

Modelling the Individual

Biography and Portrait in the Renaissance

With a Critical Edition of Petrarch's
Letter to Posterity

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INTRODUCTION

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One of the puzzling aspects of Renaissance culture is what Burckhardt has called "the rise of the individual". In his *Die Kultur der Renaissance in Italien* it is a *leitmotif* penetrating all other aspects of the new culture: politics, social life, the arts, religion and the mentality of Renaissance man — his inclination to explorations, inventions and discoveries ("Die Entdeckung der Welt und des Menschen"). Although some of Burckhardt's conclusions are far-fetched — as they are very much influenced by his background, the *Bürgerkultur* of nineteenth-century Switzerland — his views have given rise to a problem that deserves closer attention. On the one hand, it is true that the categories of art which depict individual persons increased to a spectacular degree in the Renaissance: *biography* and *portrait* are among the most popular genres of its art and literature. Of nearly every Renaissance writer, even of minor ones, we possess one or more biographies, while biographies were also collected to constitute comprehensive series such as the *Lives of the Popes* (for example, Platina), the *Lives of military leaders* (for example, Giovio), the *Lives of writers* (Giovio), and the *Lives of artists* (for example, Vasari and Karel van Mander). Series of writer's biographies represent the first efforts to compose literary history, and series of artist's biographies were the first steps towards art history. Furthermore, the genre of autobiography emerged, with some striking specimens (Petrarch, Enea Silvio Piccolomini, Cardano). With respect to the arts, there was an enormous production of painted portraits, many of them representing individual detail and, as such, deserving the qualification "realistic". The painter's self-portrait developed, in a sense parallel to the development of the genre of autobiography: first modestly in the framework of religious narrative paintings, but later on more explicitly and daringly, in the form of autonomous self-portraits in which the painter represented himself as a nobleman or as an artist.

On the other hand, the very fact that Burckhardt's theory of the rise of the individual was regarded as convincing dissuaded following generations of researchers from closer analysis. However, *interest in individual persons is not necessarily the same as the — modern — interest in purely individualistic aspects of persons*. This is the problem of Burckhardt's theory in a nutshell and one of the main themes of this book. In marked difference to Burckhardt's views, the Renaissance to us is no longer predominantly a mirror of modernity, but rather a period of stimulating alterity. The literary and artistic traditions, the social and ideological backgrounds, the motives of the production of literature have changed profoundly: Renaissance biography and autobiography and portraiture and self-portraiture have little to do with modern biography and portraiture. It is the aim of the contributors to this collection of essays to create a better understanding of Renaissance biographies and portraits through an analysis and reconstruction of the traditions, contexts, backgrounds and circumstances of literary and artistic production.

Through these articles it will become clear that the Renaissance was not a period entirely dominated by tradition, but, in intellectual and artistic terms, one of rapid development and remarkable changes. In the field of literature, new intellectuals appeared — the humanists. For them self-definition was paramount as they had to contend for a position within the existing framework of intellectual life: the church, the courts and the universities. Biography and autobiography flourished, since they constituted the most important media for the self-definition of these new intellectuals. Petrarch's autobiography, the *Letter to Posterity* and Boccaccio's *Biography of Petrarch* are landmarks in this respect, because they offered the relevant models for humanistic self-definition.

In the course of the Renaissance the efforts of the intellectuals at self-definition are characterized by an ever growing self-confidence, as one may infer from the increased interest in biographical and autobiographical representation, which came to include more and more aspects of the personality. One of the new issues concerns the description of the physical appearance — an aspect introduced by Boccaccio and Petrarch. They were the reason that a chapter on the physical appearance became an obligatory part of Renaissance autobiography. This development led to the puzzling autobiography of the Italian physician and scholar Gerolamo Cardano, who explained his personality in the first place by a profound analysis of his physical peculiarities, and, above all, by a daring step: autobiography as the history of a person's physical (and mental) shortcomings. In the present series of essays, one by Anne van Galen is entirely dedicated to Cardano's innovation.

Other important developments with respect to self-definition by the Renaissance painters can be observed. The rise of the self-portrait and the innovative painter's biographies (Vasari, Karel van Mander) show the painters' battle for social recognition as well as their growing self-confidence. The Renaissance painters — unlike their medieval predecessors — wanted to be regarded not just as craftsman, but as "artists", as equals to the men of literature. In the history of the self-portrait, we see this phenomenon in the rise of the autonomous self-portrait, as well as in its development from the simple self-portrait to self-representations as a *gentiluomo* and/or an artist and, finally, to playful reflections about the role of artist and the status of the art of painting. Anton Boschloo discusses these development with regard to Italian Renaissance painting, while Eric Jan Sluijter focuses on the latter step in his analysis of a series of self-portraits by sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Dutch painters.

