

1991

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Recommended Citation

Douglass, Merlin (1991) "Investigations of Self," *Anthós Journal (1990-1996)*: Vol. 1: No. 2, Article 12.
Available at: https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/anthos_archives/vol1/iss2/12

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INVESTIGATIONS OF SELF

Merlin Douglass

"It seems. . . to be one of those simple cases which are so extremely difficult."

The Boscombe Valley Mystery
Sir Arthur Conan Doyle

At first glance few lives could be more dissimilar than Margery Kempe, fourteenth century English country wife and mystic/pilgrim, and Lady Nijo, thirteenth century Japanese imperial concubine and itinerant Buddhist nun. Certain similarities are immediately apparent, of course. They both went on pilgrimage, they both lived in a time identified by their respective cultures as a middle age and they both lived during a time of religious revival. They also engaged themselves in writing autobiographies, an act which, to quote Georges Gusdorf, a man of no small opinion about the subject of autobiography, is "first of all a task of personal salvation." (*Conditions and Limits of Autobiography*, p. 39) Both women, writing about themselves, treat themselves as characters in the drama of their respective works, Margery goes so far as to refer to herself in the third person. But it would be as wrong to let those similarities obscure the more engaging and deeper differences as it would be to let the obvious differences hide more interesting and thought provoking

similarities.

Margery was in the middle of her life when, after many years of marriage and many children, she began a series of pilgrimages. She travelled first around England. Then, after many smaller trips around England, she booked passage for the grand tour of the middle ages, the Holy Land excursion. This was the highlight of Margery's spiritual adventure where she was first visited with the crying which was to become both her gift and her burden

Then the friars lifted up a cross and led the pilgrims about from one place to another where our Lord had suffered his pains and his Passion...And she had such great compassion and such great pain to see our Lord's pain, that she could not keep herself from crying and roaring though she should have died from it. And this was the first crying that she ever cried in any contemplation. And this kind of crying lasted for many years after this time, despite anything that anyone might do, and she suffered much contempt and much reproof for it. (*The Book of Margery Kempe*, p. 104)

Afterwards she made several other journeys to the continent after that, the last one at about age sixty. Typically she could not get permission from her confessor and the daughter-in-law she wanted to accompany didn't want her along but Margery was not one to let disapproval deter her.

"Then the creature replied, 'Sir, if you will bid me go, I will go with her myself until she gets to Ipswich, where lies the ship and her own countrymen that will take her over the sea.

"Her confessor said, 'How should you go? You only recently hurt your foot and you are not yet completely better--and also you are an old woman. You can't go.'

"So she had permission to take her daughter-in-law to Ipswich, and then come back to Lynn. Thus they set off on their journey in time of Lent, and, when they were five or six miles from Lynn, they passed a church, and so turned in to hear mass. And while they were in the church, the said creature, desiring tears of devotion, could gain none at that time, but was continually commanded in her soul to go over the sea with her daughter-in-law...She would have excused herself if she could in any way, and therefore she said, 'I am not sufficiently provided

with gold or silver to go with, as I ought to be, and even though I were, and wanted to go, I know my daughter-in-law would rather I were at home, and perhaps the ship's master would not allow me on the ship to go with them'.

"Our Lord replied, 'If I be with you, who shall be against you? I shall provide for you, and get friends to help you. Do as I bid you, and no man on the ship shall say no to you.'

"This creature saw there was no other help for it, but that she must set forth at the commanding of God." (271)

By her own account she came to her religious vocation after a bout with madness and a losing struggle in several commercial enterprises in her hometown, the sheltered and prosperous northern English port city of Bishop's Lynn (now known as King's Lynn). She was converted to a life of religious mission after many difficulties with pride, lust and willfulness. However after she had given up her worldly aspirations she was welcomed into the heavenly inner circle in her visions. She occasioned a miracle or two, enjoyed cozy chats with God, engaged in much public weeping and wailing, suffered the rebuke and insults of an unbelieving populace and travelled extensively where she was bidden in her communication with the divine.

The structure of her narrative is such that after illness and confinement comes conversion, after conversion comes travel which was, though difficult and she found her gifts unappreciated in the main, the only truly satisfying existence for her. This is true in the first and largest section of the work and it is duplicated on a smaller scale in the second section which was included after the book was written for the second time. In the second section it is her son who is converted, apparently just before he dies, and after this conversion Margery begins again to travel.

There are many gaps and missing spaces in Margery's Book. Entire years are absent. No mention is made, for instance, of the struggle to raise her children, the comings and goings of everyday life, the holidays, the small town events which form the backbone of most people's recollections. Everything extraneous to the purpose has been omitted.

She was, in her lifetime as she is now, the subject of some

controversy as to the nature of her gifts and the value of her contribution. What is not in doubt is that she was the author of the first autobiography in English. However having her Book appear in the vernacular is not a telling decision but concealing detail. Though "the language of the vernacular is women's language," (Jean Elshtain, *Feminist Discourse and Its Discontents: Language, Power, and Meaning*, p. 608) we don't know if Margery herself chose in which language her life story would appear.

