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Now

Or, On Memory and the Contemporary

and he wonders if it is worth hoping for a future when there is no future,
and from now on, he tells himself, he will stop hoping for anything and
live only for now, this moment, this passing moment, the now that
is here and then not here, the now that is gone forever.

Paul Auster, *Sunset Park*¹

To tell the truth

In 1958, amid the heady excitements of post-war European aesthetic experimentalism, and just after the signing of the Treaty of Rome the previous year, Alain Robbe-Grillet opened his well-known ‘new novel’, the Kafkaesque *Dans le labyrinthe*, with a basic truism: ‘*Je suis seul ici, maintenant*’:² I am alone, here, now. This is truistic for the simple reason that, virtually by definition, ‘I’ must always be ‘here’, ‘now’; and, insofar as I am self-aware enough to talk about ‘I’, then this ‘I’ is also, in a profound sense, alone or at least distinguished from all else. While the political scene is marking a supposed unity of various geographical entities (the very making of a labyrinth, in at least one sense), Robbe-Grillet asserts solitude. *Dans le labyrinthe*, of course, is also a self-consciously *nouveau roman*, a self-conscious departure for the novel as a literary form: it presupposes novelty, a change, and an experiment in which any ‘now’ – and most specifically the ‘now’ that opens the novel itself – is very definitely different from a ‘then’, a past or an already existing state of affairs. This now, like every now that is self-conscious, is determined by its difference from its immediate past. It is ‘modern’, and self-consciously so, in making this break and in characterizing itself precisely as a break with the immediate past.

I want to try here to think through what is at stake in this. What are the implications of our thinking that the *content* of ‘I’ is given by the substance of whatever is the ‘here-now’? The question can be phrased in some different ways, depending on one’s preferred inflection of the problem. What is ‘now’, and what might its content be? How might we understand ‘the contemporary’? Perhaps of greater socio-cultural consequence is the concomitant question: ‘What is modernity?’ Within this, we should ask the question, ‘How is *change*

possible such that “now” differs from “then” or from its immediately preceding “now”?’ This last mutates more generally into a much more far-reaching and fundamental question – in some ways the political question that shapes the post-war political settlement that shapes ‘the west’ – a question that will shape this entire study: ‘How is history possible; or what might it mean to be genuinely secular?’

It has always been difficult to assert a genuine secularity and perhaps nowhere more so, paradoxically, than when one asks questions regarding the very substantive constitution of history itself. In the neo-theological terms within which the question has traditionally been posed, it has been thought of as a question about creation or about the world itself: why is there something rather than nothing? This, in turn, is translated into literature, where it is inflected as a problem concerning authority and legitimacy, by one such as King Lear, for example, arguing that ‘Nothing can come of nothing’. In broader terms, it is the question of ‘beginnings’, as Edward Said once insisted.³ It is translated into more abstract form in mathematics when one asks the question concerning ‘zero’ and its relation to both a cardinal and ordinal number: how do we get from zero to one, or what is the relation of zero to ‘the first’, for example.⁴

Behind all of this is a fundamental issue that is at the heart of my inquiry in this opening chapter: what constitutes the substance of ‘now’? How would we characterize the present moment, the presence or the substantiality of the ‘je’ who is ‘*ici, maintenant*’ in Robbe-Grillet’s labyrinth? At one level, the ‘je’ is precisely defined and determined as a specific conjunction of ‘*ici, maintenant*’; and so, we can say with some precision, what is at stake is the very condition of the subject of modernity or of the subject in modernity.

In what follows, I shall explore this under various headings. It has become, in diverse ways, a pressing issue for some contemporary philosophy, for sociology, and for literary and other forms of aesthetic and cultural critique. Indeed, any form of criticism that thinks of itself as contributing to historical change of any kind – that is, any criticism that would see part of its purview as being ‘political’ – must find an answer to the question of what constitutes the now.

Walter Benjamin certainly thought this, in his ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’. There, he argues a preference for a kind of criticism that is, in his terms, properly identified as a historical materialism. Such a criticism needs to attend to what he regards as a ‘messianic moment’, which he describes as the *Jetztzeit* or ‘time of the now’.⁵ Rather than seeing time as a mere succession in which this is followed by that (one damned thing after another, as it were; or the narrative of ‘and then ... and then ...’), Benjamin argues that the historical materialist needs explicitly a moment that is, in a very precise sense, outside of time while yet being of that time: a present that is *arrested*, or a moment in which time stands still while still being of the order of the temporal. In this way, the ‘continuum of history’ is ‘blasted apart’, as he graphically describes it;⁶

and in that moment of drastic analysis or dissolution and fragmentation, the historical materialist can come to understand their now as a moment in a wider narrative. That is, the arresting of time allows for the comprehension of the now as a specific moment in or aspect of a 'constellation' or a shape that gives a form to the content of history itself as a whole.

Jean-François Lyotard offered something similar when he considered the operation of memory in Augustine, one of the confessional writers whose work will help shape this inquiry. In his posthumously published book on *La confession d'Augustin*, Lyotard described the operation of memory in Augustine as a seemingly self-contradictory 'negative-affirmative force' that calls to presence that which is not there, or that *re-presents* objects that are absent and then organizes those objects as if they constituted an entire world. He summed up by saying that, for Augustine, memory is 'the friend of time ... One thing after another, certainly; but the first is conserved in the second, and this latter is engorged with the former.'⁷

The thinking involved in the formulations of Lyotard, and the thought that shapes Benjamin's attitude to history, have perhaps not been fully understood. Certainly, it is a commonplace to think of Benjamin as a Marxist whose views are coloured by forms of mysticism and religiosity, such as those we might see in Augustine; but we should take seriously the question of *Messianic* time as expressed and explored here.⁸ Too often, the mysticism is forgotten or elided as we try to co-opt Benjamin for all sorts of historicisms – including, fatally, the very historicism against which he himself wrote in his Theses.

