

## Ego-Documents: The Last Word?

Kaspar von Greyerz

Britain, and especially England, can take pride in an exceptional collection of early modern diaries, autobiographies and family chronicles. As far as the seventeenth century is concerned, no other European country, as far as the author is aware, is able to claim a comparable wealth of such documents, in terms both of numbers and of content. However, the fast-growing interest among continental historians<sup>1</sup> has not, to date, caught on in Britain. The current increase in interest in mainland Europe was initiated in the early 1990s by a Dutch group led by Rudolf Dekker as a kind of avant-garde in this field. In 1988 Dekker had already published a useful overview of the development of the field up to 1986/87.<sup>2</sup> The Dutch researchers began their work by concentrating on inventories of autobiographical writing in the Netherlands.<sup>3</sup> This in turn generated monograph studies and text editions.<sup>4</sup> In the course of the same decade they were followed by a Swiss research group under the direction of the present author.<sup>5</sup> In following the Dutch example, the Swiss team working at the University of Basel decided to base their research on new bibliographical tools which they established in digital form.<sup>6</sup> Comprehensive

<sup>1</sup> This was documented for the first time in the following conference volume based on a symposium held in 1998: K. von Greyerz, H. Medick and P. Veit, *Von der dargestellten Person zum erinnerten Ich: Europäische Selbstzeugnisse als historische Quellen (1500–1850)* (Selbstzeugnisse der Neuzeit, 9, Cologne, Weimar and Vienna, 2001). F. Brändle, K. von Greyerz, L. Heiligensetzer, S. Leutert and G. Piller, 'Texte zwischen Erfahrung und Diskurs. Probleme der Selbstzeugnisforschung', *ibid.*, pp. 3–31, document the state of the debate at the end of the 1990s. A second international conference in the field was held in Amsterdam in 2000: cf. R. Dekker (ed.), *Egodocuments and History: Autobiographical Writing in its Context since the Middle Ages* (Hilversum, 2002); von Greyerz (ed.), *Selbstzeugnisse in der Frühen Neuzeit. Individualisierungsweisen in interdisziplinärer Perspektive* (Schriften des Historischen Kollegs, Kolloquien, 68, Munich, 2007), documents a small international workshop organized in Munich in 2004.

<sup>2</sup> R. Dekker, 'Egodocumenten. Een literatuuroverzicht', *Tijdschrift voor geschiedenis*, 101 (1988), pp. 161–89.

<sup>3</sup> This is discussed in R. Dekker, 'Egodocuments in the Netherlands from the Sixteenth to the Nineteenth Century', in E. Griffey (ed.), *Envisioning Self and Status: Self Representation in the Low Countries, 1400–1700* (Crossways, 5, Hull, 1999), pp. 255–84.

<sup>4</sup> R. Dekker, *Childhood, Memory and Autobiography in Holland: From the Golden Age to Romanticism* (London, 2000); A. Baggerman and R. Dekker, *Child of the Enlightenment: Revolutionary Europe Reflected in a Boyhood Diary* (Leiden, 2009).

<sup>5</sup> S. Leutert and G. Piller, 'Deutschschweizerische Selbstzeugnisse (1500–1800) als Quellen der Mentalitätsgeschichte: Ein Forschungsbericht', *Schweizerische Zeitschrift für Geschichte*, 49 (1999), pp. 197–221; von Greyerz, 'Deutschschweizerische Selbstzeugnisse (1500–1800) als Quellen der Mentalitätsgeschichte. Bericht über ein Forschungsprojekt', in K. Arnold, S. Schmolinsky and U.M. Zahnd (eds), *Das dargestellte Ich. Studien zu Selbstzeugnissen des späteren Mittelalters und der frühen Neuzeit* (Selbstzeugnisse des Mittelalters und der beginnenden Neuzeit, 1, Bochum, 1999), pp. 147–63; von Greyerz, 'Was it Enjoyable? Attitudes towards Pleasure of English and German Early Modern Autobiographers', in Greyerz, Medick and Veit, *Europäische Selbstzeugnisse*, pp. 183–98; von Greyerz, 'Erfahrung und Konstruktion. Selbstrepräsentation in autobiographischen Texten des 16. und 17. Jahrhunderts', in S. Burghartz, M. Christadler and D. Nolde (eds), *Berichten, Erzählen, Beherrschen. Wahrnehmung und Repräsentation in der frühen Kolonialgeschichte Europas* (Zeitsprünge, 7, Heft 2/3, Frankfurt/Main, 2003), pp. 220–39. A second Swiss centre of research on early modern self-writing promoted by Danièle Tosato-Rigo is taking shape at the University of Lausanne.