The Renaissance was a period of some spectacular innovations and discoveries. Certainly one of the most important was the discovery of a new continent. Burckhardt interpreted this according to his thesis of "die Entdeckung der Welt und des Menschen": Renaissance man, he claimed, had an innate interest in discovering new things. In Burckhardt's opinion, the discovery of America meant a fundamental extension and change of the then existing *Weltbild*. Recent research, among others by Wolfgang Neuber, however, has demonstrated that to some extent exactly the opposite was the case: that the discovery of the New World did not fundamentally change the Europeans' *Weltbild*, but that the picture of the New World was created by the conceptions of the Old World. Europeans were not so much concerned to perceive new things; rather, they used the "alterity" of the new discoveries to reinforce their self-definition: the conception of the "Red Indian" is, in fact, a mirror of the "civilized" European identity and its contemporary problems.

Alterity and individual representation, however, form an unequal partnership. When the Europeans stressed the alterity of the Indians, it was for them, as Wolfgang Neuber shows, nearly impossible to render them as individuals. On the other hand, when European travellers were willing to represent certain Indians, such as chieftains, in European categories and terms, they were able to render them as individuals, as Sonia Rose demonstrates in her essay dealing with the Aztec king Moctezuma.

These changes and developments will be reflected in the present series of studies. It seemed practical to present these essays in the chronological order of their subject-matter. First the outlines of the new Renaissance

biography are drawn by discussing its starting point — Boccaccio's *Biography of Petrarch* (1342) and the *Letter to Posterity* (1371/2) by Petrarch, the "Father of Humanism". Petrarch's autobiography, either directly or indirectly, became an authoritative model for humanist biography, while Petrarch's life became the model for a humanist's life. However, despite the enormous importance of the work, there is still no satisfactory analysis of its structure, and no correct picture of its main sources and its genesis. Karl Ehenkel tries to fill this gap with the first article, and because there is still no reliable edition, we also offer at the end of this book a new critical edition with an English translation.

Anton Boschloo discusses in a substantial overview the self-portrait in Italian Renaissance painting, from c. 1380 to c. 1600. It should be noted that no general study about the self-portrait in the Italian Renaissance exists as yet. Boschloo carefully analyses the development of the self-portrait from being an element of religious narrative paintings to its status as an autonomous self-portrait. In the first early modern self-portraits, the painters appear as (often anonymous) spectators at the edge of the paintings, drawn *en profile*, as, for example, Altichiero in his *Deathbed of Saint Lucia* in the Oratory of S. George in Padua (1384). In the course of the development of the religious narrative, the artists gradually gave themselves a more important role, when they started to depict themselves as looking at the spectator, thus functioning as a intermediary between the depicted scene and the spectator; good examples of this development are Benozzo Gozzoli's self-portrait in his famous *Adoration of the Magi* in the chapel of the Palazzo Medici in Florence (1459), and Botticelli's in a wall painting with the same theme in the S. Maria Novella in Florence (1470s).

Pietro Perugino's famous self-portrait in the Collegio del Cambio in Perugia (1500) is one of the landmarks of self-portraiture, since it is the first autonomous self-portrait of the Early Modern period. The inscription under the self-portrait demonstrates the enormous self-confidence that inspired this Renaissance painter: "Pietro Perugino, the distinguished painter, has restored the art of painting if it had been lost. If it has not yet been invented anywhere, then he himself has invented it here".

Boschloo discusses other landmarks of Renaissance (self-)portraiture like Titian's self-portraits, in Berlin (c. 1550) and in the Prado (1560s). In the Prado painting the artist not only presents himself as a socially distinguished person, but for the first time also as an artist. This sign of the painter's new confidence enters the history of painting almost casually, as a kind of afterthought: the painter is represented in his best clothes, in full social ornament — but in contrast there appears in the right lower corner (in the painter's right hand), rather surprisingly, the

painter's brush. An important part of Boschloo's study forms the section about "The self-portrait as a statement about painting". Boschloo discusses this interesting new development with regard to the example of the mannerist Annibale Carracci's brilliant and innovative *Self-portrait on an Easel*.

