

Contemporary values of life Biographical Dictionaries in the Nineteenth Century

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A biography is not just a description of a life, but also a book. But this has not always been the case. Let's take the nineteenth century for example. A biography was often a feature in the newspaper; a mobile movie theatre in a tent where the first movies were shown; two, three or even four part biographies, but also the portrait of twenty or twentyfive pages of a person, people thought interesting. This takes us directly to the history of books. In the nineteenth century, such a portrait of around twenty pages was usually handed out as a sort of pamphlet at fairs, exhibits or during other types of topical events. In the eighteenth century we knew the phenomenon that biographies were handed out as pamphlets at the market during or directly after the execution of a sentenced criminal.¹ This so-called crime biography or 'criminal biography' almost always had the features of a report. Right now I want to limit myself to those portraits that were sold as separate periodicals and (after about fifteen editions) combined into a book by the publisher at the end of the year, with an additional introduction, corrections and supplements to be put on the market. Such a series was *Mannen van Beteekenis in onze dagen* (Men of Significance in our days), published during 1870 till 1875 by the well-known publisher A.C Kruseman.² After eighteen-seventy-five the series was continued by Kruseman in collaboration with his fellow-townsmen, the publisher from Haarlem Tjeenk Willink, from eighteen-ninety-five till nineteenth-twentyone under the title *Mannen en vrouwen van Beteekenis in onze dagen* (Men and women of Significance in our days). Although George Sand already featured in the Men-series. 'The mind knows no gender and for the mind alone the pantheon is accesible', was the chance argument to include her.³ In that sense, the editors followed topicality: women played no role of any description in public life, but when the newspapers copied (mostly) foreign obituaries, the editors of the fortnightly periodical *Mannen van beteekenis* (Men of Significance) did not want to remain behind.

In this lecture I would like to show you, using *Mannen van Beteekenis* (Men of Significance), what, by comparison, the role and the intended goal of such biographical texts was, which values and importances the selected persons represent. And I will also expand on biographical texts that, in the nineteenth century, were products of journalistic activities.

A literary researcher by the name of A.C. Pelsler, published a study on the theory of the biography just recently in Pretoria.⁴ It is characteristic that Pelsler, in his 'Slotbeskouing' ('Concluding observations'), concludes that in South Africa there is no comprising study on the biographical genre. In the wake of this determination, he comes to several hypotheses, under which:

- the limited biography in South Africa has as a result that biographers are compelled to fall back to English and American models.
- There is a need for a theoretical substantiation to analyse the modern but also the older biography

Just like in the Netherlands, in South Africa the American New Critics (at least till nineteenseventy), had a profound influence on students of literature, in the sense that research of literature should only concern the text, the structure of a novel was the only explanation of its meaning. Personal backgrounds of the writer were off-limits. New Critics followed the spirit of the time, as the number of biographies that appeared in the United States of America shows. In nineteentwentyone there were sixhundredandsixtyseven, in nineteensixtytwo it was exactly the same number while the population of the United States of America had increased by fifty percent.⁵ Worldwide, just as the German literature social scientist Christian Klein calculated, in nineteeneightytwo hundredthousandfourhundredandeightytwo biographies appeared.⁶

Just like in other countries, in South Africa the discussion takes place about the question whether the biography is part of literature or if biographical research is a form of historiography. The discussion is also somewhat determined by the circumstantiality that in the United States of America, as well as in the Netherlands and South Africa, the biography, in the nineteenth century, was almost always about historians and politicians, and much less about writers.

The terms 'literature' and 'biography' share a common birthday in the eighteenth century in France.⁷ But already in the nineteenth century the meanings of the two terms drifted apart from each other. Or, as Gustave Flaubert wrote in a letter in eightteenfiftytwo: 'I do not believe that the pen has the same instinct as the heart.' The biographer may be interested in the personal life of the artist, but for Flaubert this has nothing to do with his art.' Biographical research is a profoundly misleading basis for the reading of literature. Proust has said something along those lines. In other words, for a long period the discussion whether or not the biography is a form of literature is an old discussion. And it is not just the writers who agree with

this claim, it is also the biographers themselves who wanted to be considered literary authors.

We are dealing with the following contradistinction: Biographical approaches to literature versus Literary approaches to biography. It is an interesting antithesis that incorporates much more than wordplay. The biographical approaches to literature in my opinion came into existence with the birth of literary criticism. Since the beginning, reviewers of newspapers have been captivated by biographica as a means to make their judgements on literary texts more plausible, to attract readers and because in a certain way, they wanted to ascribe 'truth' to literature and compare this with the reality outside of literature.