Behind Benjamin lurks Hegel, another philosopher marked by the signs of religion, in his case specifically Christianity. At the start of his *Phenomenology*, Hegel ponders what is given to us in sense-perception as the condition of our being-in-the-world. That is to say, he ponders the state of the 'here, now' that constitutes human consciousness at any given instant; and he finds a problem related to truth. Late one evening, he suggests, write down on a sheet of paper the phrase 'now it is night'. That phrase, measured against the facts of the given world, is true. Read it the following morning, validating it in the same way; suddenly, the same phrase has become false, untrue. Yet the matter is a good deal more complicated, as always in Hegel:

The Now that is Night is *preserved*, i.e. it is treated as what it professes to be, as something that *is*; but it proves itself to be, on the contrary, something that is *not*. The Now does indeed preserve itself, but as something that is *not* Night; equally, it preserves itself in face of the Day that it now is, as something that is also not Day⁹

In other words, something that is linguistically true at one moment ('Now it is night') becomes either false (because now it is day) or, at least, *fictional*. In reading 'Now it is night' at some other moment than the night on which it is written, we enter the terrain of what constitutes the fictional itself.

What became, for Hegel, the opening to the question of *negation* becomes, firstly and more fundamentally, precisely the construction of fiction: the construction of a mode of truth-telling whose validity is *not* to be measured against the world that is given to us, but rather to be legitimized in some other way.

In other words, we have a now that both *is* and *is not* a now, and a now that problematizes the idea of truth, if we consider truth to be a function of referential linguistic propositions about an actual historically material state of affairs.¹⁰ What follows from this – as we know from our understanding of fictions themselves – is that truth cannot be so easily considered purely as a function of linguistic propositions. That would lead us simply to a referential version of truth; but, as references vary in time, so also we lose the substantive idea of the transpositionality, the absolutism, of truth.

For Hegel, truth is either true or not true, so to speak. The referential version of truth is one where truth becomes dependent upon location, upon the locatedness of the '*ici-maintenant*' or the '*je*', and thus a purely subjective sensation, the feeling that the I has here-now, wherever this here-now may be. Given, further, that the here-now is entirely specific to one configuration or constellation of subjectivity (that is, by definition it cannot be occupied by any other I), then at this point truth becomes not merely relativistic, but also empty and entirely unverifiable. It is reduced to a pure manifestation of I-ness: *je suis seul ici, maintenant*. The resulting *solitude*, akin to an isolation, becomes total, and the material reality of the world is reduced to solipsistic fantasy.

The position is one that was satirized by Swift, in his examination of an earlier moment of self-conscious 'modernity', when he critiqued the 'modern' author in his 'Tale of a Tub'. There, we have a modern author who indicates that all that has preceded him – the ancient authors and the entire classical tradition – is, by definition, untrue, since it has failed to take account of the author's contemporary moment. It cannot account for it for the simple reason that, when the ancients wrote, this modern was the future and therefore unknown. Thus it is that he can claim, in Section V of the tale, that 'I here think fit to lay hold on that great and honourable privilege of being the last writer. I claim an absolute authority in right, as the freshest modern, which gives me a despotic power over all authors before me.'¹¹ Almost equally satirically, the position is criticized more recently by Michel Serres, when he wonders about the eternally optimistic or Whiggish notion of historical process that leads us to assume that the past was another country where people lived in error whereas '*Ouf! Nous sommes enfin entrés dans le vrai*' – finally, we have entered into the realm of the true – by virtue simply of being in the present moment, the most recent 'modern', purged of previous error.¹²

Hannah Arendt has considered something pertinent here, in a piece that looks at truth-telling: her essay on 'Lying in Politics'. She points out that truth and politics are uneasy bedfellows and always have been.¹³ She indicates that 'A characteristic of human action is that it always begins something new';¹⁴ but that

it does not follow from this that we can ever make something out of nothing. In other words, she is addressing the fundamental question of my present argument: how does something happen; how can we be fully human in this making something new, and even in making ourselves anew and thus ‘authoring’ ourselves or asserting autonomy? Arendt’s argument, indebted to Heideggerian notions of *Destruktion* and to Hegelian notions of negation, really depends upon our capacity for imagination, for seeing a now that both *is* and *is not* at once:

In order to make room for one’s own action, something that was there before must be removed or destroyed, and things as they were before are changed. Such change would be impossible if we could not mentally remove ourselves from where we are physically located and *imagine* that things might as well be different from what they actually are. In other words, the deliberate denial of factual truth – the ability to lie – and the capacity to change facts – the ability to act – are interconnected; they owe their existence to the same source: imagination.¹⁵

History, we might say following this, depends upon two things: displacing the here-now and lying *or* fiction. This is interesting for anyone who would be a historical materialist, for it contains within itself a remnant of idealism. Rather than accepting that imagination is simply shaped by history (i.e. that imagination is determined by the material economies of the historical process), it is arguing that history depends upon the capacities of imagination, upon our ability to see a now that both *is* night and *is not* night all at once. For Arendt, this is also an indication of our potential for freedom itself. In the same essay from which I have been liberally quoting, she concludes that ‘while we are well-equipped for the world, sensually as well as mentally, we are not fitted or embedded into it as one of its inalienable parts. We are *free* to change the world and to start something new in it.’¹⁶

It is important, thus, that we add to our question (basically a question concerning the linguistic function of the deictic) this problem concerning truth or the impossibility of our telling the truth ‘now’. Can we tell the truth? This is the basic question here but, in the context of a study of confession, it is important to get the inflection and intonation right: can we *tell* the truth? Given that ‘we’ are in a ‘present’ position, how is truth possible?