<sup>6</sup> The work of this group is documented by a data bank on Swiss German early modern *Selbstzeugnisse*: <http://selbstzeugnisse.histsem.unibas.ch/>.

inventaries, as they exist today for the Netherlands and for German-speaking Switzerland during the early modern period, have not yet materialized in Austria and Germany. Given the geographical size of Germany, and the concomitant number of archive and library holdings which would have to be covered, this lacuna is not at all surprising. To date, in the case of Austria, there is a selective survey, established by Harald Tersch for the years 1400 to 1650,<sup>7</sup> and for Germany Benigna von Krusenstjern has composed a very useful compendium of published texts from the period of the Thirty Years War.<sup>8</sup> The number of German specialists is in fact increasing rapidly.<sup>9</sup> French historians, who have worked on French *livres de raison* for some time, are in the process of connecting their research with that of colleagues in other European countries,<sup>10</sup> and pioneering individual work is also being done in Spain<sup>11</sup> and Italy.<sup>12</sup> By and large, these activities have not yet caught on in Britain. Could it be that the comparatively abundant proliferation of such documents in early modern Britain has not made such texts appear as unusual and, therefore, as interesting as they do in German-speaking areas? Or can we explain the increased interest in such research in Germany simply as a strong reaction against the previous supremacy of a *Strukturgeschichte*, which consciously neglected the historical subject in favour of collective entities? No such reaction would have been needed in British scholarship, as this kind of historical approach never dominated its agenda to any comparable extent. Hence perhaps the comparative lack of interest in the sort of texts we are considering here.

If this second explanation is appropriate, what can we then say about Dutch research? During the 1990s and, in fact, before the rise in interest in Germany picked up speed and momentum, Dutch research on early modern and nineteenth-century diaries, autobiographies and family chronicles was animated almost single-handedly by

<sup>7</sup> H. Tersch, *Österreichische Selbstzeugnisse des Spätmittelalters und der frühen Neuzeit (1400–1650)* (Vienna, 1998).

<sup>8</sup> B. von Krusenstjern, *Selbstzeugnisse der Zeit des Dreissigjährigen Krieges: Beschreibendes Verzeichnis* (Selbstzeugnisse der Neuzeit, 6, Berlin, 1997).

<sup>9</sup> A. Völker-Rasor, *Bilderpaare—Paarbilder. Die Ehe in Autobiographien des 16. Jahrhunderts* (Rombach Wissenschaft, Reihe Historiae 2, Freiburg i.Br., 1993); Arnold, Schmolinsky and Zahnd, *Das dargestellte Ich*; O. Ulbricht, 'Ich-Erfahrung. Individualität in Autobiographien', in R. van Dülmen (ed.), *Entdeckung des Ich. Die Geschichte der Individualisierung vom Mittelalter bis zur Gegenwart* (Cologne, Weimar and Vienna 2001), pp. 109–44; G. Jancke, *Autobiographie als soziale Praxis. Beziehungskonzepte in Selbstzeugnissen des 15. und 16. Jahrhunderts im deutschsprachigen Raum* (Selbstzeugnisse der Neuzeit, 10, Cologne, Weimar and Vienna, 2002); E. Kormann, *Ich, Welt und Gott. Autobiographik im 17. Jahrhundert* (Selbstzeugnisse der Neuzeit, 13, Cologne, Weimar and Vienna, 2004); D. Hacke (ed.), *Frauen in der Stadt. Selbstzeugnisse des 16.–18. Jahrhunderts* (Stadt in der Geschichte, 29, Ostfildern, 2004); G. Jancke and C. Ulbricht (eds), *Vom Individuum zur Person. Neue Konzepte im Spannungsfeld von Autobiographietheorie und Selbstzeugnisforschung* (Querelles. Jahrbuch für Frauen und Geschlechterforschung, 10, Göttingen, 2005). See also the series 'Selbstzeugnisse der Neuzeit', originally published by Akademie Verlag, Berlin, and now by Böhlau Verlag, Cologne.

