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Official Identity and Clandestine Experience

Introduction

When Vincent Descombes ponders what it means to be a historical agent, he states pithily that ‘To act in history is to work at *not being* what one is’; and this – acting in the world of *history* – is unlike the world of *nature*, where, as he puts it, ‘being signifies identity’.¹ In essence, in that explicit opposition of worlds of history and of nature, we can see here the remnants of a rather Romantic sensibility. Descombes pits an established or stable world of exteriority (a ‘state of affairs’, as it were, the world as ‘given’ or ‘*was der Fall ist*’ – ‘everything that is the case’ – in Ludwig Wittgenstein’s terms: the world where being signifies identity in the form of immutable self-sameness or self-coincidence) against a world of interior consciousness that is characterized by *imagination* or by the possibility of thinking oneself as other than one actually is. In his formulation, acting in history is essentially trying to set up conditions where the world of imagination impinges on the world of exterior nature; and the desired result is a change that must, of necessity, be at best a change in the *relation* between interiority and exteriority, and a change, therefore, in the self or subject (working at ‘not being’ what we are).

The two realms are distinct, distinguished by this power of simultaneously seeing things ‘as they are’ and also ‘as they might otherwise be’. Exteriority, in this, is fundamentally immune to consciousness; and, consequently, any change that occurs is fundamentally a change in consciousness and thus a change or difference that is now constitutive, paradoxically, of the identity of the subject. It is the ‘I’ of consciousness, and not the world of which the ‘I’ is conscious, that is the locus of change. In simple terms, we usually just call this something like reflecting on the world or thinking about one’s place in history. This neo-Romantic structure, however, is not straightforward; and it essentially gives us the predicament that we usually call ‘modernity’ – as we will see in what follows.

In the logic advanced by Descombes, ‘The historical protagonist *is* insofar as he acts, and he acts insofar as he is always *being different*.’² Consequently, we have an ostensibly counter-intuitive understanding of identity, as a sameness predicated on a difference, or as difference camouflaged under the sign of self-coinciding. Lurking behind this is the rather simple fact that there is a potential contradiction within the very concept of identity. On one hand, it must be

defined in terms precisely of this 'self-sameness' or the coinciding of two (or more) instantiations of 'I'; on the other hand, the mere fact that there *are* two (or more) such instantiations – Virginia Woolf called them 'moments of being' – indicates that the 'I' exists in time.³

Therefore, identity considered as a characterization of an 'I' that exists in time – a historical or secular subject, then – *must* acknowledge that such coincidence is simply impossible: by definition, the 'I' in history, the 'I' as a material 'somewhat', enters into the realm of self-differing. 'Self-sameness' in the secular realm is anathema. The prevailing neo-Romantic sensibility, as revealed by Descombes, construes the relation of self to history in *spatial* terms (interiority of self set against an exteriority of world); but we should rather see that what is primarily at stake here is the *temporality* of identity. It is temporality that causes the problem and, in revealing the paradoxical and problematic nature of the mode of thought in question here, Descombes construes that problem essentially as one grounded in identity as the locus of a necessary deconstruction.⁴

Here is our conundrum, as expressed in terms of formal logic, by Descombes:

there is identity not only, as formal logic would have it, between identity and identity, but between difference and difference; there is a certain *being* in *not-being*. Now, is there the slightest difference between the identity of identity with identity, and the identity of difference with difference? Certainly not. For there is no more *identity* between identity and identity than there is between difference and difference. And there is no more *difference* between difference and difference than there is between identity and identity. And yet identity and difference are clearly different types of relation. Yes, certainly. So the *identity* between, on the one hand, the identity of identity and identity, and on the other, the identity of difference and difference, is the very factor of *difference* between identity and difference.⁵

This linguistic wrestling is the attempt to grapple with identity as a historical – and thus temporally mutable – concept. Yet it also implies much more. If, for example, one considers identity as having some relation to the narrative of a life, then, of logical necessity, one has to consider the intimate relation of identity to *autonomy*, to the possibility that a human agent acts in history, and is neither simply a product nor merely an effect of that history: there is at least a dialectical relation between consciousness and exteriority. Against this, however, is the observation that we usually consider that it is precisely a pre-existing identity of consciousness that grounds the specific action that an agent undertakes in bringing about the state of affairs constitutive of exteriority at any given time: the imagination working on nature, as it were. I act as I do, we say, because of who I am (and we call that 'authenticity', as opposed to hypocrisy); and I am as and who I am because of the very actions that define me. The issue lying behind this is one that is fundamental to any theory of identity that sees identity as being in any way related to the social at all: it is the question of the possibility of *change*. Is change possible and, if so, how is it effected?

The suggestion that I am making here is that, in our current prevailing modes of critical thought, our identities, far from being autonomously determined, are, in fact, typically *given to us*, and that they are given to us as a means of officially delimiting and regulating our possible behaviours. Our identity is, as it were, ‘official’, given to us as a matter of office and limiting our possibilities precisely to the circumscriptions delineated by that office. It follows from this, further, that any genuinely historical act that we would commit is necessarily clandestine, a breaking with or a nonconformity with our office.

To put this another way, we are actually being denied the possibility of acting as autonomous historical agents precisely, and paradoxically, by being ascribed an ‘official identity’, an identity that precludes the possibility of our having the narrative of a life, and thus also precludes the possibility of our acting as autonomous historical agents, precisely at the moment when our alleged identity is being confirmed by our actions.

