Docherty, Thomas. "Waste and the Ecology of Anguish." *Confessions: The Philosophy of Transparency*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2012. 90–109. The WISH List. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 26 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781849666770.ch-005>>.

Downloaded from Bloomsbury Collections, www.bloomsburycollections.com, 26 April 2023, 09:11 UTC.

Copyright © Thomas Docherty 2012. You may share this work for non-commercial purposes only, provided you give attribution to the copyright holder and the publisher, and provide a link to the Creative Commons licence.

Waste and the Ecology of Anguish

L'homme n'est qu'un roseau, le plus faible de la nature, mais c'est un roseau pensant. Il ne faut pas que l'univers entier s'arme pour l'écraser; une vapeur, une goutte d'eau suffit pour le tuer. Mais quand l'univers l'écraserait, l'homme serait encore plus noble que ce qui le tue, puisqu'il sait qu'il meurt et l'avantage que l'univers a sur lui. L'univers n'en sait rien.

Toute notre dignité consiste donc en la pensée. C'est de là qu'il nous faut relever et non de l'espace et de la durée, que nous ne saurions remplir. Travaillons donc bien à penser: voilà le principe de la morale.

Man is but a reed, the weakest such in nature, but he is a thinking reed. The entire universe has no need of arming itself in order to crush him; a vapour, a drop of water suffices to kill him. But when the universe would crush him, man would be yet more noble than that which kills him, because he knows that he dies and he knows the advantage that the universe has over him. The universe knows nothing of this.

All our worth consists therefore in thought. It's from there that we need to set ourselves up and not from space or duration, which we wouldn't know how to fill. Let's work hard therefore at thinking: there is the principle of morality.

Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*¹

Je plains le temps de ma jeunesse ...

I pity the days of my youth ...

François Villon, 'Le testament'²

In confessing, the self is faced with a specific set of issues that we might now start to identify as the issue of reduction or kenosis. The self has to evacuate from itself all that is extraneous to its intrinsic integrity and austere purity, all that is not I-here-now, in order the better to be able to reveal, in truth, the very constitution of the I-here-now itself. This is something that we have seen, clearly, in Descartes, whose entire opening intellectual gambit in the *Meditations* is precisely this anorexic reduction of the self.

Such a reduction to the bare self, however, is structurally modelled on another act of reduction that has its basis in religion. Specifically, in fact, it is the structure of the 'event' that is known within Christianity as the resurrection, that movement of a radical reduction of the self, even to the moment of death, before its resurgence. Descartes likewise reduces the self philosophically or in theory to a kind of threshold or liminal zero-point (doubting to the point of eradication the external world, then doubting likewise the body that mediates between external and internal worlds, and finally then doubting the substantive interiority that is the mind) before rebounding back, like sand in an hourglass, and reconstituting the very solidity that he had denied in the first place (the certainty of doubt, the certainty of being a thinking substance, the certainty that this thinking substance has a kind of access to the world, and thus the resulting certainty of the existence of the very world – but now transformed – that had been doubted in the first place).

The result, of course, is that, in the case of Descartes, what we call 'modernity' begins when the *meaning* of the world supplants in importance the *being* of the world, and where the meaning of the world depends on the I or is subtended by the I. In all acts of writing, in fact, we see something similar. The case is laid bare, as we have seen in earlier chapters, by the Robbe-Grillet of *Dans le labyrinthe*; but we can find it elsewhere as well, from Montaigne's reflections on the self or in Shakespeare's Hamlet or Lear, through an entire history of Romantic thought and on into the self-reflexivities of modernist literature. All acts of writing, as Maurice Blanchot would tell us, in some way depend on this structure of kenosis.

One response to this, the response favoured by Blaise Pascal among others, is to see the Cartesian worldview as not just solipsistic but also nihilistic. For Pascal, the rational secularism of the Cartesian view is one where the existence of anything outside I is ostensibly denied (thus solipsism), leading to a radical reduction of reality to a zero-point (thus nihilism). The response is the famous wager, the wager on the existence of something absolute and absolutizing beyond the self, God. Once God is in place, however unprovable and ineffable, we have a resulting awareness of a responsibility of sorts, a sense that there is something absolute against my zero-self to whom I must justify myself. Again, the logical structure of a confessional mentality becomes a necessity, this time marked by absolutist religion.

We can begin to explore this via Blanchot. He opens his *Faux pas* by noting that 'A writer who writes "I am alone" ... can seem a little ludicrous'.³ To write this phrase presupposes the existence of someone else to whom it is written, for whom it is written, against whose existence one defines one's solitude. It is a paradox, and, indeed, for Blanchot, the preliminary and fundamental or foundational paradox of literature itself. 'As soon as one utters it [the word 'alone'], one makes present everything that it excludes,' he writes.⁴ Stronger than the word 'paradox', of course, is the word 'lying'. In writing this reduction

of the self to its intrinsic solitude, the solitude that is necessary as a kenosis for confession to occur authentically, the writer is seemingly forced to lie, or at least to base the act of writing the confession upon a ground of inauthenticity. Yet, if confession is to be worth anything, it needs to be true.

Thus – and in this Blanchot is a precursor of Beckett in his *Three Dialogues* with Georges Duthuit – the writer ‘finds himself in the increasingly ludicrous condition of having nothing to write, of having no means with which to write it, and of being constrained by the utter necessity of always writing it’.⁵ The writer, in this condition of kenosis, a condition that is an absolutely necessary precondition of the possibility of confession, must somehow express this negation in its purest sense:

And he himself is already reduced to nothing. Nothingness is his material. He rejects any forms in which it offers itself to him, since they are something. He wants to seize it not in an allusion but in its own actual truth. He is looking for a ‘No’ that is not ‘No’ to this, ‘No’ to that, ‘No’ to everything, but ‘No’ pure and simple ... the ‘I have nothing to say’ of the writer, like that of the accused, encloses the whole secret of his solitary condition.⁶

This neatly brings the structure of confession – which, for Pascal, would have been marked by religion – into the realm of the legal as well. There is always, and necessarily, a suspicion regarding the validity of, or at least the trustworthiness of, a criminal confession; and here, we see the fundamental reason for it. It is, of course, exacerbated by factors such as torture or even the simple demand or request for confession; but, at base, even if a confession to a crime is simply proffered, it is of necessity suspect.