<sup>10</sup> J-P. Bardet and F-J. Ruggiu (eds), *Au plus près du secret des coeurs? Nouvelles lectures historiques des écrits du for privé en Europe du XVIe au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris, 2005); S. Mouysset, *Papiers de famille. Introduction à l'étude des livres de raison (France, XVe-XIXe siècle)* (Rennes, 2007).

<sup>11</sup> For example, J.S. Amelang, *The Flight of Icarus. Artisan Autobiography in Early Modern Europe* (Stanford, 1998); Amelang, 'Spanish Autobiography in the Early Modern Era', in Schulze (ed.), *Ego-Dokumente. Annäherung an den Menschen in der Geschichte* (Selbstzeugnisse der Neuzeit, 2, Berlin, 1996).

<sup>12</sup> For example, C. Cazale Bérard and C. Klapisch-Zuber, 'Mémoire de soi et des autres dans les livres de famille italiens', *Annales*, 59 (2004), pp. 805–26; G. Ciapelli and P.L. Rubin (eds), *Art, Memory, and Family in Renaissance Florence* (Cambridge, 2000); R. Mordenti, 'Les livres de famille en Italie', *Annales*, 59 (2004), pp. 785–804.

Rudolf Dekker and a group of his close friends and colleagues. Their approach was an extremely pragmatic one. Dutch historians in this particular field are not given to the kind of extensive methodology discussions the Germans favour. This has its strength and weaknesses. The strength lies in the abundant proliferation of bibliographical and monograph studies. The main weakness is the lack of interest in a discussion of the adequacy of inherited categories, such as the notion of 'ego-documents'. Unfortunately, this is now a readily accepted and widely used term, which in turn seems to facilitate international scholarly exchange and discussion. The group of French historians led by François-Joseph Ruggiu and Jean-Pierre Bardet, who ran a conference in Paris in December 2006 dedicated to 'Les écrits du for privé en Europe (moyen âge, époque moderne, époque contemporaine)' have now switched to using the notion of ego-documents in an attempt to launch a European network.<sup>13</sup>

This article will argue that the notion of ego-documents is a particularly unfortunate term in dealing with autobiographical texts from centuries earlier than the twentieth century. It is divided into three parts. Part I examines very briefly the discussion in the German and Swiss research described above, from the 1980s to the recent work done in Berlin. Part II explores the career of the notion of ego-documents from Jacob Presser in the late 1950s to Winfried Schulze's contribution to the field, published in two almost identical versions in 1992 and 1996. Part III attempts to formulate some conclusions.

## I

There can be no question that the entire field of research into diaries, autobiographies, family chronicles, travel accounts and letters profited enormously, from the late 1980s onwards, by the shift from a traditional kind of social history towards cultural history. The impact of discourse analysis was particularly significant, as were the theory of gender and the influence of gender theory on the transformation of women's history to the history of gender. If nothing else, these changes destroyed the methodological naïveté, or rather thoughtlessness, with which most historians had approached autobiographies, diaries and family chronicles as historical sources during the 1980s. We were strongly and repeatedly alerted to the fact that this source material is by and large constructed, and that, as a result, it offers little direct access to the daily concerns and thoughts, let alone the actions, of the author being studied. The Foucauldians and linguists furthermore reminded us of the extent to which *Selbstzeugnisse* are cast in a particular language and terminology, which gives shape to the expression of individual consciousness, and that these forms of expression are in essence collective. In their extreme variations such theoretical approaches denied any possibility of gaining access to a historical subject, whether it be through the study of literature or of history, and indeed suggested that there was no qualitative difference between literary fiction and historical narrative. All this has undoubtedly had fruitful consequences, even though many, indeed probably most historians have not chosen to follow one of these roads of apparent methodological purism.

<sup>13</sup> The main title of a European Science Foundation (ESF) exploratory workshop convened by François-Joseph Ruggiu in Bordeaux in May 2008 was 'Ego-documents in a European Context'.