As she was illiterate (a somewhat unusual situation for a woman of her class (merchant) and her economic (middle class) status at this time) she dictated *The Book* to a priest in approximately 1436. It was her second attempt at getting her narrative written down correctly and she was concerned enough that the book accurately reflect her story that after the first attempt which was a dismal and unreadable failure she found someone who would do as she the work she wanted done the way she wanted it.

Despite the obvious drawbacks such a system imposes Margery's voice seems to come through clearly. She was a vigorous woman, none too interested in "getting along" for its own sake; a woman who had faith in her inner voices and who was brave, single-minded absolutely convinced of her special connection with God.

Lady Nijo was much less certain of her relationship to the divine. Her autobiography, *Confessions of Lady Nijo*, emphasizes the sadness and fragility of all life, its transitive nature and the sense of melancholy which is recognized as the only appropriate attitude for the sensitive person to adopt in the face of this knowledge. This is a direct result of Buddhism's incursion into Japan with "its stress on the sorrows of the earthly conditions, its rejection of transitory pleasures, in preoccupation with decay and death, and its offer of release by retirement from the world and a modification of the human consciousness." (*The World of the Shining Prince*, p. 106) During Lady's Nijo's life the Amida sect of Buddhism, with its emphasis on compassion, was gaining strength throughout the countryside, and it is this promise of sympathy which ameliorates the general tone of world weariness of the text. At the temple at Ashizuri no Misaki, one of the last shrines visited in the narrative, Nijo hears the tale of an old

monk who because he felt superior to others is not invited to visit the gods. Nijo writes

"He had met this fate because he had considered himself superior so ever since then, people living here have avoided making distinctions. Hearing this tale, I was filled with hope; wasn't this perhaps one of the thirty-three forms Kannon had vowed to appear in to save mankind?" (231)

The *Confessions* cover thirty-six years of Lady Nijo's life. She begins her story with the New Year ceremony which marks the beginning of her career as a concubine in the Imperial household to the retired emperor GoFukusa at the age of fourteen.

"As the mist rose among the spring bamboo heralding the dawn of the new year, the ladies of Go-Fukakusa's court, who had so eagerly awaited this morning, made their appearances in gorgeous costumes, each trying to surpass the others in beauty. I too took my place among them." (p. 1)

The text continues until at the age of forty-nine, when, after many years of pilgrimage, having long since given away everything of value, she is reduced to listening to services at the shrine she is visiting standing, alone, outside under the rain gutter.

During the course of the *Confessions* she presents herself as a cultured and sophisticated woman of considerable self-determination, but that determination and sophistication are not sufficient to overcome the loss, the death, the doubt and sorrow of everyday life. She never married, although she had several children, a circumstance considerably less damning in Nijo's social circle than in Marge's. As was traditional, she did not raise them herself but sent them to live with various members of the imperial household or with foster parents.

She was drawn to the experience of pilgrimage at age twenty-six both through circumstances (she was removed from her duties at court) and as a vocation appropriate to cope with the grief that a lifetime of death and loss had brought her. Brazell writes in the introduction that while it was customary for nobility to renounce

public life after a reversal of fortunes of similar severity to that experienced by Nijo that

“...the extent of Lady Nijo's pilgrimages, however, was very unusual indeed...For a woman of Nijo's high rank to travel extensively was unprecedented and not entirely approved of. She defends her journeys on the grounds that they helped her to forget the disappointments she had suffered and claims that she was following the example of her idol, the twelfth-century poet-priest Saigyō.” (xix)

There is no discussion in the text of her decision to take up pilgrimage, no wavering back and forth, no weighing of options this way and that, either because the intervening chapters have been lost or because it suited Lady Nijo's artistic sensibilities to introduce her new vocation in this way. Chapter four simply begins

“Toward the end of the second month I set out from the capital at moonrise. I had given up my home completely, yet my thoughts quite naturally lingered on the possibility of return, and I felt that the moon reflected in my fallen tears was also weeping. How weak-willed I was! These thoughts occupied my mind all the way to Osaka Pass, the place where the poet Seminaru once lived and composed the poem that ends, ‘One cannot live forever in a palace or a hut.’ No trace of his home remained. I gazed at my reflection in the famous clear spring at the pass and saw a pathetic image of myself attired down to the tips of my walking shoes in this unfamiliar traveling nun's habit.” (181)

In 1304, after nearly twenty years of pilgrimage and increasing poverty, the first Imperial anthology of Japanese poetry was issued that, to Nijo's knowledge, did not include a poem by her father or any other member of her family. This amounted to being removed from the canon of Japanese literary tradition. The works in the Imperial anthology were the poems memorized in schools, quoted over dinner, referred to by lovers and, by enduring, conferred immortality upon their authors and by extension, the authors' families. To be omitted from this influential collection was to be forgotten, neglected, and abandoned. It is to this sad state of affairs that Nijo's father speaks

when he says wistfully in a dream “. . . the waves of our influence have always been felt in the Bay of Poetry.” (252) And, at her father's urgings Nijo decides to write her Confessions.

From the very moment when she formally joins the court she draws away from the life she is expected to assume. She begins leaving the palace for journeys of one sort or another with her first installation. Each journey is occasioned by death, illness, childbirth or an unofficial love affair (sometimes with members of the political opposition, which may have had some influence on her banishment from court although Nijo was never a favorite of the Empress.)