The literary approaches to biography keeps in step with the esteem of literature. There, where literary texts are held in great respect, biographers want to establish themselves as literary authors who, like novelists, forge their material from reality into a piece of art. In doing so, they do the exact opposite from what critics of novels do, which is, they do not support the positioning of their work with 'truth' from reality, but instead by asking attention for their literary working method in their biography. That is why authors of fiction are usually used as examples of biographers who also wrote biographies or autobiographies. The most well-known example is the autobiography of André Gide, *Si le grain ne meurt*. This book has been included into the international literary canon, but if Gide had not become famous as literary writer this book would have never have gotten this status. So be it.

Still, the reader of biographical texts will appreciate his reading-matter differently than when reading a novel. It is not so much the factualness of biographies that distinguishes the genre from novels, as it is mainly the claim that the information that has been brought to the fore is reliable in its factuality. A lot of the biographies in *Mannen van Beteekenis* (Men of Significance) were written by experts, historians, biographers but also by in those days well-known novelists. The canvas or the style of those biographies, how different in nature they might be, do not tell whether they were written by a literary writer or someone else. Fiore della Neve (pseudonym of M.G.L. van Loghum) and Pol de Mont worked as brothers on the series next to a selection of people who are not known as novelists like P.L. Tak, J.A. Alberting Thijm and H. Tiedeman.

How is it that we do not find this difference back in the texts? In the nineteenth century in Germany, England, France and probably in many more countries, the so-called biographical dictionary was in great demand. The focus on a single individual is not the most characteristic form taken by the

biography in this period, and the generic prestige of the biography is predominantly a collective phenomenon.⁸ Extensive biographies of individuals were written in the second half of the nineteenth century, but preceding that development was the high flight the genre of the biographical encyclopedia took.

Between eightteeneleven and eightteentwentyeight, Louis-Gabriel Michaud had his fiftytwopart *Biographie universelle ancienne et moderne* released. In England the development got under way somewhat later. Leslie Stephen and his successor Sidney Lee were responsible for the sixtysix parts that were released between eightteeneightyfive and nineteen-o-one of the *Dictionary of National Biography*. By researchers, Stephen was considered a source of inspiration until well into the twentieth century as theorician of biographies.⁹ The eightteeneightyfour and onward produced *Oxford English Dictionary* by Herbert Coleridge (grandson of the poet) contained, since the beginning, an alarming amount of biographical information. It was this tradition, that caused Kruseman to start his *Mannen van Beteekenis* (Men of Significance) in eightteenseventy.

It is striking that in these encyclopedic biographies, literature did not get a privileged status with respect to other forms of human activity. And there are no signs that the writers of these biographical texts had any literary aspirations, even though novelists were industrious contributors to these biographical series. Likely to earn some extra money, just as when the massification of the press took place, writers were eager to write articles for the newspaper so earn something extra. The latter is also important in a different respect.

Biographies existed in another, less prestigious but equally collective and widely recognized form: they were a regular feature in the press where they constituted a journalistic subgenre on a par with the *chronique* or the *roman-feuilleton* which became established with the growth of the press. As an example, Eugène de Mirecourt provided for a small series of pamphlets, halfway during the nineteenth century in France, called *Les Contemporains*. On a weekly base he delivered a short biography of a contemporary, usually still alive. De Mirecourt was a journalist, but paraded himself as ‘Le biographe’. De Mirecourt was also working towards a biographical encyclopedia, in which he had his pamphlets reprinted as a book, with supplements. And indeed, in eightteenseventysix, his fourpart *Histoire contemporaine: Portraits et silhouettes au XIX siècle* was released. Not only the manifestation was different, from pamphlet to book, also the ambition and status shifted. Like the minor adjustment of the title suggests, from *Les contemporains* (with an s at the end) to *Histoire contemporaine* (with an e at

the end) it was not so much about the individual importance of Musset, Hugo, Lamartine or Balzac, but moreso about the contemporary history these people were part of. So this is not an example of the collective biography, whatever that may be, but about the collective way in which biographies were offered to put central theme's on stage. A nice example of: the contents answer to the description but other contents can also answer to the description. The biography – the individual story about and individual in his most individual quality – gained an immense popularity, thanks to the collective way of spreading it, in series, or perhaps it is better to speak of the omnibus. The publishers were interested in this popularity under broad layers of society, to stimulate sales, but also from a journalistic or scientific point of view this collective presentation is interesting because these biographies, by comparison, clarify the values and standards of the time in which it is written, while biographies that were not released in series put more emphasis on the uniqueness of the described person. Hidden within this is probably the reason why the biography in the nineteenth century was a cultural historic variant of traditional historiography, sprouted from journalism. 'Biography makes better history than history itself.' The argument for this as provided by Michaud: biography supplies us with the details of behaviour and private habits, was used by Balzac in almost the same wordings in his preface of the *Comedian humaine* to argue that literary texts are hence a more profound form of conventional historiography.¹⁰

About the geographer August Peterman was said, in *Mannen van Beteekenis* (Men of Significance), that his qualities that are not in relation to his scientific discoveries during his travels to Africa, were not mentioned. Only the good things were put into words, the interpretation and personal backgrounds of those were not necessary, so people maintained.