Based on the disqualification of biologically based notions of gender by feminist theoreticians, and on the Foucauldian concept of discourse, Joan Scott radically relativized the historiographical possibility of assessing any experience of a historical subject. Her essay on ‘The Evidence of Experience’ appeared in the autumn of 1991.<sup>14</sup> This had a direct bearing on how we analyse, or are able to analyse, personal narratives. In the wake of Michel Foucault, Philipp Sarasin, a few years later, denounced all attempts to derive from such texts more than insights into the occasional references to personal pain and suffering.<sup>15</sup> These occasional references, he claimed, were the only instances when autobiographical writing actually transcended discourse, and thus allowed a glimpse at personal experience. Other Swiss historians, notably Jakob Tanner, concurred.<sup>16</sup>

However, the heyday of discourse analysis in historical scholarship has passed. While its legacy—especially in terms of sharpening our awareness of the possible methodological pitfalls in dealing with diaries, autobiographies, and similar texts—certainly cannot be denied, its tendency to establish itself as a kind of monocausal orthodoxy has found influential opponents. The Butler and Scott view of physical experience has since been challenged by Loys McNay, Kathleen Canning, Lyndal Roper and many others.<sup>17</sup> As a result, many historians of gender, while studiously trying to avoid the damning reproach of essentialism, have since occupied or re-occupied a middle ground between pure constructivism and the evidence of experience offered by their sources.

In research on eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century personal narratives, Gudrun Piller, largely committed to discourse analysis in her earlier work,<sup>18</sup> has suggested that autobiographers do and can create their own discourses.<sup>19</sup> However, one would have to add that they do not do so individually because discourses can only be what they are by being collective. As a result, we must acknowledge that personal narratives, both in reproducing and in creating discourse, are deeply embedded in a collective context. This is what was suggested several years ago in an essay by Natalie Zemon Davis on Michel de Montaigne. Most literary scholars working in a Burckhardtian vein regarded Montaigne

<sup>14</sup> J. Scott, ‘The Evidence of Experience’, *Critical Inquiry*, 17 (1991), pp. 773–97.

<sup>15</sup> P. Sarasin, ‘Autobiographische Ver-Sprecher: Diskursanalyse und Psychoanalyse in alltagsgeschichtlicher Perspektive’, *Werkstatt Geschichte*, 7 (1994), pp. 31–41; Sarasin, ‘Mapping the Body: Körpergeschichte zwischen Konstruktivismus, Politik und “Erfahrung”’, *Historische Anthropologie*, 7 (1999), pp. 437–51.

<sup>16</sup> J. Tanner, ‘Wie machen Menschen Erfahrungen? Zur Historizität und Semiotik des Körpers’, in Bielefelder Graduiertenkolleg Sozialgeschichte (ed.), *Körper macht Geschichte—Geschichte macht Körper: Körper als Sozialgeschichte* (Bielefeld, 1999), pp. 16–34; for a different perspective see for example J. Jackson, ‘Chronic Pain and the Tension between the Body as Subject and Object’, in T.J. Csordas (ed.), *Embodiment and Experience: The Existential Ground of Culture and Self* (Cambridge, 1994), pp. 201–27. See also O. Ulbricht, ‘Pesterfahrung: “Das Sterben” und der Schmerz in der Frühen Neuzeit’, *Medizin, Geschichte und Gesellschaft*, 15 (1996), pp. 9–35.

<sup>17</sup> L. McNay, ‘The Foucauldian Body and the Exclusion of Experience’, *Hypatia*, 6 (1991), p. 125–39; K. Canning, ‘Feminist History after the Linguistic Turn’, *Signs*, 19 (1994), pp. 368–404; L. Roper, ‘Jenseits des linguistic turn’, *Historische Anthropologie*, 9 (2001), pp. 452–66. For a brief overview of this debate see Piller, *Private Körper. Spuren des Leibes in Selbstzeugnissen des 18. Jahrhunderts* (Selbstzeugnisse der Neuzeit, 17, Cologne, Weimar and Vienna, 2007), pp. 7–13.

<sup>18</sup> G. Piller, ‘Krankheit schreiben: Körper und Spürache im Selbstzeugnis von Margarethe E. Milow-Hudtwalker (1748–1794)’, *Historische Anthropologie*, 7 (1999), pp. 212–35.