The text is organized into five “books” of several years each, with unexplained and undiscussed gaps of several years in between. The first three books are about her life in the Imperial court with its attendant love affairs, ceremonies, and politics. During these years Nijo comes and goes from the palace following illnesses, deaths, love affairs, childbirth and because she is instructed to travel with GoFukakusa. Her life in the palace is never as fulfilling for her as her journeys, and if it weren't for love affairs might well have been unbearable. She enjoys the many ceremonies but she hasn't any real friends within the palace walls.

The last two books concern her pilgrimage in and around the countryside. She still returns to the capital now and again but never discusses the time she spends there. Her interests lie exclusively outside its gates although she still sees GoFukakusa several times. Towards the end when GoFukakusa dies, and Lady Nijo is unable to attend his funeral because she no longer has any official status, she still travels to the temple and waits outside during the service. When his body is removed for cremation she finds she has lost her shoes and must run down the road after the palanquin barefoot and crying. It is possibly the most poignant moment in the entire book.

It was almost dawn when I arrived at the crematory. The service was over; a few wisps of smoke were trailing off into the sky. I wondered what had caused me to live to see this sight. (244)

The plot structure, similar to Margery's Book, is from illness in

confinement to strength in pilgrimage. She has only one illness she writes about while she is travelling, and it occurs at the very beginning of her pilgrimage. Of it she writes that "just lying in bed day after day made me acutely aware of how my life had changed. But the span of our life is fore-ordained, and sometime in the sixth month I began to feel better." (189) After that she never mentions illness again, though sorrow continues to plague her throughout the remaining pages.

She wrote poetry, of course, as did every other well-educated aristocratic member of Japanese society of the time. The most elegant and expressive form of communication for the Japanese aristocracy was the poem. It figured in every written communication from court documents to prayers. For Nijo the poem was especially important as she came from a family of poets. In the early part of her life many of these were romantic poems. Any romance would have been initiated by the giving and receiving of such poems. The quality of the poetry as well as the beauty of the handwriting were thought to reflect the true character of the writer (*The World of the Shining Prince*, p. 226) and no one would have begun a relationship without this sort of evidence such as this. There were other occasions, of course, many others: hearing crickets in the Spring, to congratulate or console another for their good or bad fortune, any birthday or festival day, any personal communication would, if it were correct, contain a poem to mark the occasion.

"There were many occasions in daily life--a visit to the country, for example, or the sight of the first snowfall of the year- when failure to compose appropriate poems was a grave social solecism. Also, when one received a poem (on these or any other occasions) it was mandatory to send a prompt reply, preferably using the same imagery."(*The World of the Shining Prince*, p. 190)

Any poem or recitation would recall other poems from the canon which brought to mind specific emotions or events. But it is with romance that the poem comes into its own.

"His eloquence throughout the long night would have softened

the heart of a Chinese tiger, not to mention my own which is far from adamant, so although I had not the slightest intention of giving myself to him, I did. I wondered if perhaps His Majesty would learn of my unexpected new love in a dream, and I was afraid.

Warned by the morning song of the birds, he left while it was still dark. His departure upset me, and I could not get back to sleep. I simply lay there until his letter arrived sometime before dawn.

Returning, the way dimmed by tears

Even the late moon seems cruel

There in the dawning sky.

How long has this been building up in us? Now I don't think I can bear to wait 'till nightfall. How sad that it must all be kept secret."

I replied:

I cannot speak of your return,

Only the shadow of your presence

Lingering here in tears on my sleeves

As the morning sky grows light. (34)

After she becomes a nun her poems take on a decidedly more philosophical cast. When she passes a garden of chrysanthemums in the countryside she writes

Outside court life now

This far-wandering self

Fading, frost-bitten chrysanthemums

Recall the distant capital

And when she leaves an area she has been visiting she writes

And were I not a wanderer

How would it matter?

Can one remain forever in this world?

She also prided herself on other skills common to her rank and class: in matching colors and fabrics, in creating incense mixtures, in ritual and protocol, in pun and allusion, in knowing the classic literary works by heart.

But it was not until she had left the confines of the palace and the aristocracy that she discovered that there was more to Japan than she had known before. During her early journeys she was welcomed everywhere people aspired to know the arts and customs of the court. She came to find compassion in her heart for people in less elevated circumstances and an appreciation for the liveliness of the countryside that was generally unknown to the people of the court, that is the group which referred to themselves as “the good people.”

Later, as she grew poorer and older her last energies are directed towards dedicating sutras to the people she has loved and to the fulfillment of her spiritual pledge.

“Who can accompany me on that final journey though the afterworld?” she asks when fellow pilgrims ask her to join them, “I entered this life alone; I shall leave it alone. People who meet must part; things that are born must die. No matter how beautiful the plum blossoms, in the end they return to the ground.” (p. 197)

Finding authentic commonality in these two lives, as for any two separate lived experiences, is a challenge. In this case the difficulty is increased by distance, culture, intentionality, and mode of expression. While the objects for comparison, their autobiographies, appear to provide a level ground upon which to set both lives side by side and so to take their measure, the texts themselves are not without troublesome aspects. Margery, being illiterate, had to trust to the good intentions and skills of another for the organization and presentation of the text. If she had been able to write it herself it might have turned out differently. Would she still refer to herself “that creature”? If the project were entirely of her creation would she have arranged the events in the way they have been arranged, would she have structured the work the way it appears. Writing in private instead of dictating out loud she might have projected other parts of herself. It is impossible to know from this vantage point.