Portraiture, of course, was not limited to men of literature and of the arts. As, for example, Andrea del Castagno's famous cycle of paintings in the Villa Carducci shows, army commanders also constituted a very important category of persons that "deserved" portraits. Jan de Jong analyses the image of military commanders (*condottieri*) which was created either by their employers, the towns, or their families. He uses as his examples four famous portraits of *condottieri*: Paolo Ucello's monumental painting of John Hawkwood (1436), and Andrea del Castagno's portrait of Niccolò da Tolentino (1455/6), both in the Cathedral of Florence; and two impressive statues on horseback, Donatello's *Gattamelata* (1446-1450) and Verrocchio's *Colleoni* (1496), both of which were frequently used as icons of the artistic progress of the Renaissance. Jan de Jong's study sheds a light on the purpose, the artistic tradition and the ideology behind these portraits. It becomes clear that the most important aim of the artists (and of their patrons) was not to underline individualistic traits of these army leaders nor "realism" as such, but to present them in an idealized and heroic way, in an ideological context which points to the tradition of classical antiquity. Donatello's *Gattamelata*, for instance, calls to mind the statue of the Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius on the Capitoline Hill in Rome, and the shapes of his face resemble portraits of Roman antiquity, notably that of Julius Caesar. In Burckhardt's *Die Kultur der Renaissance in Italien*, Donatello's *Gattamelata* and Verrocchio's *Colleoni* were taken as typical examples of Renaissance individualism. In De Jong's study, however, it appears that the representational aspects of these statues were far more important than their realistic and individualistic features.

In the conceptional framework of identity and alterity indicated, Wolfgang Neuber demonstrates the manner in which the early modern travellers to the New World, such as Columbus, Amerigo da Vespucci and Hans Staden, depicted the indigenous Americans. Neuber shows that, although the European travellers based themselves on the rich topology of Latin rhetorical handbooks concerning praise and blame, they almost exclusively focused on bodily categories: the strength, beauty, the dark complexion and, above all, the cannibalism and nakedness of the Indians. Traditional European conceptions, such as those of Paradise and of the Golden Age, the rhetorical topology and the religious background, were decisive factors in the portrait the Europeans drew of the indigenous

Americans. To get an idea of the importance of the European conceptional (and religious) background, one only has to remember the Protestant writer Hans Staden who regarded his stay in South America as a prisoner of the cannibalistic Tupinamba as proof for the truth of his religious beliefs. Neuber's article offers a glimpse at the Renaissance discussion about the moral qualities of the Indians. Opinions varied: thus we see the picture of Indians as noble savages living in the ideal state before the Fall (as, for example, Columbus wanted to see them), next to their portrayal as sinners who have not escaped the Fall (Amerigo Vespucci and others). In Vespucci's opinion, the Indians were even worse than animals: "Other meat than human flesh they very rarely eat. By devouring human flesh they have become so inhuman and uncivilized that in this they surpass the ferocity of all animals." One can understand that such a stress on the uncivilized, even inhuman state of the Indians thwarted European writers to describe them as individuals.

Sonia Rose demonstrates in another respect how deeply the portrait of the Indians was influenced by European literary traditions. She analyses the literary portrait of sixteenth-century Spanish American historiography, above all in the chronicles of Lopez de Gomara (1552) and Bernal Díaz del Castillo (1575). Her article shows that the portrait of the famous Aztec chieftain Moctezuma was influenced by the Spanish mirrors of princes, such as Alfonso the Wise's *Siete partidas* and *Setenario*. These works offered to the historians the categories and conceptions enabling them to idealize an Indian king. In their portraits of Moctezuma, Lopez de Gomara and Bernal Díaz attribute to the Indian not only the virtues but also the lifestyle expected of an European monarch. These categories also enabled them to depict an indigenous American as an individual, something which was, as Wolfgang Neuber has shown, hindered by alterity. The model of the mirrors of princes, however, also caused some restrictions as to the individual detail: primarily favourable aspects (that would fit the princely ideal) were transmitted. But fortunately, their idealizing tendency did not impede Lopez de Gomara and Bernal Díaz from delivering striking details about the customs and habits of Moctezuma, about his women, his personal hygiene, and his physical appearance — all these aspects in the tradition of Suetonian biography.

Bodily aspects play an important role in one of the most famous Neo-Latin autobiographies, *De vita propria* by the Italian scientist and scholar Gerolamo Cardano. This autobiography, however, although an intriguing work, is by no means typical of Neo-Latin autobiography, neither with regard to the mode of presentation nor to its contents. It is remarkable how little interest the author had in social representability (the *decorum*), and how freely he deals with issues about which autobiographers

normally kept silent: his self-mutilation, his attacks of mental disorder, his neurotic fears, and his bodily shortcomings, even his impotency. Anne van Galen focuses in her article on these interesting features of Cardano's autobiography. She unfolds the medical background and analyses the medical conceptions Cardano used for his auto-diagnosis. Furthermore, she shows to what extent other contemporary scientific conceptions and models, such as humoral pathology, physiognomy and metoposcopy influenced Cardano's self-representation.