The tongue-twisting formulation of Descombes is one that enacts a tenet of deconstruction; but what it shows here, most importantly, is that, in our prevailing modes of thought – caught up in the modernity that has its roots in a certain Romantic sensibility – identity is itself identified as a form of self-sameness, or that identity can be described properly as *conformity to a rule*. Identity is established as this conformity to a rule – even if one identifies oneself as difference or as constantly self-differentiating; even in that extreme case, as Descombes helps show, constantly self-differing would itself become the very rule to which the self conforms. The important thing is the *rule*: identity is a matter for *regulation*. As Hamlet can show us, there is a certain determinacy in indeterminacy. In philosophical terms, Søren Kierkegaard shows the same thing when he points out that to defer a decision is in itself the very enacting and carrying out of a decision; or as Lyotard would have it, the decision to remain silent in the face of history is itself constitutive of a historical act: even a silence is a mode of *enchaînement*⁶ or linking with what has gone before, with what has been given to us as our present historical condition.

There is, then, a ‘law of identity’; and, as we know, identity is first and foremost a matter of legal substance and importance. The demand for identity is a demand for one’s papers; and these *formal* and *official* papers have an enormous power and, more importantly, an authority and standing that is abstract and determining. The paper, in its very formal substance, is more important than the historical individual carrying it, at least in terms of what we can call the *verification* and authentication of identity; and the entitlement to an identity is, in fact, always something that is to be authenticated rather than something that is to be understood. I’ll return to this question of the relative importance of verification in relation to authenticity later. The passport – the abstract and ‘official’ identity – as it were, *is* the identity, even when the passage of time and experience means that one no longer looks like the face pictured on it. Official identity operates at a remove from actuality, from an experience

that is now relegated to the realm of the clandestine. This is the condition that is now eminently recognizable in our fully bureaucratized societies, wherein so-called ‘modernization’ – and modernity itself – becomes constituted precisely by abstract bureaucratization and ‘management’ of everyday life.

This present argument, however, is determinedly on the side of the *sans papiers*, as it were, the untitled, those who are ‘not entitled’ or who have no identity, no passport or papers.⁷ Another way of putting this, and in some ways more importantly (at least as far as literary or aesthetic criticism is concerned) the argument that I will advance here is on the side of literary *experience*.⁸ In the first section, I explore what is at stake in the relation between identity and experience. In this, we will see that, in shorthand terms, identity *is* form and that *formal* identities have little time for any specific or actual *content*. To gain access to such content, my next section will show that we need to find a way of describing the priority of our ‘becoming’ over our ‘being’. Following from this, I will contend that the expression of an identity – our making it available as a public and social entity – depends upon a fundamental act of confession. In this, we will see the importance of identity as something constituted by forms of change; or, perhaps better, we will see the identity of the self as something necessarily predicated not just on self-criticism but upon a form of confession that is intrinsically tied to the kinds of conversion discussed in my opening chapter. In the final section, I will explore the stakes of this for a politics, and especially for the political dimensions of our predominant forms of literary or cultural criticism.

Experience

In his great essay, ‘De l’expérience’, the thirteenth essay in Book 3 of his great and constantly evolving and mutating work of *Essais*, Montaigne starts his exploration by stating, first of all, that ‘There is no desire more natural than the desire for knowledge’; and that, when reason fails to give us such knowledge, we turn to empirical evidence, or experience, ‘which is a feeblér and less worthy means’ of gaining that knowledge than is given to us by the operations of reason. In line with classical modes of rhetoric, he reaches immediately for an example.⁹ He turns to an explicit address to the law and gives us the example of the French legal process in his day. France, he says, has more laws than the rest of the world put together; and yet, no matter how many laws we have, we can never really encapsulate the infinite variety of possible legal cases. That is to say, no matter how many laws we bring about, we can never hope to cover the potentially infinite variety of possible cases or historical events.

What he is getting at is that the judge, in every new case, will have to exercise a judgement which, at least in some particulars, will need to be made without

recourse to previous laws, and that will therefore radically implicate the judge in the very act of judging, 'here-now' as it were.¹⁰ This, however, leads to a potential series of predicaments regarding judgement and justice; and he turns to the possibility of what we would nowadays call a 'miscarriage of justice'. Here, he says, is one case from his own time:

Certain men are condemned to death for a murder; their sentence, being agreed upon and determined, though not pronounced. At this point the judges are informed by the officers of an inferior court in the neighbourhood that they are holding some prisoners who openly confess to this murder, and throw unquestionable light upon the whole affair. And yet these judges deliberate whether they ought to interrupt or defer the execution of the sentence passed upon the first prisoners. They discuss the unusualness of the case, and the precedent it may set up for the reversal of judgements; for the sentence being juridically correct, the judges have no reason to change their minds. In short, these poor devils are sacrificed to the forms of justice.¹¹

The particularity – the historical or material *actuality* – of individual humans is to be ignored in order to preserve the *form* of justice, not its content. In this case, we have a situation where the judgement is made; and what is at stake is not so much the identity of a murderer as the identity of the law: as Descombes might have it, the necessarily 'natural-seeming' or self-evidentiary naturalness of the law itself: the identity of the law with the law. When experience in the form of real history calls the judgement into question, by providing the *content* of a countervailing or critical experience, then that experience has to be discounted in the interests of conformity to a rule: in this case, preserving the *office* of the law, and perhaps yet more importantly that of the *officer of the law*.

This, then, is my first example of an 'official identity': the identity of an officer of the law. It is an identity that is established by the silencing of experience, by the placing of experience into the area of the clandestine, the underground, the invisible or illegitimate. The identity of the judge triumphs over the facts of experience or of history, truth and reality. In what way can this identity be 'true', or 'real', or materially historical, therefore? In what way can it be a *substantive* identity or an identity based upon the material facts of historical agency or existence?