Lady Nijo's book given the title '*The Confessions of Lady Nijo*' in English (in point of fact a more literal translation of the Japanese title 'Towazugatari' would be something like 'Unrequested tale') ends

dramatically, the last page of the manuscript slashed through with a sword. What might have been there and why it was removed is anybody's guess. Writing as she does, in conformity to the literary expectations of her day, it is difficult, particularly for the Western eye and in a state of translation, to appreciate the subtleties of language, the resonance of pun and word play Nijo, indeed most of her aristocratic contemporaries counted being understood to make their point most effectively.

Both works have only been "discovered" in the twentieth century; the original of neither text has survived. A single copy of Margery's Book was found and rescued from oblivion on a dusty library shelf in an English manor house in 1934. A single copy of Lady Nijo's *Confessions* was uncovered in the geography section of the Imperial library in 1940, but wasn't annotated and published in 1966.

Then there is the question as to where the works fall within the guidelines for autobiography itself. Neither of them is typical of the works we have come to call autobiography, in part because of the qualities we reserve explicitly or implicitly to the nature of the autobiographical task.



Subject and object overlap each other, intending a communion of meaning, a communion that is always refused under cover of symbolisms and myths that both say and do not say, that offer themselves at the same time they conceal themselves and vanish though scarcely offered; but that nonetheless indicate a view point, an invitation to pursue the endless quest whose goal would be there, at the very end of this procession to which mirrors invite, infinitely reflecting each other.

Scriptures of the Self
Georges Gusdorf

In the West the study of autobiography is a fairly recently developed area of scholarly interest. Though most discussions of it begin with St. Augustine's 'Confessions' in the fourth century,

however, as a genre autobiography really came into its own in the nineteenth century. As a field it has been dominated by western men both in terms of its recognized authorities and its recognized practitioners.

“One would say that it (autobiography) expresses a concern peculiar to Western man, a concern that has been of good use in his systematic conquest of the universe and that he has communicated to men of other cultures; but those men will thereby have been annexed by a sort of intellectual colonizing to a mentality that was not their own.” (Georges Gusdorf, *Conditions and Limits of Autobiography*, p.29)

The reasons for this, according to M. Gusdorf, are primarily cultural. Among other things we have, “entered into the perilous domain of history.” (30) We also think well of ourselves. Gusdorf quotes Gide repeating the biblical song: “I praise thee, O my God, for making me a creature so marvellous.” (34) The development of the genre we call autobiography implies for Gusdorf “a new spiritual revolution: the artist and the model coincide, the historian tackles himself as object.” (31) Christianity is as important to Gusdorf in the development of autobiography as is the Copernican Revolution because Christianity represents each soul as intrinsically valuable and because the Christian sense of virtue requires one to dwell on one’s faults. He chooses the Copernican Revolution as a landmark event because it gave mankind the opportunity to place themselves, not in the middle of creation, but to one side and therefore measure events in historical terms.

In the East, however, autobiography has been recognized and respected for its literary value for centuries. Lady Nijo could look to the many *nikki bungaku*, or literary diaries, produced in the preceding centuries for models of form and authority when she decided to write her story. The eastern critic of autobiography dates the beginnings of autobiography from the *Tosa nikki* (*Poetics of Nikki Bungaku*, p 91) in approximately 935 A.D. The *Tosa* was followed very quickly by other works in the same vein and a tradition established in which many authors engaged themselves particularly during the Heian period

immediately preceeding the Kamakura period to which Lady Nijo belongs.

Different critics in the field of autobiography have different opinions as to what constitutes genuine autobiography and what is mere musing in an autobiographical frame. Two divergent views are represented by Marilyn Miller, and Roy Pascal. Miller, who compares Japanese texts to noted examples of the Western traditions of autobiography, takes a broader view of the genre overall than does Pascal. As Miller writes in the introduction of her book, *The Poetics of Nikki Bungaku*,

“...concentration on personality and personality development is, in fact, a very modern preoccupation... if we judge autobiography from this standpoint, whether it is autobiography of the past or much of modern autobiography, we shall in fact be impoverishing our own literature by ignoring writers who had other purposes in writing than just displaying personality development, and who were fulfilling other types of literary expectations.” (*The Poetics of Nikki Bungaku*, p. 22)

Pascal would restrict official entries in the autobiographical category to those works which meet certain criteria which he enumerates in his book, *Design and Truth in Autobiography*, primarily that the work be “a review of life focused on the self. (p. 120) It is his firm belief that “Autobiography does not come into being outside of Europe.” (p. XXX) Even some texts Pascal will admit as autobiography he cannot call “good autobiography.” Margery’s Book, for Pascal, was an example of the inferior kind:

“In the case of The Book of Margery Kempe (1436-38) we see the two worlds utterly at variance--an inner life of hysterical urgings and visions, an outer experience of disparate adventures. Here and there, and notably in her encounters with ecclesiastical authorities, there are vivid passages in which we see a moral quality in Margery’s determination to fulfill her mission, a self-consciousness which belongs to good autobiography; but usually her actions and her manner of behavior derive from the obscurest urges...it is raw, not shaped material.”(p. 120)

Perhaps it isn't a shape that appeals to Pascal but it has definitely been shaped. It is her "second reading of experience," (*Conditions and Limits of Autobiography*, p. 38) and in it is in "that consciousness of self (that) is the birthplace of (her) truth," to paraphrase Gusdorf (*ibid*, p. 38).