<sup>19</sup> Piller, *Private Körper*, p. 19.

as the personification of Renaissance individualism. Natalie Zemon Davis showed on the contrary that Montaigne's *Essays*, if analysed without preconception, revealed a man greatly and deeply concerned with his family ties and his closer relationships and not with his (historically precocious) individualism, despite his famous announcement to his readers: 'c'est moy que je peins.'<sup>20</sup>

Natalie Zemon Davis's essay was in many ways the starting point for Gabriele Jancke to look at the documents in question in a new way, and to see them not so much as a witness to the rise of Western individualism and the increasing autonomy of the self, but rather as texts documenting, strengthening and constructing social relationships.<sup>21</sup> In her eyes, writing a personal narrative, be it a diary, an autobiography, a family chronicle or a letter, was (and is) a social act. Methodologically, this is largely the direction taken by the Berlin research group headed, together with colleagues representing other disciplines, by Claudia Ulbrich.<sup>22</sup> The orientation of the Berlin group has involved a shift away from interest in historical representations of the self and selfhood to an interest in historical conceptions of the person and in the transcultural differences and meanings of such concepts.<sup>23</sup> To a certain extent, this has also implied a shift away from a more diachronic approach to a more synchronic one.

## II

Given their focus and interests, most members of the Berlin group have not shown any interest in sailing, as it were, under the flag of research on ego-documents. However, they are certainly recognized as specialists on ego-documents by others at home and abroad, as is the group centred on Basel.<sup>24</sup>

Where does the notion of ego-documents actually come from? It was first coined by the Dutch historian Jacob (or Jacques<sup>25</sup>) Presser (1899–1970) in 1958. He intended his new category to include 'those historical sources in which the user is confronted with an "I", or occasionally (Caesar, Henry Adams) a "he", continuously present in the text as the writing and describing subject.'<sup>26</sup> In an article under the title 'Clio peeks through the

<sup>20</sup> 'It is myself I am depicting': see N.Z. Davis, 'Boundaries and the Sense of Self in Sixteenth-Century France', in T.C. Heller, M. Sosna and D.E. Wellberry (eds), *Reconstructing Individualism: Autonomy, Individuality, and the Self in Western Thought* (Stanford, 1986), pp. 53–63.

<sup>21</sup> See Jancke, *Autobiographie als Soziale Praxis*.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Jancke and Ulbrich, *Vom Individuum zur Person*.

<sup>23</sup> See, for example, A. Bähr, P. Burschel and G. Jancke (eds), *Räume des Selbst. Selbstzeugnisforschung transkulturell* (Selbstzeugnisse der Neuzeit, 19, Cologne, Weimar and Vienna, 2007).

<sup>24</sup> See the information about the work of this group on the collection of unpublished source material in the *Selbstzeugnisse* databank (cf. n. 6).

<sup>25</sup> While his family temporarily lived in Belgium during his childhood, his first name was changed to Jacques. But his publications, which appeared from 1926 onwards, were all published under the name Jacob Presser. For this and the following, see the biographical summary by J. L. Foray at [http://www.novelguide.com/a/discover/rghl\\_01/rghl\\_01\\_00174.html](http://www.novelguide.com/a/discover/rghl_01/rghl_01_00174.html) (consulted 5 Aug. 2009). See also L. de Jong, *Jacques Presser (24 februari 1899–30 april 1970)* (Medelingen der Koninklijke Nederlandse Akademie van Wetenschappen, Afd. Letterkunde, Nieuwe reeks, Pt. 33, no. 9, Amsterdam and London, 1970).

<sup>26</sup> J. Presser, "'Memoires als geschiedbron'" (Winkler Prins Encyclopedie, VIII, Amsterdam and Brussels, 1958), pp. 208–10; reprinted in Presser, *Uit het werk van J. Presser* (Amsterdam, 1969), pp. 277–82. The English translation of this and the next quotation is borrowed from R. Dekker, 'Introduction', in Dekker, *Egodocuments and History*, pp. 7–20, here p. 7.

keyhole', written a few years later, he redefined ego-documents as 'those documents in which an ego intentionally or unintentionally discloses, or hides itself.'<sup>27</sup> Being of Jewish origin, Presser only survived the German occupation by going into hiding immediately after learning of his wife's arrest and deportation.<sup>28</sup> In 1950, he was commissioned by the newly founded Netherlands State Institute for War Documentation to write the history of the Dutch Jews during the German occupation. During this stage of Presser's scholarly life 'personal accounts and reports from both victims and perpetrators of the holocaust received his full attention.'<sup>29</sup> This research resulted in the publication in 1965 of a massive two-volume history of the Dutch Jews during the German occupation: *Ondergang: De vervolging en verdelging van het Nedelandse jodendom, 1940–1945*.<sup>30</sup>