Such a question is obviously of great importance in any text that would be ‘confessional’, be it Augustine acknowledging sin and relating the story of a conversion, or Montaigne trying to paint ‘my self’ (and acknowledging Augustine in his essay ‘On Liars’), or be it Rousseau determinedly and seemingly perversely revealing things about himself (including his lying) that become a source of temporary shame.¹⁷ It is vital to any text that seeks to establish and legitimize a form of natural authenticity, such as we find in certain central strands of British romanticism. It is important for any text that presents a testimony or testament of some kind, as in Villon’s ‘Le testament’, for example;¹⁸ it is equally important in a text that proposes an exemplary kind of confession, as with the tales in John Gower’s *Confessio Amantis*; and, very

differently of course, it is pertinent also in the circumlocutions that constitute a text like Derrida's 'Circonfession'.¹⁹ It is also, obviously, vital to any text that sees itself as a corrective to other forms of thought (and thus all rhetorical texts, all persuasive texts, including any and all concerned with the business of literary criticism). And it is obviously vital to any text that regards itself as being historically accurate or that sees its role as being one of revealing the truths of history or of the historical process.

We now have, therefore, not just one question but rather two interlinked fundamental questions here: not only the question of how history might be possible, but also a question of how or whether truth or truth-telling might be possible.

Augustine's conversion: kenosis and the empty turning-point

Let us begin the investigation of these questions by looking directly at a confessional text: the *Confessions* of Augustine. This is a text that narrates, among other things, the trajectory of change itself, of *conversion*, and thus of Augustine's 'starting something new', in the phrasing used by Arendt. In it, Augustine ponders the question of responsibility for his sins. Among the many topics that he covers, he asks two key questions related to this issue of responsibility, or 'answerability': first is the ostensibly reasonable question of whether he can genuinely be held responsible for actions committed without his mature consciousness of them, actions carried out when he was an immature infant or even a baby; and second is the equally pertinent question of whether his desires, as seemingly elaborated in dreams when he is asleep, are as sinful as they might be were he conscious and awake.

The implied corollaries of these questions are very serious. Firstly, should a child be held accountable for actions that an adult, possessed of a full consciousness of the norms that govern their world, characterizes as immoral, prior to their knowledge of morality itself? Behind this is a juridical issue, but one whose philosophical basis is thus laid bare: does consciousness determine history, and does intent thereby determine guilt (or innocence)? Secondly, can one commit a sin unconsciously? The relevant example for us here would be Augustine's dreams, for instance (another of Augustine's abiding worries). He feels happy to have purged himself of concupiscence in his waking life, but he remarks that he still has dreams that include matters seemingly revealing an intrinsic lust and immorality in his character, or at least in what we would now call his unconscious. Let us imagine a dream of lust: is this an instance of the dreamer sinning? Or, even more pertinently for present purposes, let us suppose that as a child, I take an apple from a tree, under certain conditions: a) without knowing that the tree does not belong to me; b) without knowing the laws governing private property

or ownership; c) without any concern for consequences for anyone else other than myself, since, at this stage, I have an underdeveloped sense of alterity. Is this a sin?

That Augustinian question is answered by Lyotard, who replies to it in his posthumously published book on Augustine's *Confessions*; he responds by saying that it is indeed a sin, *though not a sin committed by a subject*. It is a sin committed by time itself, by *le retard* – by delay – as Lyotard puts it: '*c'est le péché du retard*' ('it is a belated sin').²⁰ That which *was not* a sin *becomes* one. That which *is not* turns out to *be*. This, of course, is Hegel's 'now' revisited again – a now that has its own forerunner in Augustine, and that has its legacy in Lyotard. We have an act that *is* and *is not* a sin, all at once. How can we understand this? It is a pressing question for the law, of course, concerned as it must be with the age of criminal responsibility, not to mention with the possibilities of mercy, redemption, regret, grace and forgiveness.

In the light of this, we may need to look slightly differently at the question of the 'now'. Recall that, in Hegel, it is not the case that the 'Now it is night' simply becomes false; rather, it is the case that the night-time that is 'contained' in the now is, as it were, preserved and maintained in the later 'now', the now of the morning. Thus, the now contains a present *and* a past. This is different from a Derridean trace, for what is at stake here is *narrative* itself and the possibilities of establishing a narrative truth. Bearing this in mind, let us look more closely at Augustine.

In Augustine, the now becomes equated with the evanescence of the present moment. He effectively tries to understand it by inserting it into a narrative construction: beginning (past), middle (now) and end (future). As he develops his thought, these will respectively become enlarged as memory (past), attention (present) and expectation (future). In Book XI, Chapter 15 of the *Confessions*, he tries to locate and to meditate upon the present (in my terms here, the now). He starts by asking about 'the present century'. However, he immediately realizes that there is no such thing as 'the present century', given that a century cannot be present all at once, but is comprised of its constituent years. In the same manner, the 'present year', made up of constituent months, cannot be 'present'. Further, the present month is made up of a series of days; and the day is made up of hours and so on, until the now evaporates into the purest emptiness of a transitional moment – a moment of change – between future and past:

In fact, the only time that can be called present is an instant, if we can conceive of such, that cannot be divided even into the most minute fractions, and a point of time as small as this passes so rapidly from the future to the past that its duration is without length. For if its duration were prolonged, it could be divided into past and future. When it is present it has no duration.²¹

The now is defined as that moment of change itself, a moment of *conversion*, as it were, and thus totally of the essence of Augustine's project in his book.