By extension, I want to argue that the same thing happens in literary and cultural criticism: the identity of Montaigne's judge maps directly on to the identity of the contemporary critic (my second example: the official identity of the critic). This is, of course, what we have learned to call the form of criticism that is shaped by identity-politics; and it helps explain the triumph of what we can call, after Philippe Lejeune, an 'autobiographical pact' in criticism. The consequence of this pact is that criticism becomes an act of signing one's name.¹² It is a matter of style, of the reduction of the self as a location of experience to the pure emptiness of style, or to my 'office' as (say) Irish or working-class or specifically sexed and so on. In these, I am no longer simply

Irish, but I am instead ‘an Irishman’; nor am I sexed in terms of my behaviour in life, but rather I become the sign that represents ‘the gay’ or ‘the straight’; nor am I an electrician, but rather a representative of working-class interests in general, and so on. In short, not even my proper autobiography is told in this, for I become not an individual but the *sign* of an individual, a generalized representative of an office. Putting matters bluntly, we are all bureaucrats now, in this form of criticism.¹³

In short, the attention to an identity-politics, paradoxically, reduces experience to what I can now call my ‘official’ identity: an identity that is focused on the priority of being over becoming; and an identity, therefore, that is devoid of historical substance – perhaps even when the identity is given precisely as political, as in the case of an identity characterized or described in terms of social class.

In the middle of the last century, Leslie A. Fiedler pondered something similar in relation to abstract art, considered then as an art that was at a remove from material historical realities, or at least at a tangent to the idea that art might offer any function of representation. In an article called ‘Archetype and signature’, he argued that: ‘The abstract painter, for instance, does not, as he sometimes claims really “paint paint,” but signs his name. So-called abstract art is the ultimate expression of personality.’¹⁴

In this, Fiedler was perplexed by what was going on especially in the visual arts, and especially in so-called abstract expressionism. His point was that the artist, by endlessly repeating the same configurations on the canvas, was essentially making themselves ‘recognizable’ immediately. If you walk into an art gallery and see a painting that consists of large vertical lines of irregular width, joined together by irregularly placed ovals set in between the lines and touching them, then you know that you are looking at a ‘Robert Motherwell’ – or at least at a ‘fake Robert Motherwell’ – for all of Motherwell’s paintings in this period are essentially revisitings of this configuration. Rectangles of colour with rough edges mean ‘Mark Rothko’; or parallel lines successively moving towards the centre of the canvas but always following the shape of the canvas mean ‘Frank Stella’.

For Fiedler, this explains abstract art in some ways: the painter paints a signature, and we are edging towards Andy Warhol as a kind of ‘normative’ art or art-value. It is perhaps, then, less of a surprise that a critical attitude in the years after this – broadly during the 1960s – witnesses essays of one kind or another charting the alleged ‘death’ of the author: if the prevailing mood is one that sees art as the celebration of the very being of an author, in the expressing of their name and identity, then it is not surprising that criticism – especially a criticism that sees itself as ‘oppositional’ – will want to call that identity – or more precisely that *being* – into question.¹⁵

Fiedler was writing predominantly about abstract visual art, of course. Yet the same can be said of any art that lends itself to repetition and thus to

parody. Consider the stylistic trope of the short sentence in Ernest Hemingway, or the extended sub-clauses in a Proustian sentence, or the circumlocutions of Henry James. It is important that these styles are in some way unique, however. We might think of Dashiell Hammett or Raymond Chandler ‘learning’ from Hemingway; but, despite the preference for the short sentence, there is no way that they could be mistaken one for the other: each ‘signs’ their style. Likewise, although Claude Simon has sentences that, like some of Proust’s, traverse page after page punctuated only by commas, with an endless proliferation of sub-clauses, the two writers are clearly distinct one from the other: their ‘signatures’ differ, and they constitute different events, so to speak.¹⁶

In all cases, what is at stake is the triumph of a style over a substance (and, later, we will start to consider more fully the nature of these ‘substances’). In the terms of the present argument, what is at stake is the triumph of form over content to the extent that the content can be evacuated of primary significance. It is the *form* of the work that gives it an identity, and that even constitutes identity for its author and its reader. This last point is important: the allegedly stable identity of an author, standing over their stylized text or signature, also serves the function of imputing to the reader an ostensibly stable identity as well. The reader, receiving the autograph of the writer, knows where they stand in relation to the writer, takes their bearings from that stability, and finds their own name thereby: a different inflection of Lyotard’s *Signé Malraux*,¹⁷ as it were.

Perhaps one further observation worth adding here is that such a view narrows and delimits the possibilities for the artist. Her or his biography can no longer recognize other and disparate experiences that would result in different types of work. It is as if a biography is being reduced to a persona or personality. This, of course, is one way of describing what is probably the single most dominant form in contemporary popular culture: the identity that is given in the form of ‘celebrity’. In this, an *ethos* or disposition, with all its mutable content and responsibility for decision-making or judgement, is reduced to the merest identity-image. At this level, identity is entirely consistent with a capitalist ethos that thrives on ‘branding’, the marking of ownership and servitude on one’s skin. I will address the politics of this in the final section of this present chapter.

Now, one way of describing this prevailing state of affairs – that is, the condition of criticism in which identity and identity-politics become a grounding for value or truth or significance – would be to say that, in a modernity that has favoured abstraction over experience as a means of verifying truth, the *forms* of the law of identity are more important than the *content* of that law. For Jürgen Habermas, this is characterized as a kind of legitimization crisis: a state of affairs in which ‘the belief in legitimacy shrinks to a belief in legality; the appeal to the legal manner in which a decision comes about suffices’.¹⁸

In such a modernity, legitimacy shrinks to the point where it becomes mere legalism, the proper and decorous observation of the offices. It is, in its purest

form, the triumph of that form of bureaucracy that sees identity as something to be *managed* rather than to be represented or lived. And, by working within the rules like this, we lose our *ethos* and, with that, we also lose any ethical prerogative that might shape the possibilities of our being together or recognizing each other's identities in a commonality of experience.

If we can now say that identity is a matter of conformity, and if we can also add that this conformity is (as the word suggests) not only conformity to a rule but also conformity to a formal practice (especially to a formal *legal* practice), then we can conclude at this stage of the argument that there is indeed an intimate relationship between form and identity. Identity, in short, is a formal matter: identity *is* form; or, alternatively put, form is that which gives identity its specifics. Further, we might also say that identity, as we currently construe it – that is, as a neo-Romantic negotiation of the exteriority of a material world by the interiority of consciousness – is intrinsically *unethical* or at least that identitarianism is inimical to any ethical position or philosophy. This is all the more true precisely when we confound ethics with morality.