But Margery is a difficult personality. One either likes or dislikes her. Her story, much as her conversation must have been in life, is filled with erotic imagery, domestic representations and rebuke for her betters. She, unlike her countrywoman and contemporary, Julian of Norwich, is not an introspective, calm and meditative force.

Perhaps Pascal finds himself uncomfortably confronting Margery as the cluttered, lively, unintellectual agency for her visions. This discomfort may spring from what might be perceived as inappropriate and unrestrained activity on Marge's part; engendered perhaps by the cultural view of women that Ritta Jo Horsley called under different circumstances a recognition of the "feminine as linked with nature, the nonhuman, the erotic and the unarticulated unconscious in contrast to the male domains of civilization, power and rationality." (*Re-reading 'Undine geht'*, p. 225)

Perhaps this is the source of his discomfort with her "hysterical urgings" (hysterical etymologically related to womb). Perhaps it is this sort of cultural underpinning which informs his resistance to the recognition that Margery took control of the circumstances of her life not in the abstract but in reality. It is this he calls "disparate adventure" which issues from "the obscurest urges." He can't seem to reconcile himself to the thought that the action she took she took as a response to what she perceived as the commands of God and in the face of a great deal of local opposition. She chose to live chastely despite her married state and took to travelling at God's bidding despite her family ties. Pascal, one suspects, would be happier with a more refined product, with a story whose outlines clearly indicated a progression, a development, an end to which all activity lead. Perhaps it is this he cannot find in Margery's Book.

Professor Miller finds "a lack of finish, a sense of incompleteness or, more accurately, the inexhaustibility of the subject matter is almost the key signature of autobiographical writing." (*Poetics of Nikki Bungaku*,

p. 132) She finds in the *Confessions* a fictional quality based on the similarity of some of the episodes to episodes in *Tales of Genji* and finds the strongest element in the work to be "the contrast between the court and the world around it." (230) In this work she notes "that almost ideal existence is shown to be gradually complicated, betrayed, and destroyed, not only by individual human frailty but also by time itself." (231)

As Pascal has not read or evaluated Nijo's *Confessions*, so Miller unfortunately has not critiqued Margery's Book and so her views can't be incorporated into this study. But as she locates the *Confessions* within its literary heritage she might also have read *The Book* in light of the feminist tradition of the continental mystics contemporary with Margery. Whereas Nijo had developed her life story with the *Tale of Genji* in mind, Margery likely patterned hers after women such as Bridget of Sweden whom Margery mentions and compares to herself frequently; she even visits her home and grave when she is on pilgrimage. Maureen Fries writes in her essay on Margery that

"Her peers are Dorothea of Prussia and St. Bridget of Sweden and other Frauenmystik...Like a sizeable number of these and other holy women, Margery was married; she had children, indeed her total of fourteen may be a record. Like them, she begged for and eventually received from her husband (with however limited clerical approval) permission to live chaste. Like them, she went on pilgrimage rather than staying home shut up in a cell or community; like them, she expected sainthood....one can find in the mystical experiences and lifestyles of these and other, earlier females from the twelfth to the fourteenth centuries, ...the discovery of a tradition or style of medieval women's mysticism." (*Margery Kempe*, p. 219)

Pascal won't be happy until he finds in Margery's work more of what he calls a "determination to fulfill her mission" and "a self-consciousness," though Margery herself explains that the purpose of her *Book* is to demonstrate God's love for the sinner and the text appears to do that. "The incidents of her life's journey, with an occasional exception, are wayward and trivial, and rarely rise to the level of symbolic event in which her character and her world are

suddenly embodied," he writes. He fails to recognize important themes is her work such as movement as against stasis, a new style of feminine spirituality, the feminization of God, and the aspects of quest in her journey.

While she hoped to demonstrate the effect of redemption in her own life, (She begins the Proem: "Here begins a short treatise and a comforting one for sinful wretches, in which they may have great solace and comfort for themselves, and understand the high and unspeakable mercy of our sovereign Saviour Jesus Christ") she also wants to enter into the record her version of events. During her lifetime she felt her quest to be misunderstood by most of the people most of the time. This was the the trial she put up as a consequence of pursuing the directions she felt God gave her. For instance, when she is traveling to Jerusalem and her fellow pilgrims turn on her in the town of Constance for weeping and fasting and generally being too religious for their tastes she has no recourse but to make the best of it.