In some ways, we could see this kenosis as a kind of reduction of the self – the wasting away of the self – to the condition of total transparency. It is the moment when the I is able to reduce itself to being not really there at all, the moment when I becomes ‘Not-I’, as it were, or, to put it more bluntly, the moment of the disappearance of I, precisely and paradoxically as the mode of the assertion of the presence of I. The word that we use to describe this condition is death or dying. Confession, thus, is linked to a mode of literary suicide, metaphorical destruction of the very self that, in its destruction, necessarily reasserts itself. It is the Krapp of Beckett’s *Krapp’s Last Tape* or the speaker in his *Not I*; it is the necessity of suicide as ‘the only serious philosophical question’ in Camus. It is also what Simon Critchley describes as a condition of human being itself. Following Heidegger, Critchley writes succinctly that ‘The human being is death in the process of becoming’, itself a kind of modification of Montaigne and Cicero in saying that ‘*Philosopher ce n’est autre chose que s’aprester a la mort*’, that is, that the study of philosophy is essentially a readying of oneself for death.⁷

In this present chapter, I want to explore more fully the importance of death as an element that shapes the confessional drive. In one of his essays,

Montaigne argues that we should not make judgements about our happiness or otherwise until the moment of our death.⁸ Death is, as it were, the moment of a final confession, be it religious, juridical or purely secular. In earlier chapters, I have suggested that confession operates as a kind of apotropaic warding-off of death, that it is a way of surviving one's own death. It is this that now needs further exploration. The question relates to how we encounter what I will call 'the ecology of anguish'. Anguish here relates to the confessional demand that seems to be always incomplete: a confession unheard or unwitnessed, as in my previous chapter, becomes constitutive of anguish. It generates an ecology of abundance: the necessity to repeat the confessional discourse; and at the same time it is constituted by kenosis, a reduction of self.

We will look at the body, survival and the relation of both of these to the emergence of witnessing. If the confessant confesses in order to survive their own death, then what of the witness who, by definition, lives on. The chapter will of necessity look at the idea of bare life, and of how Agamben considers the position of the bare life in relation to the ongoing function of the camps that shape our contemporary moment.

In this present chapter, then, I will also start to explore more fully the nature of what I'll call the 'wasting' of the self, this anorexic movement in which the self is reduced to what Critchley refers to as 'very little, almost nothing'. I shall examine how it is that confession is seemingly moulded by a structure in which we go down to zero before re-emerging as one, as the only one, as the one and only. This looks forward to work on the relation of confession explicitly to democracy: a one that is *representative* of many, a confessing one that is reduced to zero and wasting away while at the same time being greater than itself and constitutive of a community as a whole.

Autonomy and responsibility

One key element that determines the shape of cultural modernity is the drive towards autonomy. Within this, there must be a definitive attempt to become responsible for one's own entire being: to give birth to the self, as it were. We have seen something of this in my discussion of Coppola's *The Conversation* in Chapter 4; but the more usual way we have described this is in terms of modernist literary self-reflexivity, whereby texts become seen as texts that somehow not only refer to themselves, but seem to be auto-generative. The *Kunstlerroman* (literally 'artist's novel') would be the classic form of this: a text that is about how the author came to be in a position to write the very text that one has just read.

The precursor to this might lie within a Romantic tradition, such as we see it in Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria* or, more obviously,

in William Wordsworth's *The Prelude*, where we see the growth of the mind of the poet who becomes able, once that mind has grown and developed, to write the very poem that details and describes the growth, the coming-into-being of the poem itself. That poem, of course, itself grows organically through various rewritings; and that growth is part of its intrinsic logic. It demands its own re-reading, as it were; and this catches something of the sense of confession as marked by the stammering of a beginning, such as I described when discussing Heaney. One modernist text that makes this kind of expansiveness and necessary reiteration into a theme is Proust's ever-developing *A la recherche du temps perdu*.

When Robert David MacDonald decided, in 1979, to stage Proust's work at the Glasgow Citizens Theatre, he produced a translation of the excessively abundant novel, calling it *A Waste of Time*. He was playing on various senses of the term, obviously: waste here suggesting expanse;⁹ but the phrase also suggests waste in the sense of loss: an unproductive loss of time.¹⁰ This latter sense is interesting: it implies an expansion of time, but an evacuation of its content, a time that is both full and empty at once.¹¹ At more or less the same moment, Joyce in *Ulysses* and Woolf in *Mrs Dalloway* are 'reducing' great expanses of history into the schematic form of a single day. Eliot is writing *The Waste Land*, a poem that attends to the fact that the spaces of Europe have been laid waste after the First World War: its London Bridge crowded, but with the dead; its 'hooded hordes swarming' towards cities of the Unreal. The cities are there all right, but these too are now reduced purely to *formal* elements, their content at best shadowy, like the merest ghostly representations of a reality that has been lost, a proto-Hiroshima in which the body is but a burnt shadow on the earth. Indeed, one might even say that the very pilgrimage in question in this poem is a pilgrimage in search not of lost time and disappearing history, but rather in search of lost space and lost place.

Waste of time and waste of space: these key modernist texts are at the centre of the theme for this section of our question, in which I will be exploring the confessing of the self as a reduced entity, a transparent or bare self, as a prelude to a more full examination of the relation of representation to democracy within modernity.