It is all forms of individual particularity – the very stuff that should be constitutive of identity – that get lost in all of this. I am not the 'real' Andy Warhol, so to speak; rather I am 'Andy Warhol', or *the* Andy Warhol (the definite article gives the game away), essentially a mythic creature and thus one doomed forever to repeat the 'same' aspects of existence. In short, such a creature is doomed to be expelled from historical existence, never allowed to 'become' anything and reduced to the status of 'merely' being. Specificity, which is precisely that which would counter mythology, is erased in these formulations. Yet more precisely, the specific material and historical events of experience are exactly what are occluded in this. Experience is reduced to nothing, evacuated of substantive content.

Becoming

Against all of the foregoing, we might begin by making a simple observation: the identity of an entity that acts in history is complex and requires an unusual ontology. Fundamentally, the attempt to grasp an identity-in-history – the identity of a living individual – is conditioned by the fact that such an identity is of necessity elusive. It is never a *being*, always a *becoming*; and, accordingly, if we are to grasp it, we need some understanding of an ontology that is grounded in becoming rather than in being. Deleuze offers us something of the required vocabulary here; and, in this section, I will argue for a criticism that takes seriously the issue of becoming, considered in terms of material or historical *force*.

In 1963, while reviewing Jean Rosset's structuralist work, *Forme et signification*, Derrida realized that the great strength of the structuralism of the

epoch was that it dealt expertly with matters precisely of form. In his review, 'Force et signification' – incidentally one of the great founding documents of poststructuralism – Derrida did not oppose form to content, but rather he set form against force. He contended that, as he put it, '*Form* fascinates when one no longer has the force to understand force from within itself. That is, to create. This is why literary criticism is structuralist in every age, in its essence and destiny.'¹⁹ Put succinctly, structuralism (and we can now say all forms of identitarian critique, critique that prioritizes form-as-identity) triumphs when one reduces the material realities of force to the merest *significations* of force, to stable representations or images of force. Here, 'force' is Derrida's term for what I have been calling the material contents of history or of experience.

Gilles Deleuze was also interested in force. With a brevity that is perhaps overly crude or simplistic, one might say that Deleuze saw history and material realities precisely as the play of forces, as in physics, forces that lead to *arrangements of events: des agencements* that are constitutive of *les événements*. For Deleuze, the concept of the event is absolutely central to an ontology of becoming, and thus to any ontology that is aware of the actual facts of material history, the grounding *conditions* or even *preconditions* and thus determinants of the possibilities of our being.

It is important to be precise here, on two counts at least. Firstly, we might say that 'becoming precedes being', so to speak: it is not the case that we *are* something and only then become something else; rather, the change that we call 'becoming' is the very condition of the possibility of our being at all. Secondly, the event here, in Deleuze, is not a definite something that is occasioned or brought about in a world of supposed 'exteriority' by an 'interiority' of consciousness that can determine material conditions in the world. The world of an alleged exteriority 'as such' does not in fact exist; rather, perhaps better, it exists only as an aspect of the arrangement or *agencement* of forces that are episodic and radically singular.

The point of these observations requires some further explanation. Deleuze takes a good deal of his philosophy from Henri Bergson and Baruch Spinoza. From Bergson, he derives the importance of *time* and of *movement*. Yet he does not remain satisfied simply to rehearse the Bergsonian notion of *durée*, duration, but prefers to give it a specific inflection. Duration, he says, 'is a becoming that endures, a change that is substance itself'.²⁰ This is already a major step. He then takes from Spinoza a very particular sense of *difference* and of *singularity*. The 'scandal' of Spinoza, as Deleuze sees it, is the scandal of dismissing any idea of the world as a duality at all, especially and above all a duality between a world of interiority and one of exteriority. 'According to the *Ethics* ... what is an action in the mind is necessarily an action in the body as well, and what is a passion in the body is necessarily a passion in the mind. There is no primacy of one series over the other.'²¹ Deleuze's ontology is entirely an ontology of becoming rather than of being.

Spinoza began his *Ethics* with a meditation on the identity of God and, as Deleuze indicates, he is especially engaged by the question of the substantiality of God. It is right at this early point in Spinoza that Deleuze finds a notion of what we might call absolute or primary difference: not difference that defines itself in opposition to something else, something 'self-same' or self-identical; but difference, rather, as an absolute condition of the very possibility of identity, so to speak. Spinoza's case, at the opening of his *Ethics*, is that God is at once infinite (and thus containing an infinity of possible attributes) while at the same time unique (and thus not amenable to re-presentation). As Michael Hardt puts it in his excellent book on Deleuze: 'God is both unique and absolute.'²² For Deleuze, this offers a consistency with his reading of time and movement in Bergson, for it offers a version of substance that is *intrinsically different*: not 'different from' something else, for there *is no* something else (God is infinite), and not differing from itself in time (God is one thing). Rather, this is pure difference as constitutive of the substance of being.

The result, for Deleuze, once the theological issue is removed from the equation, is that one is never in a state of being (a being that would allow me to give an account of 'my identity'), but only becoming (in which 'I' never quite coincide with myself, since my temporal condition precludes any such possibility, and since the 'I' is a product of the movement or arrangement of forces). 'Being' would equate with death and is negative; 'becoming' is equivalent to living and is affirmative, joyful. Moreover, becoming is thus also the matter of material history itself: living.