Yet, in voiding it of duration – that is, in voiding this time of time itself – Augustine has also voided it of any substantive *content* at all in this. What he does is to maintain the *formal* substance of a now (as a median or mediating point linking a past with a future and thereby enabling a narrative) while evacuating it of any substance in terms of content. This is a sleight of hand, of course; but it is vital to our understanding of our basic questions: what is the now and how is history possible? If the now is empty, then how can it be characterized by the substance of a conversion?

What eventuates from this is that history becomes possible solely as a *formal narrative* or as a structure; but the present moment within it remains unavailable or at least empty in terms of having any substantive *content*. We have the *form* of the now but without any *content*. It is this kenosis that shapes Augustinian ideas of substantive time. Correspondingly, we have the forms of history (narrative), which are of necessity fictions; and the now, as a something that actually happens, or as a change in the material conditions of the given world, evades our grasp.

We can partly explain this through a consideration of Benjamin's philosophies of historical critique. As we know, Benjamin argues for historical materialism against mere historicism. Historicism, according to Benjamin, thinks of history in terms of a simple progression from past to future; but here, this is a history that proceeds smoothly, without the irruption of any substantive event and thus without any real change. This kind of historicist grasps 'the sequence of events like the beads of a rosary'.²² In this, each bead would represent a now, but one that has no real content, since it is but a repetition of the same and a consolidation of a static constellation; and thus, it allows a history that can be told from the point of view of one who positions himself in the role of the victor, the teller of the beads.²³ With this state of affairs, the present moment is homogeneous (always the same), but homogeneous precisely because it is empty (it has no possibility of change or of anything really happening that might disturb the whole). Against this is the kind of history explored by the historical materialist, for whom, as Benjamin puts it, 'History is the subject of a structure whose site is not homogeneous, empty time, but time filled by the presence of the now.'²⁴ The example he offers is that of the French Revolution which 'viewed itself as Rome incarnate. It evoked ancient Rome the way fashion evokes costumes of the past.'²⁵ Here, the now of ancient Rome persists in or is contained in the now of the Revolution. The Revolution thus becomes one of those moments that actually have substance: it does what Arendt sees as bringing about something new.

Benjamin's 'rosary beads' are, in microcosm, a metaphor or model of what we might call the law of habit; and habit is the enemy of history. In the structure of the habitual, the 'next' occurrence of that which is habitual has always already happened, in a paradoxical sense; and it therefore can have no status as an event in history. Lyotard is clear on this: in a certain sense, 'the next

time' has already happened: '*Ce futur antérieur au négatif indexe l'avenir sur une impuissance toujours déjà accomplie*' ('This negative future anterior pegs the future on a powerlessness that has always already been fulfilled').²⁶ Habit predetermines the future, such that it cannot ever surprise us: the next bead of the rosary is the same as always, same as it ever was, and always already prefigured in the beads that we tell now, in the present. Under the sign of habit, what is mistakenly called history is but repetition or ritual; and, as Hans Blumenberg argued in 1966, genuine history knows no repetition.²⁷

What Benjamin is seeking, although he uses a different vocabulary, is the *content* of an event, the substance of a moment of transition that would give a solidity and a historical reality to the present or to the now-time. But an event here is to be understood in the terms given to us by Lyotard and Alain Badiou, for example. An event is something that happens, certainly; but it is a happening that could not have been predicted as the outcome of the set of circumstances that immediately precede it. The event is, as it were, history in the form of that which is conditioned by surprise. Jean-Luc Nancy offers us a language for this: 'There is, then, something to be thought – the event – the very nature of which – event-ness – can only be a matter of surprise, can only take thinking by surprise.'²⁸ As he puts it, in a fuller definition where it takes its place alongside a meditation on the experience of freedom:

Surprise as surprise does not come up in order to add itself to the course of events and to modify it. It offers another course, or, more decisively, it offers in the 'course' itself the withdrawal of the course of time, the withdrawal of all its presence. In fact, we could say that surprise is already inscribed in the heart of all philosophical analyses of temporality and, in a singular manner, in the analyses of the present instant: on the limit between the already-having-been and the not-yet-being, the present has also always proved to be the limit of presence – the already-having-passed of what has-not-yet-come. This is the structure of the surprise ... it takes place without having happened; it will therefore not have taken place, but will have opened time, through a schematism of the surprise whose 'I' would surprise itself²⁹

In these observations, the event is tied to freedom; and this is also of importance as we will see later. It is important to note here that we now have a series of collocations, thanks to Arendt and to Nancy, that link the event to both truth and freedom. That is to say, we have a clear identification of the now – once it is given substantial reality (which means historically materialist reality) – with both truth and freedom.

Now, what is the event in the present moment? It is only a point of transition between a then and a future, between past and future. It is the now of the freedom of the Eliotic individual talent; it is the location of Nancy's surprise; it is the moment when time needs to be arrested, as in Benjamin.

These formulations bring us to the recent work of Giorgio Agamben, and specifically to his essay on the question of 'what is a contemporary?'

