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Confession and Democracy

Of Democracy and Grace: The Economy of Confession

For J. Hillis Miller

He was trying to overcome an immense obstacle in his mind,
which I suppose is what confession's all about
John Le Carré, *Our Kind of Traitor*¹

The ground of friendship is ... the inevitable need we have to be
ourselves ... The basic condition of this is that we should enter
into fellowship, that we should love the other. So love may
be defined as the complete affirmation of the other by the self:
and since to be completely oneself is to be completely
free, fellowship is the basic condition of freedom.
John Macmurray, *Conditions of Freedom*²

Towards grace

In 1959, Robert Lowell published *Life Studies*, a collection that seemed to crystallize a specific tendency in mid-twentieth-century American poetry. That tendency became widely known, following M.L. Rosenthal's review in the *Nation* that year, as 'confessional poetry'. Rosenthal himself tended later to downplay the sense that this was something new. He wrote that:

The impulse to reveal and share things that everybody known but no one ordinarily talks about ... is one of the most human motives of lyric poetry. Before there was any large body of such poetry, in anything like the modern sense, poets were discovering and being guided by that confessional impulse.³

What is new at this moment, though, is a specific *attitude* regarding the importance of confessional poetry. For Rosenthal, it showed 'the chief link between poetry and the common life'.⁴ The importance of the emergence or coming to prominence of such poetry, especially in the United States, relates to this desire to see poetry as being something of material substance for 'common life', and thus of importance for what we might more usually now call the 'public sphere'. Rosenthal's formulation of 'confessional poetry' is, in fact, itself catching up with a theoretical inquiry that has emerged steadily

in many cultural practices and in European thought through the 1950s, in Roland Barthes and in Maurice Blanchot especially. That inquiry, we might say, comes to a specific kind of material and political culmination in the election of John F. Kennedy as US President in 1960.

At one level, the entire trajectory or inquiry in question is a clear echo of the shift noted in the Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* as that point of entry into romanticism that is given by the use of a selection of the language of everyday life; and there is indeed a persistent neo-Romantic tendency in some of this modern American poetry.⁵ Yet more significant, historically speaking, is the coincidence of confessional poetry with the ideological mood of Kennedy's America, an America that sees itself explicitly in terms of rebirth and renewal, a people making a clean breast of things and starting afresh.

In his inauguration speech, on 20 January 1961, Kennedy evoked the spirit that the literary world would have recognized from Eliot's 'Tradition and the individual talent' essay of 1919, a spirit bringing together in tense unity both the historical sense and a definite break with the past. Such a collocation of tradition and novelty was, and remains, a condition of 'modernity'; and, in his inauguration speech, Kennedy spoke directly of 'beginning anew', saying that the day marked a 'celebration of freedom ... signifying renewal, as well as change'. It is this idea of 'renewal, as well as change' and its bond with a certain 'freedom' that links the speech to a specific literary and cultural modernity, the very cultural modernity that Eliot would have seen in the flourishing of individual talents who were firmly grounded in tradition and who carried it within their very bones. Famously, of course, Kennedy also closes the speech with the rousing challenge to each and every American individual to become an embodiment of the whole: 'ask not what your country can do for you – ask what you can do for your country'. This rhetorical trope of near-chiasmus is a precise linguistic formulation and inflection of the kind of democracy that Kennedy had in mind, a democracy in which there is an intimacy between the individual self and the national project, such that the one acts as a mirroring representative of the other. Crucial to the chiasmus is a questioning of the self, a kind of examination of conscience; but it is a conscience that is also the conscience of a country, a 'common life' of America.

To some extent, then, confessional poetry becomes important culturally, chiming concordantly with the political mood of the moment because it considers the poet as the one who is perhaps pre-eminently *representative* of modern common life. Through this, it sees poetry as being associated with a particular American version of democracy, specifically that Kennedian inflection of a mythic America as an optimistic if nonetheless cold-war democracy embattled and threatened by communism. This poetry was not removed from common life, but rather, in confessional mode, the poet found a way of acting as a representative of everybody, of a community, bringing her or his own personal life into line with a common life of the polity.

Interestingly, at the end of the decade, in another inauguration speech exactly eight years later, on 20 January 1969, Richard Nixon essentially repeats some of the Kennedy language. He argues that America is suffering a 'crisis of the spirit', the answer to which requires only that, this time like a modernist Virginia Woolf, we 'look within ourselves'. He asks that we 'lower our voices' because America has 'suffered from a fever of words', and says that 'We cannot learn from one another until we stop shouting at one another – until we speak quietly enough so that our words can be heard as well as our voices.'

There is, across the decade, a subtle shift in this political rhetoric; and it, too, is something that finds, in its appeal to an increasing silence, or reduction of the volume of the voice, its quiet echo in literature. I am not simply referring here to the importance of a writer such as Beckett or a composer such as John Cage (whose '4'33' was composed long before this, in 1952); rather, I will draw attention instead to a more general tendency of 'reduction', a kind of kenosis in which the human self looks for a 'zero degree' of being. (The musical equivalent might be found in a certain minimalism, such as that practised by Terry Riley, Steve Reich or Philip Glass, all of whom come to prominence during the 1960s, and all of whom bridge a divide between art-music and popular music, the music of common life, as it were.)⁶

In 1947, Barthes had come up with an idea about a certain kind of writing at 'degree zero', when he discussed Camus; and this becomes his 1953 book, *Le degré zero de l'écriture*. At the same time, Blanchot in particular is repeatedly looking for 'Man at point zero', as he calls it in his review of Lévi-Strauss's *Tristes Tropiques* in 1954. In what follows below, I shall be exploring the importance of this reduction to zero as a condition for confessional thinking or writing, for a whole confessional culture that will eventuate finally in the myth of anorexic transparency, the very disappearance of the subject as such.