This means, though, that all things are necessarily always in flux. In fact, it is even more radical than that: anything that we might want to identify as a specific 'somewhat' (or some 'thing') is nothing more than a pure instantiation of a play of forces that makes the somewhat *as it 'is'* an interruption in the otherwise continuous flow of becomings (the *is* constituted by the very *is-not* that is an elemental basis of differential identity); yet more, the perceiver of this 'somewhat' is themselves but an accident of the play of forces that phenomenologically brings the perception into line, however momentarily, with the perceived. To perceive is momentarily to arrest the flow of becomings, the play of forces that constitutes history, as it were. Within this, therefore, any 'event' – like the event of perception – is itself what we might call an 'accidental condition' of history.

There is, thus, no 'I' other than the play of forces that allows me, at whatever moment, to pretend to arrest the flow of becoming. This has a massive effect on the notion of agency (including, primarily, confessional agency) and, beyond that, of freedom. This is a way of describing how Deleuze thinks of 'events'. At one level, events are what constitute history; but, according to Deleuze, we must be careful to distinguish events from spectacle. The event takes place in what he thinks of as '*le temps mort*':

the event is inseparable from dead time. It's not even that there is dead time before and after the event, rather that dead time is in the event, for example the instant

of the most brutal accident confounds itself with the immensity of empty time in which you see it arriving, as a spectator of that which has not yet happened, in a long suspense ... Groethuysen said that every event was, as it were, in the time when nothing happens.²³

Now, the event, therefore, is not something that is determined or even predetermined by a consciousness; rather, the emergence of the consciousness is that which comes about precisely as a result of the encounter that *is* the event itself, the play of forces that constitutes this 'dead time', a time that is taken out of formal narrative but that allows for the constitution of a subject.

In many other philosophies or social theories, especially those based either upon forms of psychoanalysis or upon forms of 'identity-politics', the subject is often typically characterized and described by their desire. For Deleuze, such desire is not a matter of exerting a will upon exteriority, much less a matter of 'choice', either consumerist or existentialist – in short, the desire does not 'bring something about'. Again, the desire is that which is produced through the encounter that, in the first place, is constitutive of both subject and object, and constitutive of them *as* subject and object. What Deleuze is trying to do is to find a way of addressing *movement* as the fundamental form of ontology, but ontology considered as the conditions of our becoming rather than as being.

The result is the production of what we can call the accidental conditions of consciousness or of desire. It is important to note that we are not here talking of desire as a set of 'wants' or 'choices' based on lack or need or wish. Rather, this desire is a way of describing the product of force; and it is akin also to the kinds of unwanted desires that worried Augustine, those moments when he feared that he 'sinned' but only 'accidentally', as it were. The play of forces or the arrangement of forces that constitutes becomings-in-time is something that is itself in constant flux; and it thus produces desire simply as the condition of producing yet more arrangements, more becoming. In this way, desire can be thought of as a pure 'affirmation', the affirming of positive becoming; and the significance of this is that it flies directly in the face of most radical 'critical' thinking that derives from Hegel or from any notion of criticism as negation. Desire, here, is what philosophy – and, by extension, radical social theory – should be about: it is about the production of more becoming, more *concepts*. This – the 'production of concepts' – is indeed Deleuze's answer to the great question, 'what is philosophy?'²⁴

Insofar as this desire is, then, the very production of an affirmation that constitutes the momentary instantiation of a subject, we can name it more conventionally as a mode of 'confession' or revelation. The confession in question, though, is here not the revelation of something that was occluded prior to its being narrated; rather, the confessing is the very elaboration of forces that constitute that subjectivity in the first place. Augustine famously asks '*cur confiteor?*' – why do I confess? Why indeed, given that God, by definition,

already knows the contents of my consciousness and the history of my deeds. The Deleuzian reply might be something along the lines of *Confiteor ergo sumus*, meaning by this that I confess as a very condition of the possibility of my being at all, and any such being is always already situated in relation to other potential subjects or ‘confessors’. It is to this that we can now turn more explicitly.

Confessional communications

My presupposition here is that – in some at least minimal fashion – the literary text is essentially an act of confession, that it is founded in a confession or revelation or ‘expressing’ of identity. Put more dramatically, we might say that every literary act is an act of nomination. That is where Montaigne starts in his advice ‘*au lecteur*’ at the start of the *Essais*: ‘I want my portrait here to be drawn after how I actually am, simple, natural and ordinary, without research or artifice: for it is I that I am painting. My faults will be clearly discernible, as will my unvarnished form, or at least to the extent that public reverence can accept these things.’²⁵

It is also where Rousseau starts in his great text of self-identification, the *Confessions*: ‘I have resolved on an enterprise which has no precedent, and which, once complete, will have no imitator. My purpose is to display to my kind a portrait in every way true to nature, and the man I shall portray will be myself.’²⁶

It is what we find in more recent times in a poet such as Lowell, when he transcribes letters written by his intimate others, and puts them, with line-breaks, into *History* and, perhaps more troublingly, in *The Dolphin*:

Sometime I must try to write the truth,
but almost everything has fallen away
lost in passage when we said goodbye in Rome.
Even the licence of my mind rebels,
and can find no lodging for my two lives ...²⁷

Is my doubt, last flicker of the fading thing,
an honorable subject for conversation?
Do you know how you have changed from the true you?
I would change my trueself if I could:
I am doubtful ...²⁸

Texts such as these – and perhaps Lowell is a kind of extreme test case here, for it is here that we see the explicit introduction of real names, of real signatures, of people other than the writer himself, from the ends of private letters, brought into the text – are fundamentally dramatizing the predicament laid out for

us back where we started the present meditation, in Descombes: how do we reconcile the identity of our being with the historical fact of our becoming? How can our experience (the realm of becoming) be constitutive of our proper identity (the stable and solid being, the proper name, on which we hang those experiences)? Yet this seems to be working also on the assumption that these texts explore specific and particular experiences.