For Agamben – whose thinking on this is very deeply influenced and shaped by Benjamin, even to the point of a shared vocabulary at times – the contemporary (essentially Agamben’s different word for what I have been calling the now) is marked by a certain untimeliness or, better, an intrinsic and interiorized anachronism. The genuinely contemporary (by which Agamben means the genuinely contemporary individual) is one who is never at home in the present moment, one who, though alive to that moment, is not fully encapsulated or assimilated by it. In the same way as Arendt suggests that we are not fully encompassed by the present space of the world, so, likewise, for Agamben’s contemporary, we are not fully assimilated to the temporal present:

Those who are truly contemporary, who truly belong to their time, are those who neither perfectly coincide with it nor adjust themselves to its demands. They are thus in this sense irrelevant. But precisely because of this condition, precisely through this disconnection and this anachronism, they are more capable than others of perceiving and grasping their own time.³⁰

It follows from this that ‘contemporaries are rare’. Interestingly, as he works this through, Agamben starts to pick up a vocabulary that very directly echoes Benjamin. When Benjamin considered the relation of the French Revolution to ancient Rome (as we have already seen above), he compares the persistence of ancient Rome’s now to fashion: The Revolution ‘evoked ancient Rome the way fashion evokes costumes of the past. Fashion has a flair for the topical, no matter where it stirs in the thickets of long ago’.³¹ Alongside this, let us place Agamben:

Fashion can be defined as the introduction into time of a particular discontinuity that divides it according to its relevance or irrelevance, its being-in-fashion or no-longer-being-in-fashion. This caesura, as subtle as it may be, is remarkable in the sense that those who need to make note of it do so infallibly; and in so doing they attest to their own being in fashion. But if we try to objectify and fix this caesura within chronological time, it reveals itself as ungraspable. In the first place, the ‘now’ of fashion, the instant in which it comes into being, is not identifiable via any kind of chronometer ... The time of fashion ... constitutively anticipates itself and consequently is also always too late. It takes the form of an ungraspable threshold between a ‘not yet’ and a ‘no more’ ... But the temporality of fashion has another character that relates it to contemporariness. Following the same gesture by which the present divides time according to a ‘no more’ and a ‘not yet’, it also establishes a peculiar relationship with these ‘other times’ – certainly with the past, and perhaps also with the future. Fashion can therefore ‘cite’, and in this way make relevant again, any moment from the past.³²

This, though, is exactly what Augustine has already argued as a fundamental condition of the possibility of his making his *Confessions*. There, he cites his past – his sins – in order to transform the self through the transitory moment, breaking through in an event (or a ‘moment of being’, better understood as a ‘moment of becoming’) called a conversion, into a future that will differ from the past. This is, as it were, the opposite of Stanley Fish’s characterization of

John Milton's Satan, 'surprised by sin'; here, we have Augustine 'surprised by the event that is grace', so to speak.³³ And this happens *all the time* and *at every moment* in *Confessions*.

Liotard expresses this well. He points out that confessional writing is marked by a kind of rupture (*une fêlure*, as he calls it) between what I once was (a sinner) and what I now hope to be (redeemed). In these circumstances, conversion is not something that happens like a one-off thunderbolt; rather:

le coup de la conversion n'est pas un seul coup porté une fois pour toutes, et pas non plus une grêle de coups répétés. Non, l'écriture confessive porte la fêlure avec soi. Augustin confesse son Dieu et se confesse non parce qu'il est converti, il se convertit ou tente de se convertir tout en se confessant

the conversion moment is not a single once-and-for-all blow, and neither is it a hail of repeated blows. No, confessional writing carries a fracture within itself. Augustine confesses his God and confesses himself not because he has converted, but rather he converts or tries to convert while confessing himself³⁴

He goes on, in a phrase that once again recalls the passage from Hegel's *Phenomenology* where we began, to state that, in these conditions, '*Il n'y aura plus pour le confessant une nuit et un jour, mais désormais du jour fêlé, de la nuit fêlée*' ('There will no more be a night followed by a day for he who confesses, but from now on only broken day, broken night').³⁵ In this way, Liotard helps us realize part of the point and power of writing, and specifically of writing a confessional text: the resulting text is *not* the description of a conversion that has already taken place: the script actually *is* the conversion happening *in the present* – and that present approximates, as a time of the now, to the eternal.

In any confessional text, it seems axiomatic that the subject making the confession confirms her or his presence before the act itself: 'here I take my stand. I can no more,' as it were. That is to say, the confessing subject confirms that they are 'here, now'. The now in question, however, turns out to be a now that *must* be characterized as a moment of conversion, a kind of revolutionary moment between a past and a future. Yet it further turns out that such a now can have no actual *content*. In sum, the now exists as a formal requirement for the construction of a narrative that *explains* the conversion; and, in so doing, it reduces the status of the conversion – the status of history itself – from that of an event to that of a mere 'happening'. It is impossible to confess to an event.

Alias and survival: confessing in the name of another

There is a political dimension to this, obviously, and a useful starting-point for our investigation of the political effect of such a concentration on 'the now' is, as we will see, the work of Alain Badiou on Saint Paul. Let us first sum

up where we are so far, for we have a series of interlinked problems that are generating the political issue and giving it a specific shape. Firstly, we have a now that simultaneously both *is* and *is not* now; secondly, we have an I that *is* and *is not* I (a conjunction of time and space, or an *ici-maintenant* that is and is not an *ici-maintenant*); and finally, we have the present characterized as a moment of transitory fashion, the site of change par excellence, but a change that, while *formally* there, nonetheless lacks substance or *content*, for the present moment must of necessity disappear. We can narrate the change, as it were; but we cannot live or experience it.