That relation depends, to some extent, on the location of an individual within a community; and such a relation is a matter not just of their location in space, but also in time. In one sense – the ancient sense of the word – an 'individual' is one who is entirely representative in that they cannot be distinguished from – divided out from – the group that gives them an identity; yet, in another sense – and this has become the modern sense – an individual is individual precisely to the extent that each *is* distinguished from their community. The simplest way to consider such distinction is to think of the individual as being in some way out of place or out of time: the alienated youth of the *Bildungsroman*, say, who feels themselves to be adjacent to or even

opposed to their community; or the avant-garde writer, who is already inhabiting a future aesthetic and awaiting the day when the rest of the community will catch up. For these, Hamlet-like, the time is always out of joint;¹² and we have learnt to think of this in terms that are given to us not simply by Hamlet himself, but, behind that, by Montaigne: how do we constitute ourselves as historical agents, with a sense of responsibility or answerability – literally a ‘confession’ – for any action that we might initiate? Further, how do we even consider the possibility of ‘initiating’ an action?¹³

In such cases, the question of that locatedness of an individual can be considered in terms of a question of what we can call the anguished economy of the self. In what follows, I shall explore this under the general terms of waste and abundance within the thinking that constitutes modernity.

Although they have been characterized above as dealing in waste, nonetheless both Eliot and Proust (and, in different ways, Joyce and Woolf) are writing texts that are grounded in a certain abundance or cornucopia as well. For Proust, the abundance lies partly, though not entirely, of course, in the sheer epic size of the task; and the novel, in its functioning as a comic and social satire, draws mocking attention to the riches and abundance of a certain high society whose self-definition rests on a notion of *grandeur*, a modern-day equivalent of Pierre Corneille’s *gloire*. Excess is one of the key themes of the text; and excessive size – a sheer ‘too-muchness’ – is part of its point. Proust is a little like those burghers among the Dutch elite of the seventeenth century, flouting their wealth ostentatiously to the delight and irritation of the English traveller (as described by Simon Schama in *The Embarrassment of Riches*).¹⁴

Eliot’s text, though relatively thin itself (and made more anorexic by Ezra Pound, of course, who took pleasure in trimming it back) is yet enriched by being a kind of nodal point around which the history of European literature is called up. Like a brash Walt Whitman, Eliot’s text ‘contains multitudes’, but whereas Whitman’s brashness is seen in his unrestrainable ‘long line’ sprawling itself across the page like a frontiersman edging across America, Eliot’s ‘containment’ of the multitude that is European literature and culture is marked by restraint, by the short and sometimes abruptly cut or interrupted line, and by understatement. Yet in this text, what we have is not just the words of Eliot, but also that stammering thunder at the end of the poem, the ‘Da’ that tries to stutter out three Sanskrit words; and we have that prefaced essentially by an act of listening, but listening to the voices of the dead as they speak through the poem and its quoted allusions.

Both Proust and Eliot, then, give us expanses of time and of space. The staging of Proust’s work in Glasgow in 1979–80 is also of symbolic significance. This is the beginning of a period that will see the flamboyant parading of wealth offered as a social norm, via a Thatcherite valorization of ‘business’ and of private gain. For Thatcher, ‘there is no such thing as society’. It is in the face of this kind of attitude that the Glasgow Citizens Theatre staged Proust’s great text,

with direction by Giles Havergal and design by Philip Prowse. These two, with MacDonald, were a triumvirate who made this theatre into a major cultural venue. The location is important. At the time, the theatre sat in the middle of one of the most economically deprived areas of Britain: the Gorbals. However, the Gorbals was being steadily demolished, and the Citizens Theatre ended up as the sole remaining building in the middle of an enormous waste land. It became a focal point for a political and social demand: the demand for community. The area may have been deprived, and even deprived of its buildings; but a theatre remained, and in that space, we did not have a reflection of Glasgow but rather the exploration of a world beyond, a world of possibility. In this, the economic deprivations were countered by communication: by the professing, as it were, of an identity for the economically starved and marginalized, of a very specific polity. The theatre survived the devastation of all around, as the Gorbals eventually shrunk into the space occupied by the theatre; but it survived in that it became the source for a reasserted identity, and one that was transformed or redeemed in the rebuilt and now more bourgeois revived public space.

There is a particular relation here, to which I want to draw attention as our starting point. The relation is one explicitly between waste and abundance. The abundance of wealth is itself precisely wasted, wasteful: indeed, it is a pure version of waste. The terms are certainly not opposites; one need not be a deconstructor to see that waste is abundance and vice versa. Yet if I say that that which is superfluous is wasteful, what would we do with other kinds of superfluity, such as that discussed by Wordsworth in the Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* where he describes poetry as a 'spontaneous overflow of powerful emotions'?¹⁵ An overflowing is, by definition, literally a kind of superfluity; and, to that extent, an overflowing is something inessential and unnecessary – a waste. Or what if we simply describe that which is abundant as being 'redundant'; how might we feel about describing abundance as a form of redundancy, or even 'unemployment'?

I offer these two examples: Wordsworth and the unemployed – to give a sense that not only are we here talking about economic terms, but also that the economy in question has both an aesthetic and a political or social dimension. In summing up this theoretical preamble or framework, however, I also want briefly to return to the observation that I make about both Proust and Eliot. I suggested that they give us a way in to answering our predicaments in that their texts lay bare the possibility of our having the *forms* of space and of time without the space and time in question having any specific and material *content*. In this, I claim further evidence that they are indebted to a philosophy that derives from Augustine, and to an Augustinian form of thinking – the confessional impetus – that gains ground and legitimacy as part of the condition of our modernity itself.

