

**Pouring One's Heart Out:
Textual Selves and Their Confessions**

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Abstract: *This paper looks at the transformations of the genre of autobiography from its earliest form of confession to the later Puritan (here eighteenth century) configurations of memoirs and fictional autobiographies. Margery Kempe and Geoffrey Chaucer's Wife of Bath are chosen medieval examples, and eighteenth century textual selves are analyzed on the basis of Daniel Defoe's Robinson Crusoe and Moll Flanders. The confessional mode of writing assumes the writer's/narrator's utmost sincerity, hence both in medieval as well as in Puritan confessions the narrators literally pour their hearts out disclosing intimate details of their life. The difference between the two types is that medieval texts reveal sinners' personalities insignificant in God's grand plan, while the eighteenth century ones are trying to uncover the significance of individual life.*

The Confessional mode of writing is one of the most popular forms capturing the private life of an individual. Confessions include (written) saint's confessions as well as "private histories", autobiographies and memoirs. This, as such connects the trope of the book, the text, the written word with the speaking self signifying orality and aurality, the mouth and the ear. The trope links exhibitionism with authority the compulsion to show oneself with the drive to narrate one's story.

Autobiography as a literary term was first used by Southey in the early nineteenth century, but Margery Kempe's *The Book of Margery Kempe* (c.1420) is frequently designated as the first English autobiography¹. In the contemporary sense of the word, Rousseau's *Confessions* are usually referred to as the first modern autobiography.² Still, his confessions published posthumously in 1781 and 1788 are rather unreliable as factual truth testifying to the eighteenth century battle between fact (history) and fiction (literature). Private writings underwent a renaissance during and after the Puritan period in England (seventeenth and eighteenth century) in the form of the diary writings of Samuel Pepys or John Evelyn. Autobiographies and fictional autobiographies re-appear alongside the emergence of the novel when the Puritan doctrine of introspection re-

evaluates the confessional form of writing, and projects selves onto texts in factual and fictional discourse.

In my paper I would like look at the mode of confession originating in Late Roman and early Christian Europe with Augustine's *Confessions* through medieval Christian and secular renditions (Margery Kempe and Chaucer's character of the Wife of Bath) and to show how eighteenth century textual selves (Robinson Crusoe and Moll Flanders) are created through the same confessional principle. This paper escapes the psychoanalytic or post-structural theories concerning the Self and instead looks at the constructions of textual selves in medieval and Classicist (Augustan) English literature.

In medieval culture the Self was equated with the soul. Inherited from Plato, who defined the rational soul as non-corporeal human essence, medieval philosophers frequently refer to the heart as denoting a figurative part of the immaterial soul. Thus, in the Platonian system knowledge does not consist of sense impressions in the memory but derives instead from the innate forms of ideas already present in the soul. Platonian "writing the soul" is identified with the human subject, with a presence that is prior to literal (external and material) writing. Paul subsequently embraces the Hebraic notion of man as a fleshly being whose "heart" denotes the center of the person as a rational, emotional and volitional being. The heart and not the soul is more frequently equated with sensory perception as well as with interior writing and memory. Alain de Lille (d. 1202) associates the heart with the inner book of personal memory, which as a record of good and bad deeds becomes a metaphorical book of experience (Jager 2000: 61-62). Alain de Lille understands memory in confessional terms, linking the idea of the book of experience with the book of conscience. Such book metaphors are frequently conflated with heart metaphors, and the heart in medieval understanding is the core of selfhood. Thus, the trope of the book and the heart are among the most potent and most cherished ones in Europe during the Middle Ages.

Love literature, which used sets of codified literary conventions portrayed the heart as the core of affection and love, a motif, which the Christians applied through metonymy presenting the open heart as Christ. A fifteenth century writer of the love courtly love codex Andreas Capellanus (fl., 1182-1186), however, warns the lovers against too early love confessions. While giving a beloved one's whole heart one should

not, however, be an open book to loved ones. In secular love, secrecy is part of the game. In mystical-religious love God demands pouring one's heart out, giving one's entire person to Him, confessing every thought, deed and intention.