With all this ‘being’ and ‘not being’ at once, we could, of course, call this a Hamlet question: the soliloquy of his ‘to be or not to be’ in which the ‘or’ is not exclusive – in short, Hamlet wondering whether there is a certain being in not-being; and thus his speech is a meditation not about the possibilities of suicide but rather of being dead and alive both at once, a meditation on ‘surviving oneself’ or ‘living on’, as it were. If, like Paul, or like Augustine in Book 13, Chapter 11 of his *Civitas Dei*, we are bearing witness to an event that is called a resurrection from the dead, then we can call it the Christ question.³⁶ If resurrected, Christ both is and is not dead: he is and is not at once. He thus becomes precisely the kind of fulcrum figure that is at stake in our questioning of the now. It is for this reason, almost certainly, that Paul has become such a key figure in the work of Agamben, Badiou and (to a lesser extent) Slavoj Žižek in recent times.³⁷

Badiou, the atheist, is interested in Paul for the simple reason that he sees in Paul one who is ‘militant for truth’. Expressing this even more precisely, he sees in Paul a manifestation of the demand for truth precisely *as* militancy. That is to say, he sees in Paul a version of what Badiou himself thinks of as a kind of absoluteness of truth. This is important for Badiou’s by now well-known stringent attitude to the question of truth, which he defines as a kind of ‘fidelity to an event’; and, in Paul’s case, the event in question is the Christ-event and the resurrection, the moment of being and not-being at once, the messianic moment of the now or *Jetztzeit*.

Badiou is opposed to the prevalent thinking in our contemporary state of affairs in which truth has been systematically reduced to forms of relativism. If my here-now is Night, and yours is Day, then (the relativist argument goes) we neither of us can have an absolute opening to truth as such; rather, we have truths that are conditioned precisely by our divergent subjectivities, by the particularity of our condition, our variant versions of, or historical conjunctures of, the *ici-maintenant*. Such a state of affairs would prioritize the particular over the general, as it were; and, in the end, the subscription to such relativism makes a *law* of the particular. Yet, if a law is always a law that legitimizes particulars, it can have no real force at all properly as a law; for laws must, by nature, have a generalizable applicability.

For Badiou, this is characteristic and typical of a more general state of affairs, in which the present world is actually hostile to truth or to '*les processus de vérité*' – 'methods of truth' – as he prefers to call it. He points out that we have seen what, in another context, Gianni Vattimo calls a kind of *kenosis*, an emptying out of substance from some key terms.³⁸ Badiou advances four key and (for him) axiomatic examples: a) art, he says, is reduced to culture; b) technique obliterates and replaces science; c) management replaces politics; and d) sexuality obliterates love. The result is that: 'Culture-technique-management-sexuality, which has the great merit of being assimilable to the market, and all of whose terms, further, signal a rubric of mercantile presentation, is the modern nominal recovering of the system of art-science-politics-love, which typically identifies the procedures of truth.'³⁹

In this, then, truth is lost entirely under the existing market-capitalist procedures: it becomes a commodity whose value is open to negotiation and bargaining; and that value is always determined to some extent by the powerful, those who can 'buy' more truths, who can be in possession of more truths or who, more simply and crudely, can be more malleable with respect to their identity, as it were. Those market-procedures *produce* numerous 'identities', each of which can be aligned with a specific *ici-maintenant* or located subjectivity; and each now has a claim upon a series of what they will call truths, but what cannot ever be truths. In short, truth is reduced to a matter of the particularity of a localized 'opinion' and, paradoxically like Cardinal Newman a century earlier, Badiou is profoundly hostile to the proliferation of opinion, especially when such opinion becomes the basis for a supposed democracy.

According to Badiou, there is a kind of 'co-responsibility' between art and philosophy. The task of art is to produce truths and that of philosophy is to show them. To show these truths, if they are there in an artwork at all, is, he says, a 'very difficult task ... To show them means, essentially: to distinguish them from opinion. Such that the question today is this, and nothing but this ... is there anything other than our "democracies"'.⁴⁰

Our present state of affairs, argues Badiou, is characterized by the progressive reduction of the question of truth to the merest linguistic forms of judgement and opinion. For Badiou, this would be another way of describing what he sees as the scandal of a 'democracy' that encourages diversity of opinion and multiplicity of argumentations, while truth as such is ignored and circumvented. This prioritization of a democratic impulse, according to Badiou's philosophy, leads to cultural relativism, such that even mathematics is viewed as a 'western construct' (and this, despite even the manifest fact that much of what shapes mathematics is 'imported' from non-western cultures). The consequence of our accepting such cultural relativism is that we radically distinguish the subject from truth itself: truth becomes nothing more or less than the 'performance'

or borrowing of superficial 'identities', names or opinions; and, surviving thus behind a succession of aliases, the subject as such avoids the confrontation with any 'fidelity to an event' or truth. The costs are massive.