Augustine famously pondered repetitively – indeed, abundantly – the question of time. In his greatest address to the topic, not in *Confessions* but

in the waste land that is the *City of God*, Augustine relates time directly to the question of death. Explicitly there, he points out that to think the content of the temporal 'present' is akin to thinking the content of the word 'dying'. He argues that it is difficult to identify the moment when a person is dying or 'in death', not just in empirical terms but firstly in logical terms. There are, he says, three conditions: that which is 'before death' or living; that 'in death' or dying; and that 'after death' or dead. He rhetorically conjures away the middle ground, the moment of dying, by a philosophical reduction: one is either alive or dead, before death or after death; and, he argues, it is extremely difficult – if not strictly impossible – to identify a moment of transition, the moment 'in death' or the moment of dying.¹⁶

While dying certainly happens, the moment in which it happens is rhetorically reduced to a kind of inexistence: we have, as it were, the formal necessity of the moment's having taken place, but the content of the moment cannot be detected or experienced, given its status as pure transition, pure transitoriness. Augustine then makes his key connection between this and time. Exactly the same structure, he says, shapes our experience of time: the future mutates into the past 'without transition' as it were; and thus, the present moment is also now – like the moment 'in death' – emptied of content, while also being formally a necessity. Clearly, both the present moment and the moment of dying actually exist in some way, but as if in another order of existence; and, most simply put, they now have a purely formal existence, an existence without content. The present, therefore, is but one part of a formally necessary narrative structure that allows us to relate past to future in what we call a plot, say; but now, we have to effect that relation, that plot, in terms not of a presenting but of a *re-presentation*. The present – like death – can only exist in the form of its representations; and, moreover, it has only a formal being, with no actual content.

This is important for modernity and for modern narrative, as can be seen if we think of some emblematic moments: European romanticism would not have taken the shapes it did without its elegiac tone; to some extent Proust's great text is haunted by the death of the grandmother; Eliot is haunted by the Sybil, unable to die, and still, in 1922, by the dedicatee of his 1917 volume, Jean Verdenal, '*mort aux Dardanelles*' (dead in the Dardanelles, or Hellespont); a death in the waste land that is Venice for Thomas Mann; the wartime death of Percival and the post-war death of Septimus Warren Smith in an alienating London for Virginia Woolf; D.H. Lawrence's Gerald dying in the snow and ice of *Women in Love*; Michael Furey and his no longer to be heard 'very good voice' haunting Joyce and his characters in 'The Dead'; Faulkner in *As I Lay Dying*. Such emblematic moments continue all the way into contemporary literature (as in Gabriel García Márquez's *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*, of the work of Primo Levi, or Jim Crace's *Being Dead*, or Graham Swift's *Last Orders*, or Maggie Gee's *Dying*, *In Other Words*) and, of course,

in theory (Blanchot, Derrida, Agamben, to list the most obvious). All this, of course, not to mention Beckett (of whom more later).

Modern narrative, we might say, is a structure that attempts the apotropaic warding off of death, a structure that tries to deal with the unbearableness of death – the unbearable lightness of being in a present moment which, if we are present to it, is a moment of death. It tries to deal with this unbearable moment by emptying it of content, precisely at the moment when it also renders the moment formally central to a narrative; and the result is a kind of celebration of the *representation* of death. Indeed, one might go so far as to say that it is a celebration of representation *as* death, and as a way of avoiding the content of death simultaneously.

The paradox to which I draw attention here is that the moment of death, in its identification as the moment of the present, becomes the ground of autonomy and of responsibility. It is from this moment that modernity draws a symbolic ‘birthing’ of the self, a giving birth to the self; or, more simply, it is in this moment of *crisis* that modernity finds the possibility of a self asserting responsibility for its own *beginning* of something, its initiation of itself and thus also its ‘self-confessing’.

Of the embodied voice as witness

These, then, are essentially questions pertaining to what we might call ‘the economies of the literary’.¹⁷ In our time, we have seen this question assuming a great importance pedagogically. New media have generated a culture of immediacy, alongside which is an ideological assumption that ‘transparency’ should be a normative value; and we have seen consequently a corresponding reluctance to delay not only the ‘consumption’ of material goods, but also the processing of texts.¹⁸ Anecdotally, but perhaps also empirically, it is thought that few students or readers have the time for the older ‘big texts’, or even for long poems; rather, we live in and through a culture of the anthology, the fragmented parts of texts: a whole ecology of sampling. This is itself akin to Eliot’s method, of course; but for him, the anthology was not sufficient, and it was vital that, in hearing a line of Dante, we somehow were aware of the entirety of his work and able to conjure it up through one nodal citation; in opening *The Waste Land* proper with an echo of Geoffrey Chaucer, the reader is supposed to be able to summon up the entirety of the *Canterbury Tales*, and, indeed, part of the sense of the text as a pilgrimage-poem derives from our awareness of a geography that takes Eliot eastwards, way beyond Canterbury, to an endpoint that seems close to the Ganges where the thunder speaks in faltering and stammering Sanskrit.

Among the many things that this poem asks is a question that will become focal to what I am arguing here: what is the *proper* place of the human? What

constitutes our *propre*, our 'property' or properties, that which is proper to our self? How do we assert our identity and the *limits* of that identity or selfhood; and in relation to what original sources or roots can I take my identity, again as something *propre* or without my identity spilling over into those places that are beyond the circumscribed life? Further, how do we assert our own voice, and thus claim the possibility of confessing authentically, if we speak in the voices of absent others, of the dead? What, in short, is the relation of witnessing to the dead when we rehearse their words, when we cite them in order to find our own confessing voice, as in Eliot?

This kind of question can only be asked once one is aware of the full significance of (for present exemplary purposes) Chaucer, say, acknowledging the totality of that identity as we find ourselves 'hearing' the whole of the *Tales* in Eliot's opening line. The allusions that punctuate Eliot's text draw attention to particular places and to a geo-politics that gives the text much of its meaning. These allusions are not simply economic, therefore (shorthand references, synecdoche, as it were), but are also *ecological*: they have to do with an environment, with how we as humans figure in the waste of space that is the waste and wasted land.