The Middle Ages, however, see confession not in literary but religious terms. In medieval texts, misconduct (based on the reformulation of desire) is branded as transgressing not only the laws of decorum but primarily God's precepts concerning human beings. Such is the case in the moralities, where this relationship between personal and public experience is represented. In 1215 Pope Innocent III decided that confession should be mandatory for all Christians. In a decree *Omnis utriusque sexus* he set in motion the confessional machine, which involved priests, confession manual writers and ordinary sinners all united under one goal of performing true, complete and wholehearted confessions. Priests had to learn to hear confessions, and sinners had to confess, while confession manuals defined every sin giving various examples of sinful behavior. The Middle Ages were obsessed with codified and externalized behavior. The literature of the time is largely concerned with regulating sex(uality) and desire through public discourse. One can even claim that medieval culture was organized around the practice of penance, devising a discourse that involved literature, theology and philosophy. Hence, mystical texts as well as secular literature thematize confession both as a literary trope and subject of discourse.

The sacrament of confession transformed desire into discourse and once again stressed the discrepancy between the spirit and the flesh. Originally designed to prevent heresies from spreading throughout Christendom, confession became the subject of literature and the mode of literary discourse constructing the persona of a sinner. Such is the Wife of Bath, in her prologue in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* (written between 1387-1392). She is a literary example of the confessional mode, a character who practices a certain type of mental exhibitionism. A sinner herself, The Wife of Bath joins the group of Chaucer's pilgrims on the holy pilgrimage to Canterbury. In her prologue Chaucer upholds and challenges at the same time all the negative ideas about women, presenting the naïve sincerity of the speaking subject. Still, he lets the Wife of Bath defend women: "By God, if women had but written stories/Like those the clergy keep in oratories,/More had been written of man's wickedness,/Than all the sons of Adam could redress" (*Canterbury Tales*, p. 277)³. The medieval ambivalence derives from the discrepancy

between the positive and negative images of women and the ensuing ritual denunciation of women, such as is countered by the Wife of Bath. It constitutes the order of a cultural constant.

In her prologue the Wife of Bath ponders on questions of virginity and state of wifehood. Evoking biblical examples, she unashamedly mixes the sacred and profane forms of love which underlie the images of lust.⁴ "In wifehood I will use my instrument/As freely as my Maker me it sent./ If I turn difficult, God give sorrow!/ My husband, he shall have it eve and morrow/Whenever he likes to come and pay his debt" (*Canterbury Tales*, p. 262). Huizinga claimed that the Middle Ages were extraordinarily open in expressing sexual matters in technical and ecclesiastical terminology (1996: 131). At the same time comic literature and art depends on the symbolic representation of sexual matters. Chaucer rejects conventionalized courtly love, concurrently he ridicules pious mentality which for him represents a coarse denial of ideal love by prosaic sensuality.⁵ Medieval culture shows marked connections between sexual, literary, and theological metaphors. God the Father both engenders the cosmos, and, as Ernst Robert Curtius notes, writes the Book of Nature. Both tropes describe the single act of creation. Ultimately, He also writes the Book of Judgement (Curtius 1990: 309-332).

Mystical literature, although frequently full of eroticized images was, above all, seen as the illumination of the heart. For a medieval aspiring "saint", Margery Kempe, the book of the heart, the book of memory acquires corporeal specificity. *The Book of Margery Kempe's* (c.1436) is considered the first extant autobiography in the vernacular and is one of the most extraordinary and interesting works of the Late Middle Ages. Contemporary critics see the text in its social context and praising its author for the autobiographical content. Written in the space between oral and literate discourse the work emulates both mystical as well as hagiographic discourse, and in fact, can be called auto/hagiography, as Margery Kempe herself testifies in favor of her own sanctity. As the text is written in the third person, assigning Kempe the role of "this creature", the function of the scribes writing down Kempe's "confession" cannot be forgotten. Between lay, and predominantly oral culture and clerical, essentially written culture, Kempe comes out of the text as a speaking voice as well as the object of scribal discourse. Trying to legitimize her words she constantly identifies herself with oral communication (the famous scene in chapter 52 when she is asked to come to the pulpit and she refuses claiming that she only uses "conversation and good words"

[*The Book*, p.164]),⁶ even though she recognizes the value of the written text and searches for textual models among other female mystics like Julian of Norwich or Bridget of Sweden. Supplying the reader with a plethora of details concerning her inner life as well as her relationship with her husband.

