

Hyperlink on Childhood in Egodocuments

Rudolf Dekker: *Childhood, Memory and Autobiography in Holland from the Golden Age to Romanticism*, London / New York 1999, 126.

It is apparent that for many novelists actual childhood experiences served as the basis for their works. However, it still remains unclear how they reworked those into literature. It is unusual that this process is documented. The only exception in the nineteenth century is Albert Steenbergen.

Albert Steenbergen was born in 1814 and was a quite successful painter. Later he became municipal treasurer in the small town of Hoogeveen. He started to write after he had secured a steady income. He produced a small oeuvre, and translated Goethe's 'Faust' into Dutch. In the library of the University of Leiden there is a document which, according to the catalogue, is his autobiography. This bundle of papers contains the moving story of a person who became an invalid following a serious childhood illness. Closer examination illustrates that the date of birth of the author does not correlate with Steenbergen's. It came to light that almost the same story but this time in the third person was published by Steenbergen in a journal. Finally, in a family archive, his real autobiography was discovered, and this time the details correspond with official documents. Thus there are three surviving 'autobiographies' of Albert van Steenbergen. Each time he made a different reconstruction of his childhood. Various details shed light on the process. For instance, Steenbergen was indeed affected by partial paralysis during his earliest youth. In his genuine autobiography he revealed the true story: the cause was not a disease, but his nanny who had dropped him on the floor.

The manner in which Steenbergen moulded his personal experiences into literature illustrates how an autobiography can evolve into a novel. This case is exemplary for a general literary development. After 1800, the way autobiographers recollected their childhood changed, and a few decades later, this process emerged into a genre of childhood memories.

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