Let us develop our inquiry, then, from the question of economy and ecology and the relation of these to writing, and especially to modern and contemporary writing. Following from the Eliotic example, we can approach the issue of ecology and economy by thinking more about the place of the body in literature. How does the body relate to its environment? In Beckett's great narrative trilogy, we have a moment that seems to replicate Augustine. We have *Molloy* 'before death', *Malone Dies* 'in death', and *The Unnamable* in some other place or state. We have already seen, the condition of the Unnamable reduced to the transparency of the 'thing that divides the world in two', reduced, as it were, to the merest fold of skin: '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'.¹⁹

For Beckett here, the body can be reduced to essentially to the medium for the voice or for language itself. Beckett asks the same question as does Agamben, when in *Il linguaggio e la morte* he writes that '*Noi parliamo con la voce che non abbiamo, che non è mai stata scritta ... E il linguaggio è sempre "lettera morta"*' ('we speak in a language that we do not have, and that has never been written ... and language is always "dead letter"').²⁰ In Beckett, as in this particular argument of Agamben, the body is reduced or reducible to an extremely bare form, not just to the medium through which the voice of the dead speaks, but also like the membranous form of the skin.²¹ If that is also the site of a writing or of a representation, then we can immediately see the terrifying logic here: the body becomes the site of a tattoo, and thus also for a taboo.

In at least one waste land that haunts the modern world, the body becomes the site on which a number can be tattooed, a certain abundance of numbers, between six and nine million; and the existence of that number on the skin that is now the self is something that effects the reduction of the self to pure waste, to an *availability for death*, as it were.²² The self is reduced, as in Primo Levi, as in William Styron's *Sophie's Choice*, to a number tattooed on the arm. The self, in this transparent condition, is prey to – indeed, is essential to – the bureaucratized condition of modern being where the human has been reduced to pure instrumentality, pure function. In this, confession becomes a matter of an allegedly transparent faith, a belief or ideology (one ‘confesses’ Jewishness, for example, in the way that one belong to a ‘confession’ or faith) that is so *immediately* transparent that it brooks no discussion and will result only in a silencing that brings a death from which there can be no ensuing transformation or autonomy.

For the moment, however, let us remain with the literary aspect of this, as opposed to the directly political. This excessively – abundantly – anorexic body of the Unnamable has its literary precursors. So let us look for a moment elsewhere, and at the literary body. There has been a long history of thinking the body in rather excessive terms. François Rabelais might appropriately start us off here, with Gargantua and Pantagruel, giant bodies whose sheer abundance of size allows Rabelais to make a series of comic observations about human wastefulness, and, indeed about human waste or excrement. The history can be traced through later medieval or early Renaissance allegories of the human body (Edmund Spenser's House of Alma, the lyric poems of Charles d'Orléans), and on into Swift, say, whose satirical explorations of perspective, with the giant Gulliver, lay open or transparently reveal what the anti-psychiatrist Norman O. Brown famously called his ‘excremental vision’.²³ It continues to the present day in the work of a satirical allegorist such as Will Self, or even in that of J.K. Rowling, whose Hagrid owes something to the Falstaffian tradition of the naively roguish larger-than-life figure. As is well known, many critics have been content to allegorize the stage in Beckett's *Endgame* as the interiority of a human head, its high back windows proposed as eyes and so on. We can also think of a whole tradition of American poetry, with that Whitmanian ‘long line’ mentioned earlier travelled still in John Ashbery and the like. These lines transgress boundaries: they announce the ever-onward movement across the terrain of the page; they are as expansive as the spirit of Whitman himself.

At the core of this is an ecology of the human body; and we can possibly see this most clearly if we turn to look at two examples from the seventeenth century, at the very foundations of what we now recognize as our modernity: *King Lear* and Andrew Marvell. In *King Lear*, I want to draw attention to a moment when Lear is accused of a particular wastefulness in the abundance of

his following courtiers, with all their rich accoutrements. This play is organized from the start around various questions of economy: indeed, it lays bare for us the very terms of the emergent management of space that accompanies a new economics of capitalism, where land and sex enter explicitly into measured exchange, thus allowing us to think even of sex and its associated rituals or activities as potentially wasteful in their potential abundance (that 'expense of spirit in a waist of shame'). How much land is worth how much love, asks Lear, for example; or what will Burgundy or France accept by way of a dowry with Cordelia? And, of course, what will she confess in the way of love, and how will her confession (as those of her sisters) be determined by the economy that shapes the play's governing and presiding idea of values and truth?

These issues set up a tone of measurement in which Lear, like some contemporary accountant or auditor, explores how we might quantify quality. The profligate France, of course, is the antithesis of this, seen as odd – or what we will later call 'sentimental' – in his willingness to think of love as being outside of the economy, not subject to rationed and rationalized measurement: wasteful, abundant and all the more 'un-English' for this dyseconomical profligacy and prodigality. Later, as we will see, such prodigality is the condition of a *grace* that serves a political purpose in its disturbing of an early capitalist economic structure.

Essentially, Lear starts by giving us an example of the very predicament regarding the relation of waste to abundance with which I began this present chapter. He gives up the *content* of kingship while determinedly trying to hold on to its *form*. That form is symbolized by the retinue of one hundred knights that he will retain, and that he expects to be entertained, month and month about, by Goneril and Regan. In the horrendous Act 2, Scene 4, with Lear's knights making excessive noise, their voices fully heard, Lear is told by Goneril that she will accept only half of his retinue – fifty knights and no more – at her house. He curses her. He then flies to Regan who, primed in this by her sister, halves the number again, reducing him to five-and-twenty. He is now near silenced. And then, in one of the play's most cruel moments, Goneril says: 'Hear me, my lord. / What need you five-and-twenty? Ten? Or five? / To follow in a house where twice so many / Have a command to tend you?' And, as if this is not enough, Regan then interjects with the final and fatal blow: 'What need one?' Lear's response is a plea for abundance: 'O reason not the need! Our basest beggars / Are in the poorest thing superfluous.' This, then, is Lear being stripped to the bare life, to the unaccommodated man that he sees himself reflected in eventually in the figure of Poor Tom, naked on the heath.