"They cut her gown so short that it only came a little below her knee, and made her put on some white canvas in a kind of sacking apron, so that she would be taken for a fool, and people would not make much of her or hold her in any repute. They made her sit at the end of the table below all the others, so that she scarcely dared speak a word." (*The Book of Margery Kempe*, p. 38)

However, Margery is at her best when she is suffering this sort of worldly reprimand.

"Then this creature thought it was a joyous thing to be reprovod for God's love. It was great solace and comfort to her when she was chided and scolded for the love of Jesus, for reproving sin, for speaking of virtue, for conversing about scripture, which she learned in sermons and by talking with clerks. She imagined to herself what death she might die for Christ's sake. (p. 65)

She would be chided but also she wanted it understood that there was a higher purpose to her example. She was not a fool except as she was a fool for God. And so, in stating her case herself in *The Book*,

she can set the record straight for the future, to correct the false impression of the past. This, too, is precisely Lady Nijo's impetus. Her father's request when he appears to her in a dream that the family's literary good name not be forgotten and her own wish that her version of event be told, she says, are the main reasons she tells her story. As Gusdorf writes,

"It is precisely in order to do away with with misunderstandings, to restore an incomplete or deformed truth, that the autobiographer himself takes up the telling of his story...One is never better served than by oneself."(*Conditions and Limits of Autobiography*, p. 36)

In Margery's case, however, she has been far from successful. Pascal is not her only detractor. She has been reviled for being too demonstrative and emotional. Her chatty visits with God have been called the unsophisticated imaginings of a merchant's daughter and even her defenders have taken her to task for her style—too snippy and too quick to point out the spiritual shortcomings of other pilgrims and to compare them unfavorably with her own privileged place in God's heart.

Nijo is somewhat more successful. If it hadn't been for her *Confessions* the modern world would not know she had lived at all. We would also know less about the dynastic struggles within the Japanese royal family that precipitated the rise to power of the warrior class.



*Your brush marks tell me,
"After this, no more!"
My silken sleeves
Are wet with tears.*

The Confessions of Lady Nijo

The analysis of Japanese autobiography by a Western researcher

owes much to translators and interpreters. As connections between traditions begin to be identified across cultures and more texts are available in various languages we will better understand the effect of culture on the experience of self. Without that knowledge understanding the underlying expectations and demands of a text outside one's cultural experience is risky. Questions can be raised but not definitively answered, at least by me.

In the case of Japanese texts I defer to Miller to set the guidelines. "The Japanese tradition sanctions and exhibits a very high degree of artifice and art," she writes, "...On the whole, Japanese literature relies heavily on the active participation of the reader in the interpretation (construction) of the text through the frequent use of allusion and association as literary techniques." (*Poetics of Nikki Bungaku*, p. 175) The better informed the reader then, the more one can get out of the text.

Besides the need to bring to the reading a knowledge of the literary corpus, for the translator there is the additional difficulty of taking an artistic construction from one language with all that entails and trying to render the equivalent in another language which evidences an entirely different set of cultural information. Karen Brazell, translator of the *Confessions*, discusses some of the problems she was up against in the introduction to the text. A single grammatical demonstration:

"Consider the fact that the subject of a verb does not need to be stated. For the writer who wants to tell good anecdotes without being indiscreet about names, it opens up all sorts of possibilities. Lady Nijo took advantage of them all. In describing an affair that lasted three nights, the most specific reference she makes to her companion is a single use of the word 'person.'" (*The Confessions*, p. XXV)

So, not only does the presentation of the Japanese text spring from a highly evolved cultural code but the message is at variance with Western expectations. Where the Western critic looks for a discussion of the evolution of the self, the Japanese text presents instead the ever-changing display of self.

"Japanese autobiographical writing could be said to be...an expression or presentation of self rather than an explanation...The self presented in...Japanese works was not so much a search for the self and/or the description of its development, but rather the expressions of that self, the many facets of that existence and sensibility." (*Poetics of Nikki Bungaku*, p. 128)

In any case critical analysis of the *Confessions* is largely unavailable in Western literature and what criticism has been made by Eastern scholars has not yet been translated so the same sorts of discussions that have been enjoined about the merits and/or defects of *The Book* are not available for the *Confessions*. It is interesting to wonder what Pascal might make of it, what Gusdorf would find there.

Though the *Confessions* is not European, not dedicated to documenting the development of personality and is patterned on fictional models, many of the people and events can be substantiated through outside sources. It has been, in its short modern life, come to be accepted as autobiography in the Japanese tradition and is in fact heralded as "one of the finest works in classical Japanese literature," (Brazell, vii)

Nijo structures elements in her story in terms of earlier Japanese classics, *The Tale of Genji* and *Tales of Ise*. Nijo is not alone in her affection for these Heian models of cultural civility. They set the standards for all manner of official Japanese events and discussions in her time. The stories in *Genji* and *Ise* themselves were acted out at court, the ministers and ladies-in-waiting playing Prince Genji and the other characters. The Heian ideals were adopted and copied in court behavior for the successive two and one-half centuries that followed their development until, in the Kamakura period, the games, poems, relationships and ceremonies of the court were copies of the Heian originals and were retained even though the conditions which brought them into being were all but gone by that time.