Long before all this, in Augustine, we find the philosophical delineation of the predicament. Augustine begins his own *Confessions* with what is essentially a philosophical meditation on experience, considered in terms of an inner and outer space of the self. In Book 1, Chapter 2, Augustine tries to establish the proper relation between himself and God. Here is how he tries to wrestle with the idea of the spatial relation between himself and God:

How shall I call upon my God for aid, when the call I make is for my Lord and my God to come into myself? What place is there in me to which my God can come, what place that can receive the God who made heaven and earth? Does this then mean, O Lord my God, that there is in me something fit to contain you? ... Or is it rather that I should not exist, unless I existed in you? For *all things find in you their origin, their impulse, the centre of their being*. This, Lord, is the true answer to my question. But if I exist in you, how can I call upon you to come to me?²⁹

In passing, of course, we might see here the perfect illustration of what Karl Marx will eventually call ‘alienation’, that process worked out in *The German Ideology* and in some of his early philosophical papers, whereby the human individual creates something within themselves, and then expresses it as a really existing power outside of the self, and a power that now has to be obeyed. In all such cases, however, we are seeing that ‘modern’ framework whereby the question of identity is being construed essentially as a spatial question concerning the relations of interiority and exteriority, and how we regulate the competing claims to power and supremacy of each. For my own later purposes, yet more importantly we see the question of how the self is always alien to itself, always governed through alterity.

Fundamentally, the question for Augustine, as he begins his confessional text, is whether God exists within Augustine or whether Augustine exists within God: is God within or outside the self; and is the self outside of God or somehow held within God? Clearly, this affects the whole question of identity, of Augustine’s identity. The *Confessions* is at once an exercise in distinguishing Augustine from God while at the same time identifying Augustine with God. It is for this reason that it *has* to be a ‘conversion’ text, charting the distance travelled in moving from distinction to intimacy; and it is for this reason, further, that it is the original *Bildungsroman*. It is a conversion text because it must chart the movement in Augustine from a position of being distanced from God to one where he is intimate with God; and it is a *Bildungsroman* because it sees the narrative of this movement as a process of learning or development, *formation* as the French has it, coming towards truth from falsehood or deception.

As such a text, it must focus on a delineation of the self that is fundamentally shaped by two things: a) experience within the self; and b) the expression – the putting outside of the self – of a version of that experience. It is structured around the necessity of confession as revelation of an obscured interiority; and it helps start the process, in one reading, whereby that interiority is characterized as selfhood.

At the opening of this section, I suggested that every literary act is in some minimal sense an act of nomination. We can now clarify this further. An act of nomination essentially requires a scene of recognition, in which there are at least two subject positions or two positions that have the potential for subjectivity, for pronouncing the deictic ‘I’. This, however, is essentially a confessional scene: a scene in which an ‘I’ presents itself or reveals itself before some other ‘I’: ‘Call me Ishmael,’ perhaps, would be the fundamental American version of this, as in Herman Melville.³⁰ In this, ‘I’ present myself *as if* something interior is ‘ex-pressing’ itself to an exteriority. However, we have already argued that such a spatialized version of this state of affairs is essentially limited and circumscribed by a ‘modern’ mentality, a mentality that leads to a construction of selfhood in which identity is set up in a contest between the human consciousness and a world of nature.

Hence, if we look more carefully at this state of affairs, we now see that a better way of thinking about it is to see that the ‘I’ in question is always already in a scene of recognition, but one where it is recognizing *itself*, and doing so *in time* and as a substantive differing, as Deleuze would have it. In short, the I recognizes itself as a name, as an identity, if and only if it constructs a *narrative* scene in which recognition (and misrecognition of itself) is possible. The self is that which confesses itself to itself; and this is why, in the case of Augustine, the question of who is inside whom (God within Augustine or vice versa) is resolved eventually as it is, as a question of *time* and not of space.

Early on in the text, Augustine ponders the fact of his infancy, which is now over, and so ‘My infancy is long since dead’, as he puts it, ‘yet I am still alive.’³¹ How can these two things be reconciled, he wonders, and finds the answer in the odd temporality of God:

you are infinite and never change. In you ‘today’ never comes to an end; and yet our ‘today’ does come to an end in you, because time, as well as everything else, exists in you. If it did not, it would have no means of passing. And since your years never come to an end, for you they are simply ‘today’. The countless days of our lives and of our forefathers’ lives have passed by within your ‘today’. From it they have received their due measure of duration and their very existence. And so it will be with all the other days which are still to come. But you yourself are eternally the same. In your ‘today’ you will make all that is to exist tomorrow and thereafter, and in your ‘today’ you have made all that existed yesterday and for ever before.³²

That is how Augustine phrases things at the start. However, the entire point of the text of the *Confessions* is to find an intimacy with God, to come to a

position now where God knows Augustine (for Augustine acknowledges that, as God knows everything, he already knows Augustine entirely), but rather to a position where Augustine knows and can name God, and, in so naming, find and name himself.

It is at the end of the text that we see the final recognition scene in Augustine. He has argued that much remains mysterious about the relation between himself and God; but in the very final paragraph, he presents himself as a man knocking at God's door, when 'Only then shall we receive what we ask and find what we seek; only then will the door be opened to us.'³³ The final meeting, then, is presaged at the end, but presaged as a narrative possibility in and through which the I finds itself as a subject in time; but also as a subject of a conversion, a change.