Kempe's book not only validates female religious experience, the book as a physical object becomes irretrievably connected with her Self as she aspires at her hagiographic self-presentation. The struggles to have the book written are all incorporated in the narrative of self-explanation. Kempe is concerned with truth, but the topography of events and places, their chronological order is of no interest to her. "This book is not written in order, every thing after another as it was done, but just as the matter came to this creature's mind when it was to be written down; for it was so long before it was written she had forgotten the time and the order when things occurred. And therefore she had nothing written but what she well knew to be indeed the truth" (*The Book*, p.36).

The integral property of meditation is a blurred boundary between the active and passive assimilation of images. She also remembers things only because the Lord put these thoughts into her mind. Circularity then becomes the chief marker of structure. If one can define structure as a means, a method of organization, a way of unifying experience, here one will not find the traditional development of one's life story. *The Book* represents a sequential episodic journey, full of repetitions and recollections based on associations. What seems to be an inconsequential chaos is filled with the author's or better narrator's determinacy to tell the story, whose intrinsic purpose is the verbalization of the love of Christ. "And so it was 20 years or more from that time this creature had first feelings and revelations before she had any written" (*The Book*, p.35). She waited some twenty five years before she decided to dictate them. Margery reports that it was other people, not herself, who offered to write down the text. Kempe is indeed afraid of being linked to the Lollards but otherwise she always "speaks boldly in the name of Jesus". Her fears are quite legitimate bearing in mind that she was accused of having connections with the Lollards,⁷ branded as a heretic and slandered. She never aspired to learn how to read and write. High rates of female illiteracy were an economic factor. Education was a scarce resource and it was only worthwhile to educate boys. Thus, it was commonly accepted that lay women were silent and that their artistic and literary needs were rare. Written culture and public speech

were the fruit forbidden to women and this exclusion from forms of cultural writing is generally understood as symbolic silence.

Kempe returns to the story of "writing" the book in chapter 88, relating her meditations at her church in Lynn. In July 1436 she hears Christ say that in order to please him she should concentrate on writing the book, and she hears everybody in heaven saying that they are very pleased with the book. This directly points to the active role of Christ in the composition and writing of the book and again shifts the stress from Margery the subject, to Christ the teacher. In her discourse Kempe integrates the tradition of Christian oral Confession based on the book of conscience/recounting experience. Hence, the "tell all principle" which legitimizes her, the sinner, in the eyes of her confessors, priests and ultimately in the eyes of her readers.

Acknowledging the formal boundary between the authority of the writer and the authority of Divine teaching, she represents herself as always guided by Christ's words. She is the ultimate centerfold, embedded--when her text was written--within the narrative of the priest. She cedes part of the authority over the text to the priest and, moreover, textually that Self loses part of the control over her confessions. She produces a self-definition in relation to the significance of others. The "I" of Kempe's experiences is changed by the priest into "she". The use of the third person pronoun functions as a distancing factor between the author and the narrator. As she becomes, at least at first glance, both the author and the narrator of the book, the narrator's persona helps to externalize the internal experience. Kempe always stressed that she is only an instrument in God's hands never venturing to speak publicly unless she is specifically ordered by the Lord to do so. The parts connected with her search for female models need to be read in the context of Kempe's uneasiness about her own book indicating that anxiety is rooted in the medieval subtext of authority of the written text, *auctoritas*. And yet although written by another person she proves to be an unquestionable author (medieval *auctor*) of the book of her heart.

Another example pivotal for mapping the medieval trope of the book of conscience is introduced through the persona of medieval Everyman. The chief *dramatis persona* of the morality play under the same title (c.1492) is an exemplary sinner who has to balance his book of conscience. Reckoning of one's sins was primarily mental, although in the play we meet Everyman's sins. Everyman is not confessing in public. The book of one's soul is "read" (or better spoken) to a priest. Confession is also

sometimes seen as illumination. The interior function of penitence in *Everyman* is shown through the field of commerce. Everyman has to show his books but: "For all unready is my book of reckoning/But twelve year and I might have abiding, /My counting-book I would make so clear/That my reckoning I should not need to fear" (*Everyman*, p. 134-137). Such discourse mixes the interior and exterior function of confession, merging moral and commercial vocabulary. Everyman reads his book of conscience, re-works the idea of the human subject seen in terms of a manuscript book.