It is easy to see why the "good people" of the court would want to imitate the elaborate Heian period since they were lacking a social ideal inspired by their time and circumstances. The Heian period to which Nijo refers her *Confessions*, is as refined a society, as exquisite a

delineation of an ideal, as has ever existed.

Heian women spent their lives immersed in a culture of music, poetry, the blending of incense and the clever use of color in clothing. These activities were emblematic of a cultural milieu of the most refined sensibilities. The aristocracy spent their year following the schedule of religious festivals, making time for sports and contests, visiting the countryside for poetic inspiration and conducting love affairs. During this century in Japan "nearly every noteworthy author was a woman." (ibid, p. 211) Heian women enjoyed a high degree of independence. Indeed the noted translator and scholar, Ivan Morris, states that it is "only since the Second World War that that the position of Japanese women has become better than that of their ancestors a thousand years ago." (ibid, p. 220)

But the aristocracy of Lady Nijo's Japan, two hundred years later, the few members of the Japanese society for whom any of this had ever been true, were reduced to acting out the scenes in the *Tales of Genji* and *Ise*. The experiences which produced them were already slipping away and that discrepancy represents another filter between the text and the lived experience. Rather than looking for new styles, new fancies, new preoccupations, Lady Nijo's Japanese courtiers engaged in "wistful longing for the past" (*The Confessions*, xiv) and sought "precedents for their actions and models for their behavior" (Brazell, xiv) in the great literary works of two and one-half centuries earlier. Even the language reflected the decline of culture. Where as imamekashi (up-to-date) had been a mark of the highest praise in Heian society, it had "gone out of fashion in the Kamakura period." (Brazell, xiv)

The work itself is divided into five books. In each of the five books various journeys occur. The first three books are concerned with Nijo's life at court, her various love affairs, her personal misfortunes and the various relationships within the imperial family. It is, as Miller points out, a description of an idealized society in which movement away from the ideal is the over-riding event. The last two books concern her travels around Japan. In these books Nijo moves away from earthy illusions and towards her religious ideals and, in parallel, away from the idealized court and towards a more authentic life.

Miller finds in these last chapters a "betrayal" of the ideal but I think betrayal is too negative a statement. Nijo seems more serious but also calmer, more mature in the later texts. Perhaps instead of "betrayal" it would be possible to substitute the word "growth" as she moves away from an outdated and rigid social system and towards the more vital life of the countryside. She brings the social graces and cultural standards of the court with her everywhere she goes but she changes too as she comes in contact with life outside Kyoto, reflecting the interaction of the ideal with reality.

The most explicit statement of purpose in the entire *Confessions* occurs near the end of the book when Nijo meets retired emperor GoFukakusa for the last time. She has been on pilgrimage for many years. GoFukakusa asks her if she has had many lovers while she has been traveling around the country. He can't believe that she has travels for spiritual reasons alone. She makes the longest speech in the entire book which sprawls over nearly three pages in which she describes the substance of her journey the gist of which is that GoFukakusa is missing the point of her pilgrimage entirely.

"Ever since I left the mist-shrouded palace to wander perplexed in frost-covered places, I have understood the scriptural passage: 'the restless world of unenlightened men is like a burning house,' for I have known no rest even for a single night. The sutras also say, 'Examine your present state to discover your past karma.' I am well aware of the wretchedness of my condition...In this life I think constantly of salvation, petitioning the gods to dissolve my sins that I may be reborn in paradise..." (*The Confessions*, p. 222)

She writes that she began her *Confessions* because her father appeared to her in a dream and pleaded with her to restore the family's fading literary reputation. For Nijo, dreams are always visions. They are always useful and give necessary information. They are the path of information which goes beyond knowledge, they are the vehicle of communication with the all-knowing.



*And smale fowles maken melodye,
That slepen al the night with open yē
(So priketh hem nature in hir corages):
Than longen folk to goon on pilgrimages.*
Canterbury Tales, Prologue
Geoffrey Chaucer

As all study of autobiography is more involved with the analysis of connections of the self to the world than it is with the delivery of unvarnished Truth, it is the examination of these interconnections that provide the most interesting investigation. There is the relationship in both Western and Eastern traditions between writings of the self and the religious impulse to be examined. This is a relationship which is obvious from the very beginning of both traditions. Both Nijo and Margery write and live within their respective religious traditions and their personal strength springs from those beliefs.

But, perhaps, more fundamental to the understanding of any activity which can be described as an investigation of self is the connections which seem to naturally spring between the activities of autobiography and pilgrimage. Journey has been understood through the years in the thinking of both the West and the East to be a metaphor for life but its psychological and physical import may be understood much more specifically. In the conditions of journey, pilgrimage or quest one experiences both the freedom from usual restraint and the discipline of a goal. When one leaves home one leaves all the landmarks that establish identity and place in the world: family, community, familiar surroundings. When one returns the connection between person and place has been altered. The same sort of process occurs in the construction of autobiography. In the collection and recollection of life events, sorting the significant from the mundane, pruning, shaping and massaging the totality of a lived life into a comprehensible whole the life which is the raw material for the process is changed, not only for the writer but for the larger community as well.