The anonymously published biography of the French military man and politician Charles Guillaume Marie Apollinaire Antoine Cousin-Montauban, count de Palikao (seventeenninety-six – eightteenseventyeight), still alive when his lemma was written in eightteenseventy, starts with the apology that not all men in *Mannen van Beteekenis* (Men of Significance) were that special, with such a requirement the series would rapidly be exhausted. 'But big enough is the number of those statesmen and of those influential men, who, although not the most excellent or the ones best up to their task, by coincidence or because of circumstances play a significant part in the history of their country.'¹¹ On the cover of the first issue of *Mannen van Beteekenis* (Men of Significance), concerning Bismarck, it is written that it 'unfortunately! are the men of war that attract everyone's attention, it is the

Editors' dearest wish to shortly be able to devote their heartfelt sympathy to the heroes of peace'. The biography, as this and many other remarks show, was appreciated for sociological rather than psychological qualities.

Especially in journalism, the 'biography contemporaine' (with and e at the end) was used to put the ruling notion of what was culturally appreciated to the test. For newspapers the biographical method became a form that offered possibilities to get closer to the skin of time, by judging people of name and fame, of significance so to say, using a social mold of what was considered a desirable life. All resources were acceptable, even if it would mean digging up intimate details about well-known people. It was seen as something typically journalistic, a vulgar need of the common people. The newspaper for the commons, the book for cultivated citizens. Originating in that fear for news and topicality is the widely heard distress call: the newspaper is killing the book! One can compile a fine anthology of quotes that tell us the journalist is utilitarian and the writer is altruistic and self-sacrificing to the ideal of a higher esthetical goal. In other words: the journalist served no higher purpose, the public opinion was a sleeping monster that could wake up at any moment to throw the vulgar herd into commotion. And something similar applies to the biographer as well, unless he regarded himself as a hagiographer for a noble person.

J. Barbey d'Aurevilly spoke of the Siamese twins of a single vanity, and he meant the biography and photography. His conclusion was that the biography has nothing to do with literature and all the more with journalism, mainly because of the cheapening of history. Chances are he was simply right, the democratization of society resulted in a curiosity amongst people that played a part in public life, that is when the biography gets into the picture. As early as 1850 the American photographer and photographic galleryowner Matthew Brady produced a book, in installments, of lithographs based on photographs, which he called *The Gallery of Illustrious Americans*.

Publishers zeroed in on the public's demand to see the faces of famous people, by bringing out photo books such as *Men of mark: a gallery of contemporary portraits of men distinguished in the senate, the church, in science, literature and art, the army, navy, law, medicine etc.* (London 1876), *Galerie contemporaine, littéraire, artistique* (Paris 1876-1894) and in the Netherlands *Onze hedendaagse letterkundigen* (Our contemporary men-of-letters) compiled by Jan ten Brink (1885). The portraits in these collectors' albums, which came out in serial form, are sharp and unadorned by photographers' props and such like. The important thing was to express the character of the person portrayed. Among the politicians and scientists

portrayed in these ‘galleries’, we also find writers, such as Victor Hugo and Jules Verne.

The English theorician of biography Sidney Lee even says: 'Biography exists to satisfy a natural instinct in man - the commemorative instinct - the universal desire to keep alive the memories of those who character and exploits have distinguished themselves from the mass of mankind.¹² The problem of the condemning tone of Barbey d'Aurevilly about the biography is that such a proces of ‘cheapening of history’ had also taken place in the belles lettres.

Already at the start of the nineteenth century literature was of influence on journalism and the influence of journalism on literature was equally effective. That meant that journalists let themselves be influenced by writers (the journalistic portrait in the newspaper became a full-fledged biography, from newspaper to book so to say) or that writers who worked as journalists, that proces culminated in authors like Zola who in their literary novels took over the working methods of journalism. The biography as a journalistic genre, with a bad reputation, had to distance itself from the somewhat popular reputation if that same biography through releasing series was more and more used to want to represent the cultivated world of citizens. Out of that felt necessity the series *Mannen van beteekenis* (Men of significance) is a direct and logical result.