By this stage in the text, a significant change has taken place in Augustine. At the start, he had pondered the question of whether he was in God or God in him. Now, at the end, he sees things differently. Instead of there being a dialectic, as it were, between interiority and exteriority, Augustine sees the relation of himself to the world as one that is essentially *mediated* by the odd temporality of God's existence. In Book XIII, Chapter 38, he writes that, 'We see the things which you have made, because they exist. But they only exist because you see them'; so who is actually seeing these things? The answer comes: 'Outside ourselves we see that they exist, and in our inner selves we see that they are good. But when you saw that it was right that they should be made, in the same act you saw them made.'³⁴

In this, an important distinction is being made. On one hand, there is God, for whom there is an intimacy between *logos* and *ergon*, such that the thinking of something *immediately* brings it about. Such an intimacy is identified with God for whom all time is eternally present: God has no *Bildung*, as it were: by definition, this intimacy, constitutive of the being of God, is itself a state of 'truth': God's word cannot lie, its 'confession' or expression is the creation of the real ('You are Goodness itself,' he writes in this same chapter). On the other hand, there is the human 'being' (actually now a human becoming), for whom there remains a distinction between the realm of value ('we see that they are good') and the realm of fact ('we see that they exist'). Crucially, in explanation, Augustine explains that 'It was only *after a lapse of time* that we were impelled to do good' (emphasis added). This temporality, our condition of *becoming* on the way to *being*, is the story of a confessing, the story of how Augustine comes to take his stand, an 'I' before the door of God.³⁵

Politics

In his 'Foreword' to the English translation of Jean-Luc Nancy's *The Experience of Freedom*, Peter Fenves makes an extremely interesting series of observations,

partly on the differences between ‘Continental’ and ‘Anglo-American’ philosophy, but also simply on the relation between ideas of experience and facts of freedom: ‘Empiricism, as a doctrine of experience, and civil liberties, as the political content of freedom, are united [in Anglo-American thought] in their effort to remove unjustified authorities.’³⁶ For Nancy, freedom is in some moments a matter of surprise, or even, in Woolfian terms, freedom is *the* ‘moment’ not of ‘being’ but rather of ‘surprising’: it is related to the concept of the event, or that which cannot be preprogrammed, that which opens us up precisely to the temporality of history whose opposite is Augustine’s God. Augustine’s God, being beyond history, being beyond becoming, is, of necessity, the eschewing of politics as such; and thus, this God is also the site where freedom is denied, replaced by an idea – a tragic Hegelian-Marxian idea – of history-as-necessity, *Ananke*.

Can experience be tied at all to political freedom; and can this have a bearing on the philosophy and practices of literary and cultural criticism? As critics influenced in recent times by various strands within Continental philosophy, we have in general been schooled to mistrust experience as a category, identifying it all-too-readily with ideology. Catherine Belsey prefaces her work on *Desire* with the exhortation: what will this book be about, and answers: ‘Experience? Perish the thought.’³⁷ Giorgio Agamben puts it more philosophically: ‘It is the character of the present time that all authority is founded on what cannot be experienced, and nobody would be inclined to accept the validity of an authority whose sole claim to legitimation was experience.’³⁸

We mistrust experience initially because we see it as subjective, and therefore not only unscientific or not based in objective truth but also because, as a matter of subjective life, it is prone to ideological distortion. Experience, in fact, is almost aligned with ideology purely and simply; and this explains the mistrust of a critic such as Belsey towards it. And yet, at another level, what is history if not the summation of actual undergone experiences? Without this, we are in the realms of the absolutes and abstractions of theology (as in Augustine’s God); or, at the least, we open ourselves to the dangerous possibility of the reduction of history to myth or abstraction and of identity to ‘office’, to the formal and official ‘being’ that constitutes my function in an organization or whole.

Behind this lies the question of the relation of form and identity to questions of autonomy: how does a subject distinguish and identify itself in relation to the authority of tradition, so to speak? In other terms, how does the I make a difference or ‘emerge’ from a weight of history that gives the I an already-given identity? It is the question that Marx raised at the start of the *Eighteenth Brumaire*; and it is a question of how one ‘authorizes’ oneself as a historical entity. If one simply conforms to that which one has been given, then one becomes simply a medium for the ghosts and spirits of the past, invoked by

Marx, who now speak through the present subject. Yet the question remains: how can one 'begin' oneself or have an identity that is *not* already given as a matter of formal being?

Arendt is helpful on this. In her essay 'On violence', she considers how it is possible for us to intervene historically in the world, and she writes that 'What makes man a political being is his faculty of action'; and, further, more suggestively for our present argument, that 'To act and to begin are not the same, but they are closely interrelated.'³⁹ What she is getting at in this is her own version of *events*, which, for her, 'are occurrences that interrupt routine processes and routine procedures'.⁴⁰ She argues that we have a tendency to ignore events, especially those events whose *actual* happening threatens the sanctity of our reasoned theory or expectation or prediction of what the theory says *should* take place in any given situation. The parallel, for my own argument, is with formal and official identity: we tend to ignore any act of actual becoming that has the potential to contradict the sanctity of our office, our being, our 'identity'. The price we pay for such ignoring, according to Arendt, is that we remove the theory 'further and further from reality'.⁴¹ Likewise, our formal identity is what removes us from the possibilities of reality or of experience: identity such as this – identity-politics in criticism – paradoxically is the very thing that *distances* us from history.

Like Agamben much later, Arendt also saw a problem concerning authority, and especially the formal authority of what we are calling tradition, the weight and burden of the past that seems to condition our present. In a prefiguring of Agamben's actual phrasing, she writes that:

authority has vanished from the modern world. Since we can no longer fall back upon authentic and undisputable experiences common to all, the very term has become clouded by controversy and confusion ... a constant, ever-widening and deepening crisis of authority has accompanied the development of the modern world in our [twentieth] century.⁴²

The thing about authority, here – the authority that we have been systematically losing – is that it is akin both to religious thought and to an ontology of being:

Authority, resting on a foundation in the past as its unshaken cornerstone, gave the world the permanence and durability which human beings need precisely because they are mortals ... Its loss is tantamount to the loss of the groundwork of the world, which indeed since then has begun to shift, to change and transform itself with ever-increasing rapidity from one shape into another, as though we were living and struggling with a Protean universe where everything at any moment can become almost anything else.⁴³

This is the crux of our issue: does our identity conform to that which we are given by the authority of another (the past); or do we adopt the troubling condition of protean instability which, for all its vexations to us, nonetheless

offers the possibility of change, of events, of action (and thus of political life)? Arendt herself is relatively clear here:

the loss of worldly permanence and reliability – which politically is identical with the loss of authority – does not entail, at least not necessarily, the loss of the human capacity for building, preserving, and caring for a world that can survive us and remain a place fit to live in for those who come after us.⁴⁴

It follows from this that, if we are to have a political living at all, then we need to accept the vexing problems of instability – and above all, of instability in what we call our own identity. Like Proteus, we are historical beings only to the extent that we change, that we become other than what we were. All else belongs, as in Augustine, to God and to other forms of absolute – and essentially therefore mythic, non-historical – form, or office.