For this publication, Jacob Presser conducted a great many interviews and, on a different level, according to Rudolf Dekker, he

became aware of the problems surrounding ego-documents, both oral and written. He was faced with people whose memories were so painful that they could not recount or even want to remember them, but also with people who unconsciously, but more often consciously changed and rewrote their memories.<sup>31</sup>

This preoccupation from the late 1940s onward would seem to have had something to do with Presser's predilection for the notion of ego-documents. Would he also have opted for the same category if he had been faced with the inchoate mass of seventeenth-century personal documents? More often than not, for such documents we lack any additional evidence allowing us to bring them into a context directly connected with the author—the kind of circumstantial evidence, for example, which would allow us to determine the degree to which specific personal reminiscences do not agree with other sources. In other words, the category 'ego-documents' may be partly acceptable in connection with an abundantly documented recent history, where this very abundance allows us to get much closer to a historical person than extant sources for the early modern period will ever permit.

Since the 1980s, and especially in the 1990s, Rudolf Dekker and his group have revived the category of ego-documents in their research on Dutch personal documents from the years 1500 to 1814. The category now includes autobiographies, memoirs, 'diaries of a personal nature as well as travel diaries'. For practical reasons, the group has excluded letters from its research, but it has included personal notes, though only when these are limited in time and focused on a specific event, as for example on a family quarrel.<sup>32</sup> The most surprising element in this heterogeneous collection of different genres is the inclusion of travel diaries. From the later sixteenth century onwards, travel diaries—some exceptions duly considered—increasingly also included cut-and-paste combinations of passages lifted from other diaries and guides and to a growing extent excluded personal thoughts and impressions. The Dutch case may admittedly be

<sup>27</sup> Cited in Dekker, 'Introduction', p. 7. See also R. Dekker, 'Ego-Dokumente in den Niederlanden vom 16. bis zum 18. Jahrhundert', in W. Schulze (ed.), *Ego-Dokumente. Annäherung an den Menschen in der Geschichte* (Selbstzeugnisse der Neuzeit, 2, Berlin, 1996), pp. 33–57, here p. 33.

<sup>28</sup> Deborah Suzanna Appel died at the Nazi concentration camp of Sobibor (Poland) in March 1943; see Foray (n. 25).

<sup>29</sup> Dekker, 'Introduction', p. 7.

<sup>30</sup> See Foray (n. 25).

<sup>31</sup> Dekker, 'Introduction', p. 8.

<sup>32</sup> Dekker, 'Ego-Dokumente in den Niederlanden', p. 34.

different,<sup>33</sup> but as far as German and Swiss travel accounts are concerned, it seems seriously doubtful whether they can actually be called ego-documents.

In a conference paper read in 1991, James S. Amelang admitted that there were some advantages in working with the category of ego-documents, but he warned against 'its lexical and conceptual imprecision'. Ego-documents, he maintained, are 'a general, catch-all category, one which dredges up practically everything in its nets.'<sup>34</sup> He pointed out in particular that if such notions as 'autobiography, text, narrative, document, account, memoir, diary, letter' and so on are used interchangeably, this creates problems in terms of method, for 'one has carefully to distinguish their meanings if any sense is to be made of the act of authorship'.<sup>35</sup> However, the question of authorship is crucially important if we are to take seriously the semantic implications of the category of ego-documents. The advantages Amelang is willing to concede result from the possibility of including in the new category a greater array of sources than under the label of 'autobiography' and in being able to get away from the narrow group of texts canonized by historians of literature. Arguably, this is not a very convincing justification, and in fact Amelang offers it only half-heartedly.