Epistemological problems of description and definition that the writers of early prose fiction faced made them turn to romance and travel framed in the fictional autobiography discourse. It is autobiography which merges spiritual autobiography and, frequently, criminal life that becomes the principal form of writing for early prose fiction. One of the first such texts, Thomas Nashe's, *The Unfortunate Traveller* (1594) subtitled *The Life of Jack Wilton*, introduces an autobiographical record of travel and adventure that is a precursor of both Defoe's stories and the picaresque novel. The material is organised around the storyteller, Jack Wilton, a page at the court of Henry VIII, whose adventures emerge as enormous practical jokes (see chapter two of the text). Early novels were not labelled as novels but as "private histories", autobiographies or "secret histories" with their authors functioning as fictitious editors. All the early pseudo-factual fictions simulate such discursive forms as the chronicle, the traveller's reports or sets of letters stressing the factual rather than fictional context. These texts are not historical fiction but historicized fiction (Zimmerman (1996: 51). Such an insistence on the truthfulness of fiction as Zimmermann notices is related to the "tendency of the eighteenth century fiction to put itself within the parameters of historical interpretation" (1996: 51). Ian Watt (1957) in his classical study puts forward the hypothesis of the "triple rise", the rise of the middle class, the rise of literacy and the rise of the novel, which were related and happened nearly simultaneously. Hence, literate characters from the lower classes, like Moll Flanders, were not difficult to imagine. The individuation of characters like Robinson Crusoe or Moll Flanders is for Watt (1957) one of the signs of realism of the novel. The emerging novelistic pattern responds to the needs of early mid-eighteenth century British society. At the same time the novels address the epistemological problems of the time. Hence, the confluence of both the social "questions of virtue" as well as the epistemological "question of truth".

The insistence on the truth factor in relation to puritan autobiography is observable in *Robinson Crusoe* (1719). In the text, Defoe frames himself as an 'editor' of fictional history, thus presenting his character as a real person. In fact, his adventures were based on the accounts of castaways on uninhabited islands. Alexander Selkirk, who lived on the island of Juan Fernandez for five years, provided one such account. Crusoe, a descendant of a hard-working Puritan family decides to run away to sea against his father's wishes. He has numerous adventures, including an episode as a slave, before he is shipwrecked and finds himself on an uninhabited island. Initially, his narrative is almost entirely subdued to the need to confess his transgression against his father and God. The model of spiritual autobiography was inherited from Augustine's *Confessions* (c. 400). Augustine was able to resolve the problem of guilt claiming that evil impulses reflected the material element. Robinson, on the contrary, sees himself as entirely culpable for his fate, living in the state of guilt, constantly weighing up the positive and negative sides of his punishment. The utopian vision of "a new Adam" is altered by Defoe as Robinson sees his solitary sojourn on the island as God's punishment for defying his father (God's representative on earth). The punishment is foreseen or brought upon Robinson by his father who warned him: "if I did take this foolish step, God would not bless me, and I would have leisure hereafter to reflect upon having neglected his counsel when there might be none to assist in my recovery" (*Crusoe*, p.29). Robinson's outlook on individualism is primarily economic in nature. Defoe advocates the value of personal observation and experience as a God-given precept to subjugate nature. Sharing his mental and moral life with the reader on a day-by-day basis through this autobiographical memoir, Crusoe achieves closeness with his inner life. Puritan autobiography attempted to understand private experience, to reconcile the experience of the exterior, secular world with the inner system of religious values, to counter human temporality and took the form of self-examination, a narrative in which cause and effect sequences were crucial. Here, similarly to Augustine's *Confessions* the heart functions as a metaphor for inner life. Robinson's journal itself is a form of spiritual bookkeeping (Brown 1997: 75). He consults the Bible on everything he does. He combines this introspection with a biblical interpretation of events and not only concludes that his life was spared by the intervention of Providence, but that with God's will directing events he is even justified in constructing his own capitalist, absolutist kingdom.