Later in that same century, Andrew Marvell writes a paean of praise to Fairfax, 'Upon Appleton House'. Interestingly, Marvell comments on what is essentially a modesty of sorts – a non-abundance, as it were – within this impressively large place. He compares the building of Appleton House with

the brash and showy wasteful abundance of other stately homes. Here is what he writes:

Why should of all things man unruled
Such unproportioned dwellings build?
The beasts are by their dens expressed:
And birds contrive an equal nest;
The low-roofed tortoises do dwell
In cases fit of tortoise shell:
No creature loves an empty space;
Their bodies measure out their place.

But he, superfluously spread,
Demands more room alive than dead ...²⁴

Here, he notes the sheer size of the space, and comments explicitly on it; but comes round to thinking that there is really no need for such excess, such abundance. The human, at the limit or considered in terms of fundamentals, can be best identified not by the house and surroundings, but really rather by the bare life of the single body itself. It needs no more space to be itself than the space that can essentially be circumscribed as the space of the coffin.

In these pages, I have repeated the term ‘bare life’ to describe what is at stake in this stripping bare of the human being. The term, in my usage of it here, comes from Agamben who, following Michel Foucault, sees the politicization of biological existence as the decisive entry-point into our modernity: ‘the entry of *zoē* into the sphere of the polis – the politicisation of bare life as such – constitutes the decisive event of modernity’.²⁵ The ancients made a distinction between *bios* and *zoē*. The latter is the crude fact of existence itself – bare life; while the former equates to a kind of mode of living – bare life as modified by its living, by experience. The bare life is at the root of this issue of waste for us; and we arrive at it here, now, in modernity, as a political situation in which the body as such has been politicized.

In a certain sense, we find ourselves reduced anorexically to the bare life, to the position of the Unnamable; and our only possible distinction is on the surface of the skin: no inside, no outside, pure surface – and whatever makes us distinct from someone else, in this situation, is operating structurally in exactly the same way as the tattooed number on the arm in the camps. The tattoo is, as it were, a writing on the body that not only politicizes the body itself but also politicizes it as the site of a *transparent confession*, an allegedly unmediated ‘evidencing’ of identity and meaning.

In this predicament, we are all bearing the tattoo of the camps, and the camps have become the inescapable and carceral condition of modernity. The contemporary world, politically, is precisely that domain in which we

increasingly see the triumph of form over content – which is actually here another way of describing the politicization of bare life, the transmutation of *zoē* into *bios*. No one has a right to a private life anymore; for such privacy would mean a return to content, to the quality that makes us *propre*.

This was all prefigured for us by Walter Benjamin in his celebrated ‘Work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction’ essay.²⁶ In these pages, I want to address just one small aspect of that extremely complex and rich essay. Benjamin points out that, prior to the age of mechanical reproducibility, art is rather difficult to access in an odd but very precise way – given that there is but one singular work, typically it is geographically or geo-culturally distant. If we do manage to get into the presence of the single work, we become aware of its aura, that ‘unique phenomenon of a distance’ through which we become enabled to see the art as a product of struggle or even of violence. As he will put it in the ‘Theses on the philosophy of history’, we can see the barbarism that underpins and is the dark side of the culture. Thus, when I do go and see a work that has not been or that could not have been reproduced, I become aware of the work as the site of a ‘contained’ history: the work, in a quite literal sense, ‘contains’ the historical struggles and is filled with the substance of the history that made its very existence possible; and, in that containment or substantive filling, it simultaneously and paradoxically both makes those struggles available apparent while yet occluding them under the ostensible subject matter and execution of the work itself. The work is, as it were, like the point in the middle of an hourglass: it sits isolated at the centre, containing or filtering a before and an after, the before being the historical struggle, and the after being our critical reception.

In the age of mechanical reproduction, by contrast, I lose the specificity of that ‘contained’ content, and see instead merely a beautiful picture: I see, as it were, those elements of the work that we have learnt precisely to call the *formal* elements in their aesthetic structuring, but I ignore the history and struggles that produced the very particularity of the image. For Benjamin, the distinction between these two modes of approach to a work of art is decisive, and has a political corollary.

For Benjamin, fascism is what happens when we find ourselves in the normative condition of evacuating historical content from art, and believing that form is the primary totality of that work. As he puts it in the odd afterword to the essay, the masses have a right to change property relations; and capital says in reply, ‘let them express that right’. The content of the right is replaced by the poor substitute of a persuasive rhetorical but formal argument. This is extremely close to Agamben’s claim, following the politicization of bare life – that biopolitics that constitutes modernity – that modern democracy is contaminated by the persistence of Nazism and fascism. ‘Today,’ writes Agamben, ‘politics knows no value ... other than life, and until the contradictions that this fact implies are dissolved, Nazism and fascism – which transformed the decision

on bare life into the supreme political principle – will remain stubbornly with us’, leading to a state of affairs where there is ‘an inner solidarity between democracy and totalitarianism’.²⁷

Crucially for my present argument, it follows that representation *as such* is in some sense complicit with the active forgetting – the elision of content and its supervention by the diversion of form – that enables fascism to take root. In this state of affairs, my body is *not* my own, not *propre* or proper to me; rather, it is tattooed, its very skin marked, as a representation of (for example) a class, a gender, a sexual orientation, a colour. Inasmuch as it is thus representative, it is intrinsically doubled – excessive to itself, abundant with respect to itself; and the actual life – my bare life – is also therefore waste, potentially unnecessary. Fascism says that it is disposable; but, importantly, a certain form of democracy based upon bourgeois representation – as also a society of bureaucratized individuality – also structurally fundamentally echoes that same position.