On the twentyseventh of September eightteensixtynine Kruseman wrote to the Parisian publisher Hachette: 'Je me propose de publier au commencement de 1870 un nouvel ouvrage périodique, intitulé *Histoires de nos jours*.

It had to be a periodical, so Kruseman wrote to Hachette, containing important biographies and obituaries of illustrious personalities. According to his biographer Enschedé: ‘Men of significance thank or blame their roots to the important events of eightteenseventy, when the breaking out of the French-German war brought all sorts of political or military men of consequence on stage, in which the public more or less had to show an immediate interest.’

In the short editorial of the bookseries the editors wrote: ‘People, whose names appear in the dailies on a daily base, cannot be strangers to the readers; (...) for the rest a remembrance of that which they already know might be pleasant.’

So the intention was not to provide new information, but to emphasize once more what others had said about these important people. Straightforwardly they said that the topical value was held as more important

than accuracy, resulting in quite some mistakes in the original texts of the periodical. But this remark seems to have been an argument to boost sales, because, now that the biographies were combined into a book, the editors had erased all the mistakes. This way, the readers of the periodical had to buy the collection most definitely!

Moreover, it was communicated that the initial plan had been to just include men of significance still alive, but gradually the editors found out that the real selection only takes place after death. It is likely this was also an occasional argument to keep the bookrelease topical.¹³

The editorial in the first bookrelease of *Mannen van Beteekenis* (Men of Significance) makes clear that journalism developed into historiography, but that process was not entrusted to historians. The periodical *Mannen van Beteekenis* (Men of Significance) appeared under varying chief editors, but without exception they were all journalists. Kruseman had asked them because they 'could be considered to have the necessary resources next to being skilful stylists'. In eightteenseventyfive N.C. Balsem became chief editor. It was under the rule of Balsem that the series had such a great success, so great that *Mannen van Beteekenis* (Men of Significance) became a set expression.¹⁴

From encyclopedia to biographical dictionary to biography takes the same route as the attention for the individual in the press and in society. Halfway during the nineteenth century we see an increasing attention for the self-consciousness in poetry, politics and therefore also in the attention for individuals. Biographical periodicals like *Mannen van Beteekenis* (Men of Significance) are a manifestation of that, preparing for the critical modern biographies of the twentieth century.

¹ P.J. Buijnsters, *Levens van bevruchte personen*, p. 11.

² Er viel bij bundeling ook wel eens wat weg, zo ging de tijdschriftaflevering over Otto, Graaf van Bismarck-Schönhausen vergezeld van een facsimile van het 'Geheim tractaat tusschen Frankrijk en Pruisen, tot verdeeling van België en Nederland'.

³ Deel 3, p. 197

⁴ Abraham Christoffel Pelser, *Die literêre biografie - 'n terreinverkenning*, Verhandeling voorgelê ter vervulling van die vereisten vir die graad MAGISTER ARTIUM in Afrikaans in die Fakulteit Geesteswetenskappe aan die Universiteit van Pretoria, [Pretoria] 2001.

⁵ Pelser, p. 6

⁶ Christian Klein, 'Einleitung: Biographik zwischen Theorie und Praxis. Versuch einer Bestandaufnahme', in: idem, *Grundlagen der Biographik. Theorie und Praxis des biographischen Schreibens*, Verlag J.B. Metzler, Stuttgart/Weimar 2002, p. 1-22.

⁷ Ann Jefferson, *Biography and the Question of Literature in France*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2007.

⁸ Jefferson, p. 83.

⁹ Zie de inaugurele rede van Sidney Lee, *Principles of Biography*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1911.

¹⁰ Jefferson. Zie ook Pieter Stikvis en Marita Mathijssen, 'Literatuur en maatschappij. Het beeld van de burgerlijke levensstijl in Nederlandse romans 1840-1910', in: Pieter Stokvis (red.), *Geschiedenis van het priéleven. Bronnen en benaderingen*, OUNL/SUN, Heerlen/Amsterdam 2007, p. 385-407.

¹¹ [Anoniem], Hippoutte Cotjsin De Mochtauban, graaf van Palikao

¹² Lee, p. 7.

¹³ Redactie, 'Voorberigt' bij *Mannen van Beteekenis in onze Dagen*, november 1870.

¹⁴ Enschedé, p. 263 noemt hier: H.A. Woelders, *Spreuken en gezegden van mannen van beteekenis op het gebied der lichamelijke opvoeding*.