In 1992, Winfried Schulze ran a symposium at a conference centre in Bad Homburg, the proceedings of which were published in 1996. The volume entitled *Egodokumente. Annäherungen an den Menschen in der Geschichte?*<sup>2</sup> opens with a programmatic introduction by Schulze. Inspired by Jacob Presser's notion of ego-documents, he intended to expand it considerably. It was to become a category covering

all those sources, in which a human being tells us something about him- or herself, whether he or she does so out of free will—as, for example, in a personal letter, a diary, the record of a dream or in an autobiographical manner—or under different conditions.<sup>36</sup>

By 'different conditions', Schulze meant constraint, for his notion of ego-documents, as he went on to explain, also included court records, in which historical subjects offer us information about themselves. With court records he further associated tax evaluations, visitation records, official interrogations that subjects had to undergo (*Untertanenbefragungen*), interviews of witnesses, formal questions addressed to candidates for a public position, petitions for mercy, depositions made under oath (*Urgichten*), merchants' records, account books, last wills and testaments, and so on.<sup>37</sup>

In German-speaking scholarship, whenever non-specialist authors want to refer to research on self-narratives, they almost invariably refer to Schulze's collected volume of 1996. Few of them have bothered to read beyond the editor's introductory essay to discover that several authors whose contributions are included in that volume, such as

<sup>33</sup> See R. Dekker, 'Dutch Travel Journals from the Sixteenth to the Early Nineteenth Centuries', *Lias: Sources and Documents relating to the Early Modern History of Ideas*, 22 (1995), pp. 277–99.

<sup>34</sup> Amelang, 'Spanish Autobiography', p. 69.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> W. Schulze, 'Ego-Dokumente. Annäherung an den Menschen in der Geschichte? Vorüberlegungen für die Tagung "Ego-Dokumente"', in Schulze, *Ego-Dokumente*, pp. 11–30, here p. 21. This is a free translation opting for gender balance. Schulze had previously published an extended version of this introduction: W. Schulze, 'Ego-Dokumente: Annäherung an den Menschen in der Geschichte?', in B. Lundt and H. Reimöller (eds), *Von Aufbruch und Utopie. Perspektiven einer neuen Gesellschaftsgeschichte des Mittelalters. Für und mit Ferdinand Seibt aus Anlass seines 65. Geburtstages* (Cologne, Weimar and Vienna, 1992), pp. 417–50.

<sup>37</sup> Schulze, 'Ego-Dokumente. Annäherung an den Menschen in der Geschichte? Vorüberlegungen', p. 21.

James Amelang, Gabriele Jancke, Jan Peters and the present author, are distancing themselves from the category of ego-documents.

Many historians in the field have continued to adhere to the notion of *Selbstzeugnisse*, knowing full well that in many of the personal documents studied one does not really encounter a fully recognizable self. Yet many such texts allow one to historicize at least individual aspects of the self, whereas they shed no light at all on the inner workings of an ego. Compared to Schulze's extended category of ego-documents, the notion of *Selbstzeugnisse* is quite obviously the lesser evil. Leaving aside the problems inherent in Schulze's all-embracing category, what is clearly damaging the credibility of the category of ego-documents is the inevitable association with Sigmund Freud's work, alluded to above. This leads us to some tentative conclusions.

### III

There is no need to dwell on Freud's distinction between the id, the ego and the super-ego (*Es*, *Ich* and *Über-Ich*), as this is not central to the present discussion. However, the category deconstructed here does suggest that historical sources and texts designated as ego-documents offer us access to an ego. This may indeed be the case to some extent with twentieth-century texts of this nature, which we are able to contextualize in a very dense or very 'thick' way. However, the argument here is limited to early modern evidence. A dense contextualization of early modern self-narratives is more often than not out of reach because the additional sources that would permit it are not there. This goes a long way towards explaining the failure to date of psychohistorical interpretations of self-narratives.

This enquiry is limited to two cases: the two autobiographies written in Basel in the 1570s and in the 1610s respectively by Thomas Platter and his son, the physician Felix Platter. The psychohistorical interpretation based on Thomas Platter's reference to the fact that his mother was unable to breast-feed him can be disregarded because it is based on one short autobiographical reference only, and no additional evidence provides any further light on this passage.<sup>38</sup> The interpretation on offer is essentialist, and correspondingly marked by a lack of interest in the effects of historical change on society, family, childcare and nutrition. The psychohistorical explanation for Felix Platter's childlessness is only slightly more convincing. It ultimately fails because it is based primarily on one single passage in Felix Platter's text and because, in highlighting the causal nexus to Felix Platter's oedipus complex, it leaves little room for an acknowledgment of the fact that even under such special circumstances the argument needs to be supplemented by a study of Felix Platter's wife, Magdalena Jeckelmann.<sup>39</sup> This is not intended to sound like a general scepticism regarding the possibilities of a psychohistorical approach within the context of early modern history. However, the difficulties of

<sup>38</sup> R. Frenken, 'Aspekte der Geschichte der Kindheit anhand historischer Autobiographien', in F. Nyssen and L. Janus (eds), *Psychogenetische Kindheit. Beiträge zur Psychohistorie der Eltern-Kind-Beziehung* (Giessen, 1997), pp. 309–98, especially pp. 346–60.