In that mode of absolutist thinking – the thinking of official identity – we open ourselves to the dangerous possibility that large terms like ‘Holocaust’, in the wrong hands, are presented not just as myth but also as lie. My tendentious claim is that ‘the wrong hands’ are the hands of those who consider that we need to ‘verify’ or validate an identity in relation to such events. What we are saying, of course, is not that we should avoid the term ‘Holocaust’, but rather that we should realize that the Holocaust is not one simple or single identifiable thing: it is many experiences (between six and nine million at least), it is Primo Levi, it is Elie Wiesel, it is all the many stories of Claude Lanzmann’s *Shoah*, it is Christian Boltanski’s *Dead Swiss*. In short, it has no identity – and to give it an identity is to reduce it to form, to evacuate it of content, to hand it over to the right-wing for reduction to myth.

We have a modern example of a fictional character who is caught in the Augustinian trap, pondering the location of a selfhood in terms of the relation of interiority and external history: Beckett’s Unnamable. Consider this self-identification:

perhaps that’s what I feel, an outside and an inside and me in the middle, perhaps that’s what I am, the thing that divides the world in two, on the one side the outside, on the other the inside, that can be as thin as foil, I’m neither one side nor the other, I’m in the middle, I’m the partition, I’ve two surfaces and no thickness, perhaps that’s what I feel, myself vibrating, I’m the tympanum, on the one hand the mind, on the other the world, I don’t belong to either, it’s not to me they’re talking, it’s not of me they’re talking, no, that’s not it, I feel nothing of all that, try something else, herd of shites, say something else⁴⁵

The identity here becomes unnamable, ‘improper’. It is as if the self is reduced to a kind of ‘bare life’ as in some of Agamben; but in Beckett this is formulated as if the Unnamable’s self is pure skin, the site of a feeling or of a visceral experience: ‘I don’t know what I feel, tell me what I feel and I’ll tell you who I am’. This skin, however is, in Beckett, the site of a writing or of a representation; and we can see the terrifying logic here, as the formally identifiable body

becomes the site of a tattoo, and thus also for a taboo.⁴⁶ The body here is a site on which a number, say, can be tattooed. This is an effect of the prioritization of official identity, of identity-politics.

In more precise political thinking, this in turn is fully shaped by the aporia of Auschwitz. Here is Agamben from the preface to *Remnants of Auschwitz*: 'Some want to understand too much and too quickly; they have explanations for everything. Others refuse to understand; they offer only cheap mystifications. The only way forward lies in the space between these two options.'⁴⁷ And this is important, because Agamben sees what he calls 'the aporia of Auschwitz' as something profoundly philosophical. Auschwitz is characterized by a situation where its survivors are witness to 'the only true thing' and, at the same time, this truth is 'irreducible to the real elements that constitute it', and so we face 'a reality that necessarily exceeds its factual elements'. And so, as he puts it, 'The aporia of Auschwitz is, indeed, the very aporia of historical knowledge: a non-coincidence between facts and truth, between verification and comprehension.'⁴⁸ Fact need not be truth, in this. There is a non-coincidence between fact and truth; and this would be important if we are to counter Augustine's conception of God, for whom fact and value are one, unified or identified with each other through the power of God's word-as-deed, word-made-flesh, as John has it in his Revelations or 'confessional' Gospel.

Now, however, let us place this insight from Agamben in the context of the legalism that we saw in Montaigne. The result will be that we have, in criticism, actually prioritized verification over comprehension by our prioritizing of identity and its forms. We thus understand or comprehend nothing. To comprehend, in this case, will mean to explore that space between the options of explanation and mystification of which Agamben writes as he tries to find a new ethics of criticism.

In these terms, formal identity is that which effaces historical experience, which must now become clandestine if it is to exist at all. Formal or official identity – and identitarian politics with its preference for verification over comprehension – is that which operates and becomes valued when our society has become fully 'bureaucratized'. Identity-politics in criticism might present itself as radical and critical; yet, as the foregoing shows, it is entirely complicit with the very conservatism of the social formation that it pretends to oppose. Bureaucracy in governance and bureaucratic government exist in order to manage behaviour in predictable fashion, and thus to preclude the very possibility of there ever being an action or an event at all. As Arendt argued, 'It is the function ... of all action, as distinct from mere behavior, to interrupt what otherwise would have proceeded automatically and predictably.'⁴⁹ Official identity – and a criticism based on 'who I am' rather than on 'how we change' – is anathema to historical materialism, and to the necessary 'witnessing' of literature that calls us into becoming and into political activity.

To be a 'witness' to literature will mean opening ourselves to the fact of the clandestine experience, the experience that can have no formal presentation because it cannot be verified. And yet, at the same time, this is an experience that is not itself constitutive of identity. Yes, we can experience, we must acknowledge experience; but we can now do so only in a clandestine fashion, perhaps even a covert or occluded, 'private' fashion. Our experience cannot be officially acknowledged; for we live in a critical age of official identity, bureaucratic identity. This is what has shaped the criticism based on identity-politics which, while assuming itself to be radical, is in fact entirely in conformity with the law of the bureaucracy that demands one's papers. The more radical move – indeed the move that is more radical precisely because it acknowledges limitations and strives for comprehension – is the move that abandons the ID card and steps firmly on to the side of the *sans papiers*.

My next chapter has its source in an original man *sans papiers*, Shakespeare's Caliban.