As soon as we start thinking this way, we can start to identify sub-cultures (*sous-ensembles*, as Badiou calls them), each with their own particularized claims on their truths. Truth, in this, becomes a matter of contestation between particularities – and between particularized 'identities' – regardless of any absolute claim on historical eventuality or 'events'. In turn, this form of contestation of opinions reduces all criticism, indeed all thinking, to a series of *victimologies*. In this, the response, by those who lack authority, to the effect of power in the marketplace of truths is an assertion of victimhood and a call for recompense. It is the identity as victim that guarantees legitimacy (if not yet power). Yet the end result of this, as Badiou shows, is that each alleged identity, for each alleged victim, will have its own market or marketability:

What an inexhaustible future for mercantile investment in this surging up, in the figure of redeemed communities and supposed cultural singularity: women, homosexuals, the disabled, Arabs! And then the infinite combinations of adjectives here: what a dawn! Black homosexuals, disabled Serbs, Catholic paedophiles, moderate Islamists, married priests, young green managers, oppressed unemployed, the already-old-young. Every time, a new social image authorizes new products, specialist magazines, adequate commercial centres, 'free' radio stations ... and so on.⁴¹

Badiou argues that in this state of affairs – a state of affairs that he characterizes as 'barbaric' and entirely consistent with the logic of capital – truth is systematically and organically simply impossible.⁴² This state is 'organically without truth', as he puts it.⁴³ Paul, while noting social and cultural difference, is completely opposite to all this, according to Badiou; and it is this that attracts Badiou to him, and to his militancy for a truth that transcends relativist positioning, a truth that is *not conditioned by identity*, identity-politics, or a truth that is produced by the mere presence of the *je* or of the *ici-maintenant*. Rather, in Paul, truth is a matter of being faithful to the declaration of an event; and the event in question is that of the 'Christ-event' and the resurrection.

After Paul, then, asks Badiou, can we re-found any relation between truth – a truth that has a greater substance than mere opinion or judgement – and the subject at all? Truth, here, is an event *independent of my identity*. It follows from this that 'I' cannot 'tell' the truth, as it were: truth is not a matter of my speaking at all in that sense.⁴⁴ Badiou explains this by having recourse not to the question of particularity but rather to that of what he calls singularity (and what he will eventually call a 'universal singularity').

He rehearses the claim that, for Paul, truth is a matter of being faithful to the declaration of an event. Two things follow:

First, truth being of the order of an event, or of the order of that which comes to pass, is therefore singular. It is neither structural, nor axiomatic, nor legal.

No available generality can give an account of it, nor could it structure the subject which lays claim to it. There could not possibly be therefore any law of truth. Further, truth being inscribed with effect from a declaration that is essentially subjective, no pre-constituted sub-group underpins it, nothing communitarian or historically established lends its substance to this process. Truth is diagonal with regard to all communitarian sub-groups, it does not authorize itself from a basis in any identity and (this is obviously the most delicate point) nor does it constitute one.⁴⁵

With these two consequences in mind, Badiou removes truth from the question of identity-politics (and vice versa, in fact). Truth, then, is not a function of a linguistic proposition whose validity can be tested by being aligned with or placed alongside a non-linguistic fact. Nor is it a matter of who is speaking or of where the discourse comes from (these being now Foucauldian or Barthesian questions that have no claim on truth at all). This truth or fidelity to the declaration of an event – a *process* of truth for Badiou – is something that cannot recognize degree either. Either something is true or it is not. The result is that either you declare the truth and live with it or you remain outside of truth, and thus forever a stranger to it.⁴⁶

Badiou's position up to this point seems relatively uncontestable. He has made it abundantly clear that a certain kind of relativism leads to an identity-politics in which the production of identities, each armed with their 'truths', leads simply to an enhancement of the capitalist marketplace. It would follow in this that the contemporary demand for confessional culture, all the way from demands for 'transparency' in public life to daytime TV shows where individuals parade stereotypically dramatized versions of their personal lives, is entirely consistent with a market-capitalism. If this is so, then confession is simply a literary and cultural mode that requires conformity with preset identities, identities that are given to individuals through established cultural norms; and the I that 'confesses' is necessarily simply playing out a role, their confession ripe for consumption in a marketized society. Is a more genuine confession – a confession that is informed by the necessities of *conversion* and difference or change rather than conformity and identity – at all possible?

At the core of this is the way in which Badiou deals with the great question of modernity: how do we reconcile the claims of the particular with the general; or, better perhaps, how do we *persuade* someone who does not share my particular view that it is not simply a particular view but rather a universalizable truth? That is to say, how do we *convert* others – as Saul/Paul was converted, as Augustine was converted – to the universalizable truth?

Yet we can also see the difficulty clearly emerging. Insofar as truth is not a matter for the subject, then one cannot 'tell' the truth; or, to put it slightly differently, one cannot possibly 'confess'. At the same time, insofar as truth is indivisible, insofar as one is either 'in' the truth or 'outside' of it, then *all* that one can do is to 'confess' or to be of a particular singular confession. We will use this difficulty to prise open further the issue of democracy and its relation to confession.

It has long been a commonplace that one way of thinking about aesthetics and its importance for a philosophy of modernity is to see its fundamental question as one in which we seek to regularize the claims of the particular against the universal. For Francis Hutcheson in the early eighteenth century, for example, beauty was described as a ‘variety within uniformity’ (or vice versa): that is, a specific particularity noted as particular or varied (and thus distinguished from the universal or uniform) while still being identifiably part of that universal or uniformity. For Badiou, this is an error. In fact, Badiou claims, these are not opposites but precisely part of the same intrinsic whole or structure. Against them, he finds what he calls not just singularity but a ‘universal singular’.

This, he argues, is what allows us to assert a truth that is not based on opinion, democracy or even the subject who ‘tells’ the truth. The subtitle of his book on Paul, we should recall, is *La fondation de l’universalisme* – the foundation of universalism. However, given that this universalism depends upon the fidelity to an event, it becomes less a universalism and more a fundamentalism. For what happens when I am certainly faithful to an event, and you are too, but the events in question differ? In fact, it seems, Badiou is in some ways evading the problem that Lyotard once identified as that of a differend. A differend arises when two competing claims upon truth, each entirely reasonable within their own regimes of discourse, enter into a conflict with each other, and when we cannot find a third and overarching regime of discourse within whose terms both parties to the dispute can operate. It is a kind of impasse in thought or in argument. Badiou’s position circumvents this, essentially by claiming a more fundamental viability for one of the potential parties: one event, as it were, has a greater claim on universalizability, or, in Badiou’s terms, one *singularity* is *universal*.