<sup>39</sup> C. Bumiller, 'Die "Selbstanalyse" des Arztes Felix Platter (1534–1614)', in R. Frenken and M. Rheinheimer (eds), *Die Psychohistorie des Erlebens* (PsychoHistorische Forschungen, 2, Kiel, 2000), pp. 303–24.



approaching early modern self-narratives from the vantage point of psychohistory do point to the fact that these documents do not readily grant us access to a given ego, which, according to Freud, constantly has to mediate between the sexual and bodily drives of the id and the conceptions of the world offered by the super-ego.

This does not mean that the texts in question would in any way be marked by self-deception, as is sometimes argued. One literary author has criticized such a judgment as 'high Freudian "received wisdom".' He points out that

the notion of self-deception rests on a faith that our minds are equipped with an all-seeing panopticon scanner that has access to everything we have experienced . . . On this view, it is self-interest, 'defences', or whatever that get in the way of this all-seeing scanner. But everything we know about the structure of direct experience and of memory storage and retrieval tells us this is a deeply misleading view. Perceiving and remembering are themselves constructions and reconstructions.<sup>40</sup>

This is certainly true. But it does not exclude the possibility that an author consciously gave his reminiscences a certain drift. While acknowledging that perceiving and remembering do involve constructions, we should not be misled by neuroscience into believing that these are processes over which we have absolutely no control.

So, where do we stand? It may well be too late to stop the current rise in interest in the notion of ego-documents, although it seems unlikely that this will do justice to most early modern self-narratives. The category appears to be universally recognized, and even many specialists seem to assume that a catch-all basket is better than a more narrowly defined category. Considering the sophistication achieved by methodological debates within this field of research in recent years, it is perhaps surprising that so many historians have been content to embrace the notion of ego-documents. This article does not seek to propose a more narrow definition. We should, however, be wary of suggesting, by the labels we give central notions we work with, that our sources offer access to a historical person's ego. Only some of these sources actually do, but the great majority do not.

Most of our particular sources and texts are extremely miscellaneous in composition and do not adhere to modern literary rules of genre. They offer us insights into life worlds and representations, into aspects of a group-specific habitus, they offer us glimpses of specific aspects of religion and systems of belief, and eighteenth-century texts sometimes tell us something about the reading preferences of an author and sometimes, albeit rarely, even about his or her sexuality. And most documents in question offer information about personal and social connections, within a given family and beyond. 'Self-narrative' or 'personal narrative' would be better notions to use.

The historical subject we can grasp within and behind the autobiographies, diaries and family chronicles on offer is not an ego. It certainly has a self, whose external contours of personhood some of the documents in question may allow us to study. For all practical historical purposes, what we are looking at in self-narratives are primarily persons in their specific cultural, linguistic, material and, last but not least, social embeddedness. Ultimately a majority of these texts, most certainly early modern ones, probably tell us more about groups than they do about individuals.

<sup>40</sup> J. Bruner, 'The Autobiographical Process', in R. Folkenflik (ed.), *The Culture of Autobiography: Constructions of Self-Representations* (Stanford, 1993), pp. 38–56, here p. 39f.

## Abstract

This article examines the concept of 'egocuments' from a historiographical perspective. It looks at its origins in the 1950s in the work of the Dutch historian Jacob Presser, at its revival in the work of Rudolf Dekker and his group from the 1970s onwards, and at the considerable expansion the notion was subjected to in the early 1990s by Winfried Schulze. The article argues that we should be aware of the noticeable differences between using the concept in twentieth-century history, as Presser did, and its usage in the context of early modern history.

**Keywords:** autobiography, early modern history, ego-documents, Jacob Presser, Rudolf Dekker, Winfried Schulze

University of Basel  
Kaspar.Vongreyerz@unibas.ch