Isolation through imprisonment has for centuries been a situation in which people have reflected on their own lives.⁷² That the interest in egodocuments relating to the war is growing among historians is also shown by the special issue on this subject of the annual *Oorlogsdocumentatie '40-'45* [War Documentation '40-'45] with contributions by, among others, Barbara Henkes, Solange Leibovici, Chris Vos and Gerrold van der Stroom, editor of the scholarly edition of Anne Frank's diary.⁷³

⁷⁰ Several contributions in Barbara FRIEBERTSHÄUSER and Annedore PRENGEL (ed.), *Handbuch qualitative Forschungsmethoden in der Erziehungswissenschaft*, Weinheim/München: Juventa Verlag, 1997.

⁷¹ Ellen SCHWARZSCHILD, *Tagebuch. Niet lezen als 't U belijft. Nicht lesen Bitte. Onuitwisbare herinneringen 1933-1943*, Amstelveen, Schwarzschild, 1999.

⁷² Rudolf M. DEKKER, "Gevangeniservaringen in Nederlandse egodocumenten uit de 17e en 18e eeuw", in C. FIJNAUT - P. SPIERENBURG (ed.), *Scherp toezicht. Van boeventucht tot samenleving en criminaliteit*, Arnhem, Gouda Quint, 1990, 145-165.

⁷³ *Oorlogsdocumentatie '40-'45. Tiende Jaarboek* N.D.J. Barnouw e.a., red., Zutphen Walburg Pers, 1999.

Awareness has also grown that the author's gender is important for the interpretation of Anne's diary.⁷⁴ Thus, it is significant that the writing of diaries itself was a typical activity of girls, rather than boys. Although Anne regarded her diary as a literary product this side was long ignored. That there is presently more awareness of this aspect, is also a result of the fact that literary theorists have been taking the genre in general more seriously. The diary shows which books Anne read, and especially the influence exerted by popular authors of books for girls like Cissy van Marxveldt.⁷⁵ Appreciation for Anne as a writer has grown, for her originality, her creativity and her remarkable skill in handling Dutch.

The diary of Anne Frank is the best known diary in Dutch, it is read all over the world, has been translated into dozens of languages, and millions of copies have been printed. Yet it has hardly been used as a source by historians, and, until recently, was hardly the object of serious study. Anne Frank's diary, then, is a telling example of the paradox the egodocument presents, as a text that easily takes its reader back to the past, but is notoriously intransigent for professional historians.

6. Conclusion

When Jacques Presser thought up the term egodocument fifty years ago, he was evidently filling a gap. At the same time historians were more suspicious than ever of the texts indicated by the term, such as autobiographies, diaries and so on. Only after Presser's death did new

⁷⁴ Denise DACOSTA, *Anne Frank and Etty Hillesum. Inscribing Spirituality and Sexuality*, New Brunswick NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1998.

⁷⁵ Berteke WAALDIJK, "Reading Anne Frank as a Woman", *Women's Studies International Forum* 16, 1993, 327-335, reprinted in Hyman Aaron ENZER- Sandra SOLOTAROFF-ENZER (ed.), *Anne Frank. Reflections on her life and legacy*, Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 2000.



movements arise, such as the history of mentalities and microstoria, in which autobiographical material plays a central role. The 'linguistic turn' was a development that taught historians to treat such sources differently. The textual aspect is only now getting the attention it deserves, egodocuments are no longer simply regarded as 'sources', but as part of historical research itself, as texts that raise new questions rather than answer old ones. The growing interest has stimulated the search for unknown egodocuments in several countries. However, outside the practice of history, egodocuments have always remained popular. Reading an autobiography or a diary often gives the reader the feeling of being close to the past. Even though that remains an illusion in the eyes of most historians, it is an important function of egodocuments. Anne Frank's diary is an example of this paradox. It has hardly been used as a historical source, but for millions of readers all over the world her diary is a direct and poignant reading experience.