Put simply, if I fail somehow adequately to represent my class, gender or whatever, then someone else will have to step in to do it better. I have no right to a private life, for there is no substance to a private – present – life. Not only have I earned what Blanchot called ‘the right to death’, I also am now identified entirely with the enacting of that right. Blanchot, haunted by the after-effect of the French Revolution, thinks of this as the Reign of Terror, which may still be with us:

No one has a right to a private life any longer, everything is public ... And in the end no one has a right to his life any longer, to his actually separate and physical existence. This is the meaning of the Reign of Terror. Every citizen has a right to death, so to speak: death is not a sentence passed on him, it is his most essential right.²⁸

Economies of representation

More importantly still, we can see in these examples a sense of an economy in literary representation of human being in which the self can become identified with the dead or dying self, the self ‘in death’. That reduction to ‘the thing itself’ – the thing without waste, or without abundance, ‘graceless’ – is a reduction to the self at the point of death. A democracy based upon *formal* modes of representation is characterized therefore by our ‘availability for death’, we might say, or by the potential for sacrificing our bare life, or the *content* of a life. We may lay down our life for country or for friend, and may see in that the essence of a democratic polity or relatedness within the social or public sphere; and if so, we have just consented to a democracy being based upon the militarization of everyday life.²⁹

And yet ... And yet dying is in fact a supremely private act in at least one sense. Derrida argued that death is the one event where representation cedes

place to presentation: it is the one thing that no one else can do on my behalf. As he has it, in passages that are heavily influenced not just by Heidegger but also, and maybe more importantly, by Levinas:

Death is very much that which nobody else can undergo or confront in my place. My irreplaceability is therefore conferred, delivered, "given," one can say, by death ... It is from the site of death as the place of my irreplaceability, that is, of my singularity, that I feel called to responsibility. In this sense, only a mortal can be responsible.³⁰

Perhaps equally significantly, in this sense also, only one who is 'singular', not amenable to or given over to 're-presentation' and its (diplomatic or duplicitous) doublings, can be responsible.

Now why is this important for our purposes here? In short, the bare self, as the self-in-death, is equivalent to the end of representation of the self. We can invert this to suggest that representation might properly be thought of as the very embodiment of waste. Why do we need representation at all? Why do we have it? In extreme and fundamental form, the argument goes back to Plato's *Cratylus*, certainly; but perhaps the most important recent meditation on this is in the work of Clément Rosset. Rosset has examined what he calls 'the singular object'; and the logic of his argument indicates that a thing's material reality is determined precisely to the extent that it eschews representability. The thing itself – its bare life – is 'idiotic' and is real only to the extent that it is not doubled in representations. That is what gives it its Scotist *haecceitas* (its 'thisness'), its Aquinas-inflected *quidditas* (its essence, its 'whatness'), its *propre* (its property). It is what makes it what it is: its identity, now meaning a self-sameness that is so intrinsic that it cannot be represented – and, equally, cannot be representative, if we are to remain in the idiom of truth.

It follows, further, that the expression of our self or of our conscience in an act that constitutes a supposedly authentic 'confessing' of the self or of identity must be flawed. Indeed, it cannot constitute truth. And it follows from this that *either* a) confession must axiomatically be self-undoing in that it cannot tell the truth; *or* b) confession is not a matter of conscience at all, nor has it anything to do with a representation that would have positive and ethically progressive meaning in the political sphere.

If we were to take all this in a literal fashion, we might come up with an argument that says that those forms of political ideology – such as a bourgeois democracy, that are based on a notion of truthful or legitimate representation – work precisely to the extent that they de-realize the original person or voter who wishes to have herself represented, emptying her of her specific *content* and reducing her to the merest *form* of an individual. Our 'representatives' exist at the cost of our own specific reality; and, in the extreme limit, we die that they be given their 'democratic' legitimacy, or, to put it less bluntly, their legitimacy depends upon our availability for the sacrificing of our bare life. This is a problem.

Let us remain, for the moment, with the philosophical rather than the political aspect of the problem. Put very crudely, the hypothesis that we now need to consider, stated in its extreme form, is that representation as we usually consider it (both aesthetically and politically) is governed by a logic of waste. Further, 'waste' here implies the availability for wasting of the bare life of individual people, whose bare lives can be wasted precisely because they have no content and are to be viewed purely as formal abstraction (in modern employment terminology, 'human resource'). Their lives are intrinsically seen as 'not worth living' precisely because they are purely formal or bureaucratic entities: they are but branded tattoos, and can be removed when they start to embarrass the 'leaders' who design and write the tattoo or brand. Such wastefulness might be seen as symptomatic of a culture in decadence, a culture of decadent abundance.

Perhaps yet more importantly still, there now appears to be a fissure in the structure of representation. Representation can never do what it claims to do, in that – as in the *Cratylus*, as in Rosset – it can never genuinely or legitimately duplicate the thing that is its subject. Thus, while on the one hand, it ostensibly claims to allow me to be present where I am not (as in a bourgeois democratic parliament, say, where my representative will supposedly speak on my behalf), it actually curtails my 'excessiveness', my ability to exist somewhere else or beyond the confines of my material body here-now. It cannot allow me to exist in some form *beyond* my bare self, in some metaphysical fashion. Its logic implies that any self that is beyond the bare self can have no reality, since it cannot be quantified in the economies of representation. In this way, the subject's *imagination* – that element of consciousness that allows us to identify our very self legitimately as a self elsewhere, in another world or in another time – is anathema to representation. This form of representation, we might say, cannot permit a *culture* of the individual, by which I mean to imply that it cannot abide the fact that the individual may grow, especially through some edifying encounter with the alterity that constitutes the literary experience.