The same principle of “pouring one’s heart out” one can find in yet another of Defoe’s texts, *Moll Flanders* (1722), which encapsulates the preoccupation of early novels with criminality and adventure. The text is a narrative of a woman who was exiled to Virginia as punishment for being a prostitute and a thief, thus merging spiritual autobiography and a criminal life. The quality of the book rests primarily in its directness and its unsophisticated delight in the world of street, jail and brothel. In the preface the text is offered as an autobiography, a “private history”. The editor is looking back from 1720 at a document dated 1638. “My true name is so well known in the Records, or Registers at Newgate, and in the Old-Bailey, and there are some things of such consequence still depending there, relating to my particular Conduct, that it is not to be expected I should set my name, or the Account of my Family to this Work; perhaps, after my Death it may be better known; at present it would not be proper, no, not tho’ a general Pardon should be issued, even without Exceptions and reserve of ersons or Crimes” (*Flanders*, p.1). Moll looks at her life and talks about it in business mercantile terms. Love as well as marriage are subject to negotiations. Hence, the frequent use of words such as number, interest, returns, loss, gain, portion and fortune.

Moll presents her story as an individual history, chronologically so as to grasp the significance of her individuality. She herself assumes a penitential attitude as she has to be absolved (be her readers) of the numerous sins in order to start a new life in the New World. Moll’s life of promiscuity and theft is as frankly recounted as Margery Kempe’s struggles with her husband over conjugal debt. In her last words, she says that she and her husband who “is come to England also, where we resolve to spend the Remainder of our Years in sincere Penitence, for the wicked Lives we have lived.” (*Flanders* p.339). Where Margery calls for the authority of Christ, Moll assumes the tone of penitential moralizing so that her life, just like Margery’s, might become an example for fellow creatures. Still, whereas Margery aspires to sainthood, Moll strives for respectability, a more contemporary social virtue.

Confessional narratives are books of the heart. Medieval and Puritan life stories containing personal narratives written and studied by the individual himself/herself are nevertheless placed under divine authority and interpretation. Selfhood is written in books of both personal memory and divine omniscience. In Margery Kempe’s *Book* the third person pronoun shifts the focus from the ego-oriented expression of sensory

perceptions and emotions into an interactive category of dialogue. In *Robinson Crusoe* and *Moll Flanders*, the author's first person narrative frames the fictional story as private history acknowledging the legacy of puritan introspection. Both types of narration problematize the relationship between the genre of autobiography and sacred biography or saint's life and fictional autobiography, exerting a direct effect on the implied reader within the fictional world as the narrator is mostly engaged in communicative situations. The pattern of "telling everything" and "pouring one's heart out" recalls the mode of confession in which the sins of the mind, word and deed are transformed into penitential discourse. The body, one's sexuality and related matters were always privileged topics of confession. Hence, Margery's and Moll's descriptions of marital relationships as well as their numerous temptations. Representing themselves as sinners, the women equal themselves with their prospective readers, similarly to Augustine. They detail their sinful lives before their "conversion" so as to show themselves as persons fully deserving divine illumination and first and foremost their reader's sympathy.

Notes

¹ This is especially true in feminist discourse on autobiography, e.g., Leigh Gilmore claims that mystical writings in general originate with autobiographical discourse (1994: 131-162).

² For more on Rousseau's *Confessions* see Marcus (1994 179-228)

³ All the following quotations come from the contemporary translation of Chaucer's text by Neville Coghill (1977).

⁴ The Wife of Bath's discourse was later partly inherited by John Cleland's erotic text of *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure*, known as *Fanny Hill* (1749). Cleland retains the "tell all principle" but without the religious context.

⁵ All the following quotations come from Barry Windeatt's contemporary translation of *The Book of Margery Kempe* (1985).

⁶ Lollards were originally a group of adherents to the unorthodox doctrines of John Wycliff (c.1320-1384). Their main demands were for the freely available vernacular translations of the Bible and a reduction in the materialism and powers of the Catholic Church. They denied the value of pilgrimages and prayers for the dead, the necessity of confession and the validity of the doctrine of transubstantiation

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