Such a condition or claim for a singular universal is close to totalitarian. Against it, I will pose here the vexed question of the democratic space; or better, since we speak of the now, the democratic *moment*.

The moment and democracy

In my opening section here, I indicated that, for Augustine, the moment of the I, the ‘here-now’, is, in a certain sense, evacuated of content; it has a formal being, but, insofar as that being is characterized by transition, conversion or *becoming*, it can have no stable essence. Here, I want to see what happens if we try to consider the confessional moment precisely as a moment that *can* have a material and historical substance; and the effect of this will be to give us an idea of the relation of confession to democracy.

Jacques Rancière is useful here. In his essay on ‘Politique et identité’, he indicates that, in the frame of identity-politics, what happens is that ‘*on donne*

la parole aux gens uniquement dans le cadre d'une identité qu'ils auraient à réaliser ou même à exprimer ('a voice is granted to people solely within the framework of an identity that they would have to realize or even to express').⁴⁷ We certainly bring those who have been silent into voice, as it were: we try to legitimize and to authorize; but it is an alleged identity – not a subject – that is authorized thereby. Now, argues Rancière, correctly, '*la citoyenneté n'est pas la défense de sa culture ou de son groupe d'appartenance*' ('citizenship is not the defence of one's culture or of the group to which one belongs').⁴⁸

Culture, we should note firstly, is not a state of affairs but rather an event, a 'something-that-happens'. It is episodic and rare. Further, culture is culture precisely because it *converts*: it is edifying, a moment of transformation or growth, *Bildung*.⁴⁹ As Rancière has it, '*la culture est toujours une forme de désidentification : la possibilité de parler autre chose que la langue de ses aïeux et de son groupe d'appartenance ou d'intérêt*' ('culture is always a form of dis-identification : the possibility of speaking otherwise than in the language of one's forebears and of one's community- or interest-group'). If there is a public sphere (or a possibility of democracy) at all, it is the space in which we speak other than what we are, in which we can differ from our forebears or from the identity that we have 'inherited' from the past. For Rancière, without this, politics itself does not even exist. If it is the case that confession is of necessity conversion, then we are close to saying that confession – but confession of *that which we are and are not at once* – is intrinsic to culture.

This is important for one who will want to salvage the public sphere as a *full* space, as a space with actual and material content, and not just the kind of 'transitional' formal and empty space that characterized Augustine's idea of 'the present'. This is, as it were, the crowded agora and not the formal but uninhabited piazza. However, it is not the agora simply as a space to be colonized by the market; rather, it is an agora whose very instability is of its essence. Badiou's position leaves us either in a totalitarian mode of conformity, or simply silent. If we reject this (while acknowledging its force as a critique of identity-politics), we can move further, beyond the limitations of identity itself.

In his posthumously published book, *The Memory Chalet*, Tony Judt reflects on what he calls 'edge people', those with 'identities' that are usually characterized as minority or tangential to the mainstream or, in my terms here, peripheral to the agora. He invites us to consider the response to this in the life of the academy or cultural criticism; and he points out that 'Undergraduates today can select from a swathe of identity studies: "gender studies," "women's studies," "Asian-Pacific-American studies," and dozens of others.' His argument against this is that these programmes encourage students 'to study *themselves* – thereby simultaneously negating the goals of a liberal education and reinforcing the sectarian and ghetto mentalities they purport to undermine'. The counter-desire – the democratic desire – would be one where, instead of confirming identity and conforming to established norms for that identity, we try to find

ways of seeking alterity, difference or change: that is, the democratic moment is that moment where identity becomes filled with *becoming*, with a becoming that is 'confessed' as an act of conversion.

Judt goes on to point out, as we would expect from a historian, that:

Most people [in the United States] no longer speak the language of their forebears or know much about their country of origin, especially if their family started out in Europe. But in the wake of a generation of boastful victimhood, they wear what little they do know as a proud badge of identity: you are what your grandparents suffered.⁵⁰

The assumption of such historical victimhood is, of course, a proud denial of the present moment and of its possibilities for change, difference, confessional conversion. The democratic impulse is not one where we 'confess' to a pre-existing or normative identity, given to us by the voices of the past or the dead, nor to a stable identity at all; rather, the democratic filling of the agora is what happens when we enter that agora in pursuit of conversion, change and difference, when the I is identical-and-different at once.

A major problem with identity-politics in the end is that it atomizes the political will and its community. If we endlessly multiply identities, all we do is: a) give capitalism more markets; b) struggle among ourselves for victimhood (is one more of a victim – and does one have more counter-hegemonic, or simply *critical* legitimacy – if one identifies as Irish *and* a woman, say; or are these both trumped by being working-class or homosexual or both?). While the political right stands firm, and assumes the identity of confession with a transparency that encourages only conformity to pre-established historical norms, the left squabbles among itself for authentic being, an authenticity that is given to identities by marketization, by advertising, by capital itself. In short, leftist 'confession' is every bit as conservative as the very rightist ideologies that it seeks to confront. Political identity then becomes evacuated of content. It is imperative that we return content to the now of lived experience, the now of a conversion of identity, the now that depends upon the democratic community, a community that is always evolving, the historical still-to-come.