How intense the Renaissance's interest in biography was, is indicated by the fact that it was frequently parodied. Mock biographies and invective-biographies, distorting a person's life, were favourite genres of the humanists. Paul Smith shows that two highlights of French Renaissance literature, Francois Rabelais' *Pantagruel* and *Gargantua* are in fact composed as mock biographies. Using the prescriptions of the ancient rhetorical handbooks for biography, that is, praise and blame, Smith analyses Rabelais' topical invention and discusses the manner in which he attained his comical effects through the perversion of the "normal" and topical expectations of his contemporary readers. For example, although the Renaissance biographer was expected to say something laudatory about the offspring and descent of his object, Rabelais perverts this topos by composing an enormous genealogy of the giant Pantagruel, with sixty-one ancestors, thus mocking the contemporary preoccupation with genealogy.

Eric Jan Sluijter discusses the self-portraits of Dutch painters, ranging from the Leiden painter-burgomaster Isaac van Swanenburgh (1568) to David Bailly (1651). The way in which these Dutch painters deal with the genre, testifies to their self-confidence as artists and as socially respectable persons. As Sluijter demonstrates, self-definition for them meant to make statements about their art, above all about the illusionistic power of painting to capture transience. Mirrors play an important role in these efforts to transcend the limitations of time and space. Van Swanenburgh, for example, depicted himself in a "doubled" portrait, looking in a mirror: the man outside the mirror represents Van Swanenburgh at the time of painting, while the man in the mirror exhibits an old man — the future Van Swanenburgh. The old man in the mirror points to vanity and transience, but the fact that Van Swanenburgh was able to express this in his painting demonstrates that art gave him the power to overcome transience. Artistic statements like this make clear how proud painters as Van Swanenburgh were of their craftsmanship. Accordingly, the Dutch painters of this period regularly depicted themselves with the tools of their art, the palette and the brushes.

Dutch culture of the seventeenth century offered many occasions for the display of pride and self-confidence. It is no coincidence that this period brought forth some striking autobiographies, such as the one by the diplomat, writer and assistant of the Princes of Orange, Constantijn Huygens (1596-1687). Indeed, Huygens left a remarkable work: a substantial metrical autobiography, *De vita propria sermonum inter liberos libri duo*, composed in the last years of his life. Although Huygens claimed that he wrote it for private use as a kind of educational family book for his sons and their male offspring, he did his very best to deliver it in a perfect form, that is, in the Latin language, embellished with ample rhetorical *ornatus* and with many quotations from ancient authors. Even more remarkable is, as Frans Blom shows, that we never get to see the private Huygens, but always the official, honourable person. In his very self-confident autobiography Huygens not only wanted to give a descriptive narrative of his life, but a moral example as well. His intention was to teach his readers how to become as successful in social and political life as he himself had become. Within this framework, Huygens stresses, as Blom demonstrates, the importance of a broad *gentiluomo*-education.

The fact that Huygens was a self-made man influenced his self-presentation: he did not care much about exercises in modesty and told with nearly naive pride, the story of his success. Given the huge amount of details and facts, Huygens certainly appears as an individual, but his individualistic traits are throughout tempered by the needs of social, and above all, courtly life. Huygens the courtier is not willing to inform us about his physical and mental shortcomings, as Cardano had done. In some cases this tendency takes extreme forms: when, for instance, old Huygens (at the age of eighty-two) compares himself to his younger self at the prime of his life, he maintains that he is still as strong as in his early youth and that his eyesight is still as good as it was then. There is quite some tragedy in these remarks, certainly if one considers that at the time of writing Huygens suffered from severely diminished eyesight, and was so ill that he was unable to leave his bed.

The series concludes with Anton Harmsen's article on seventeenth- and eighteenth-century biographies of Dutch poets. As Harmsen demonstrates, there is still an enormous difference between this type of biography and the beginnings of modern literary history in the nineteenth century. Whereas in the latter the literary production of an author and his artistry (composition, style, etc.) play an important role, the readers of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century biographies were above all interested in the private life of writers. An analysis of the writer's style was rather the exception than the rule. Nevertheless, the biographers of the great

Dutch poets, such as Vondel and Hooft, opened up new horizons, as, for example, Geeraert Brandt did in his *Life of Hooft*, where he analyses Hooft's Tacitean style. Brandt, however, was only one of the many Dutch authors who composed writer's biographies. In his overview, Harmsen offers a glimpse of this rich, but as yet unexplored field of Dutch literature.