There is quite a lot of scholarship available on the subject of

autobiography. And there have been some studies which explore the significance of quest--mostly in terms of a particularly masculine experience. However there is almost nothing on feminine quest and absolutely nothing on the relationship of feminine quest to feminine autobiography.

In the works *The Book of Margery Kempe* and *Confessions of Lady Nijo* these two women reveal not only themselves and their times in their work. They reveal the conditions which subordinated their being to an external authority and how they reclaimed that power. They demonstrate the difficulty of finding modes of expression and determining a course of action which would take into account the obligations they faced and still allow themselves a freedom they found essential. In both the European world of the fourteenth century and the Japanese world of the thirteenth century women had very little power over their own lives, they were not expected to require it, they existed for the convenience of others. But it is clear from reading their work that they did require it, they found ways to obtain it and they created for themselves some small measure of personal freedom though they were careful never to claim it as such.



Je m'en vais chercher un grand peut-être

Gargantua

François Rabelais

Despite the incalculable differences in the lives of Margery Kempe and Lady Nijo there are a number of structural similarities between their works and their lives. Not only do they both purport to tell the true story of a life as it was experienced, they both tell essentially the same story. They do so as Gusdorf pointed out previously, as "first of all a task of personal salvation." (*Conditions and Limits of Autobiography*, p. 39) They both found themselves in traditional roles, indeed the only roles, for women. They found themselves defined in relationship to someone else.

Early on in their lives they felt dissatisfied with the situation in which they found themselves and realized the need to pursue another life experience. Nijo relates that at fifteen she understood the tenuousness of her position as a concubine, she had experienced the death of her mother and father, she is back in the palace after a period of seclusion and mourning.

"On the first day of the eleventh month I returned to the palace. I had begun to feel at this time that I needed to change my way of life. I was obsessed with thoughts of my father, and my own undefined position made it difficult to know how to behave when Empress Higashi-Nijo chose to be unpleasant...all I really wanted was to have my baby quietly and then go off to some quiet spot where I could give up this illusory world and pray for my parents' happiness in the next life. Toward the end of the month I left the palace again. (p. 39)

From the beginning Nijo is traveling to and from the palace, intending to get away, always called back. Long before her formal pilgrimage she is engaged in the restless movement that continues to batter at the edge of her confinement.

Marge, working with a different set of problems, endures several years of temptations, the working out of an arrangement of chastity with the ever-patient Mr. Kempe, and the miracle in which she is healed after a stone from the church ceiling falls on her head before she too begins to search out the boundaries of a new life experience. Still it is only page fifty-seven before she says: "Soon after that (the incident of the stone), this creature was moved in her soul to go and visit certain places for spiritual health."

Both Marge and Nijo establish a pattern of travel such that it becomes the dominant theme in their lives. When they are still and confined to one place it is because they are having personal problems and are unable to get away. They both experience bouts of illness when they are at home. The movement away from home coincides with a restoration.

The journey itself seems to be the most important aspect of their pilgrimage and not the destination. Indeed there are dozens of

destinations but only one journey. They quest after spiritual comfort on pain of their eternal salvation. In both cases although the trope of pilgrimage is a recognized spiritual exercise in their communities, it is extremely unusual for women to travel alone. They need the authority of a spiritual venture in order to justify their active quest. They communicate with God and the spiritual world through visions and dreams. In this way they can value and act upon their own knowledge and feelings as well as divine the wishes of the highest authority.

They take vows of celibacy both because celibacy is a recognized virtue in the religious experience and seemingly as the currency required for unencumbered passage for the female pilgrim. Interestingly the vows of celibacy represent a type of spiritual rebirth, a definite change of focus for two women for whom sex was an important part of life. Margery is very clearly seeking to establish herself as a renewed virgin in an era when virginity was the highest state a woman could achieve. Nijo renounces the worldly life in order to devote herself to her spiritual development. Despite their celibacy they continue to feel emotionally connected to the men they leave but they have redefined those relationships in their own terms.

They both feel their relationships with those men has been given greater purpose and depth after the initiation of pilgrimage than before. They both begin their pilgrimage in the second part of their lives after they have met the usual obligations of women in their societies. When they do leave they both experience certain dangers inherent in travel but neither dwell on it nor are they deterred by it. They both exhibit unexplained gaps in their autobiographies, times when, unengaged in their search, they didn't think worth writing about. They both believe the truth about their existence in the physical world is bound up inextricably with their ability to travel, to see the world with their own eyes. They both depend on dreams and visions for truth that goes beyond knowledge.

The writing of an autobiography is in many ways a journey of another kind, back through time, searching for the meaning of it all, trying to find in retrospective the sign posts which marked the way. It is a transformation of experience, the levying of a spiritual tax on the labors that have gone before. The trip backwards gives form and

substance to what went before.

For Margery and Nijo the search for self required leaving home and living among strangers in order to become more familiar with themselves. It was both a quest and an exile of sorts. The texts they left are road maps that they followed into the wilderness that was more welcoming than rejecting, more embracing than excluding, and offered more permission than restraint. They were pilgrims both for religious reasons and for personal production. And they have left us a record of that search for salvation.

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