In short, this kind of representation, based as it is upon vacuous formal entities, enters into precisely that kind of quantification of quality that caused Lear his problem. It is tied to a crude economy; and, more importantly for present purposes, an economy that cannot allow for anything 'extra'. It is the economy satirized by Dickens in *Hard Times* and *Great Expectations*, an economy that eschews the possibility of a pure giving, of what we might call *grace* (a word by which I mean, here, to imply no specific religious connotations). Grace, or 'gifting', is of the nature of an *event*, as that term has been used by Lyotard, Deleuze or Badiou in recent times: it is an act whose outcome could not have been prefigured from the state of affairs prior to its taking place; or an act that, once it has taken place, can be used to 'explain' or define the state of a relation between the before and the after of the giving itself. In this sense, grace is culture itself, and not merely one possible aspect of a cultured society.

Political grace

Let me try to sum up where we are, and to point towards some conclusion that will open a new question for us. The logic of the argument thus far suggests an intimacy between waste (and all that it entails in the way of redundancy) and the act of representation, with at least two possible consequences. I can lay them out here. In these paragraphs, I address the fundamental question of representation; but I consider the confessional drive – in its traditional sense as an expressing of the self – to be a paradigmatic example of this representation.

The first possibility is that we accept that representation is based upon a necessary act of ‘de-realization’ of an original material subject. In this view, only that which is singular – only that which eschews the possibility of representation – can be real, or can have any real content. In this view, representation becomes a kind of fiction; and any legitimacy that it may have (either with respect to truth, aesthetically speaking; or with respect to viability, politically speaking) is based upon our willingness to substitute a narrative for the material facts of history, and to subscribe to that narrative in a way that allows us to use it to set norms that can be communally shared. The result of this would be, for example, that we understand historical conflicts as essentially being contests over the legitimacy of competing narratives. In this view, ‘democracy’ eventually becomes a kind of rhetorical contest in which the more appealing tales (the tales that have most adherents) propose themselves as legislators for all. There is a clear question here about the legitimacy of any such polity, not to mention a question about the establishment of norms of aesthetic taste and value (or what we usually call ‘criticism’).

The second possibility is that we understand representation *as such* to be intrinsically flawed and antipathetic to any form of democracy. In this view, we accept that for representation to work at all, the subject that is to be represented must be evacuated of any specific content, and reduced instead to the merest form of that content. The material or historical specificity of the subject must be elided and occluded under a ‘lowest common denominator’ that will allow for the subject to be inserted into a narrative as a type of ‘character’; and, in this, what typically will happen is an exercise in synecdoche in which one aspect of the subject’s identity is taken as the driver for the entirety of the identity.

More importantly still, that aspect will be one that is shared with other ‘characters’: it may be a class, a gender, a sexual orientation or whatever. At that point, instead of a narrative being told about specific individuals, representation requires that we tell narratives about these purely formal ‘qualities’ (and thus tell the history of sexual preferences, or of class struggle and so on). It is not the case that these narratives lack legitimacy as such: indeed, they are important. However, they lack legitimacy in terms of their aspiration to *represent* specific individuals, for they require that the material

singularity of each individual – their *content* as an individual – be ignored in the interests of the tale of the history of concepts that, in the end, are purely *formal*, not shaped by the particularity of specific experience. In this sense, confession as a revelation of one's conscience would be anathema to democracy, for it precludes the possibility of the public sphere having any material content, preferring it to be shaped by pure abstractions of 'character'.

It would follow from both of these positions that aesthetic and political representations *in which we make some claims upon truth or legitimacy* are, of necessity, self-contradictory: they de-legitimize themselves precisely in the moment of their claiming legitimacy.

In these terms, then, we reach the possibility of a conclusion and a question. The conclusion would go like this. Political representation is at once both necessary and problematic. It is *necessary* in that it is required if we are to counter the 'idiotic', and to allow for a general theory or even for a community to exist at all. Community as such requires that we identify points of contact and of identification among different specific individuals; and I take it as read that democracy requires some form of acknowledgement of community. Yet it is also *problematic* in that, precisely as it succeeds in establishing the identity of a community (by 'formalizing the specificities of content', as we might now put it), it necessarily *misrepresents* or presents its subjects not as specific subjects, but rather as empty and exchangeable counters in a formal narrative, pawns in a tale that is being told by someone else or by something else.

What happens to democracy in this state of affairs? Essentially, for it to have any currency, democracy must be seen as a fiction of sorts. It is a fiction not only in the weak sense that it pretends to do what it cannot do (that is, to represent adequately and with a serious legitimacy or truth-content its participants and subjects); but it is also a fiction in the stronger sense that its workings depend precisely upon what are essentially aesthetic questions concerning narrative, plot and characterization.

Proust, Joyce, Eliot, Woolf and many others knew this. They knew it when they produced their over-abundant texts, texts where the very fact of wastefulness becomes, finally, an issue in the starkest terms: the terms concerning the definition of the democratic human subject as one who is available for death within and on behalf of a community. In attending so centrally to the question of death – and even sometimes appearing to romanticize it – they have been taken as being sympathetic to certain right-wing fantasies; yet I think that it is important to see that in their writing, they are writing *against* death, and *for* the specificity of the particular, however complicated that is becoming in the mass cultures of modernity. In doing this, they are addressing the fraught issue of the wastefulness of human lives with their desire to give and to return content to the material subjects – Marcel, Leopold, Jean, Percival or Septimus – who haunt them – and who should haunt us in their absolute alterity, their *unavailability* for us.

And, for some thinking about a philosophy of the future? Perhaps democracy is better thought of not in terms of representation and its economies at all; rather, perhaps it is better to think our way through the considerable problems that democracy might bring us by placing it under the sign of the dyseconomies of grace, of giving, of offering. A grace such as this might be characterized as that which disrupts any economy, for it is a giving that does not foresee any return, cannot prefigure its own representation in a gift returned. Such grace makes of democracy a pure event: something that is yet to happen, but whose happening will be genuinely transformative, and never final. We can explore it further in my next chapter.