It is as if we can trace a movement through the American 1960s from Eliot to Woolf, from a question of the individual expressing their Eliotic talent against the traditional backdrop to a very different question, characterized by a Woolfian desire to 'look within'. Of course, that introspection is what might be required for any idea of a confessional discourse that arises after the classic Catholic idea of the 'examination of conscience'.⁷ However, it is also consistent with the growth of a culture of *surveillance*, of which Nixon's Watergate is but one very small (and actually atypical) example.

Additionally, this progressive inward look is one where the democratic subject is being asked to confront themselves in a kind of pure and naked form, all extraneous matter removed. We are arriving at the idea of a reduced subject, the subject who themselves approaches a kind of anorexic reduction to a bare or zero-point, a self that is so *transparent* as to be immaterial, in a very precise sense. This gives us the most obvious paradox that shapes

confessional culture: the confession is, as it were, a confession that is made *without a subject*, for the subject is reduced to a zero-point.⁸

As a consequence, there must also be a problem for any kind of democratic culture that bases itself upon the idea of any form of ‘communicative action’, as Habermas would later call it. One dominant version of this cold-war democracy would be that which sees the democratic society as being grounded in ‘deliberation’, a kind of agora of diverse voices, all of them speaking what they see as the truth and revealing (or confessing) their innermost self in an effort to contribute equally to the whole. However, while this may be admirable in principle, it simply cannot happen in any meaningful way if the subject is so transparent as to disappear, effectively.

I have repeated the term ‘cold-war democracy’ here. There is a good reason for this. As we can see from the inauguration speeches (and perhaps that of Kennedy more clearly), a straightforward opposition is set up within the culture between, on the one hand, the ‘common life’ (which is valued and which the confessional poet represents) and ‘communism’ (which is characterized as the very denial of free expression, the ostensible denial of the very possibilities of ‘confession’). The simple issue here is that, even in a culture that ostensibly praises common life and its expression through poetry, we face a major problem if the subject of that confession is essentially null, zero. In this present chapter, I shall be exploring some of these vexatious issues; and, importantly, we will need to investigate what we might term the status of the private life.

In Lowell’s case, the poet’s aim ‘is to catch himself in the process of becoming himself’;⁹ and, in doing this, ‘The “myth” that Lowell creates is that of America ... whose history and present predicament are embodied in his own family and epitomized in his own psychological experience’.¹⁰ Interestingly, the substance or semantic content of the poems seems also to be important here, for it is *because* of the way that ‘Lowell brought his private humiliations, sufferings, and psychological problems into the poems [that] the word “confessional” seemed appropriate enough’.¹¹

Here, then, we have the collocation of several important issues. First, the poet reveals himself, ‘confesses’, and in so doing, establishes and yet simultaneously breaches the dividing line between a private and a public realm. This confessional discourse presupposes that something that has been occluded is now revealed: the occlusion requires a realm of privacy, often considered simply as the interiority of a subject; and the revelation requires the existence of a sphere that is public, that is constituted by discourse or dialogue, and that transcends the private domain. In this set-up, the private is a realm that secretes itself away from the social: it is a space characterized by secrecy, in that sense; in Lowell’s case, it is the realm of family history as well as the darker corners of his own depressive psyche. However, such secrecy is always under intrinsic threat: a secret is only a secret once it is revealed, for, unless and until it is

revealed, it has no real existence (or is at best just private thought; but even then, to be a thought, it has to be expressible, available and comprehensible *as if* already made public).

Second, confession as described by Rosenthal in his critique of Lowell is marked by humiliation: it is a confession of something that demeans the private self of the poet in some way; and yet the writing of the poetry is the redeeming factor – that is, the confession ‘clears’ him, purifies him. As de Man showed in his essay on Rousseau’s *Confessions*, the very act of writing undoes the confession, for the confession is always marked by ‘excuse’: *qui s’accuse s’excuse*, he points out. He goes on, ‘in terms of absolute truth, [this] ruins the seriousness of any confessional discourse by making it self-destructive’.¹² As I have argued in earlier chapters, there is a certain inauthenticity that is necessary and integral to a discourse of confession that would be truthful.

Joyce is aware of these two paradoxes. In his story ‘Grace’, he explicitly places a confessional act at the heart of a public sphere. In the story, Tom Kernan falls down the staircase of a pub, drunk. He faces arrest but is saved at the last minute by two men: one is a young man on a bicycle, who promptly disappears from the story, having helped Kernan to his feet; and the other is Mr Power, a local gentleman who offers to see him home safely. In falling, Kernan has bitten off a part of his tongue, and so he cannot speak. He cannot bear witness, as it were, to his accident.

Mr Power, along with Martin Cunningham and Mr McCoy, hatches a plot to try to turn Kernan around from being something of a wastrel. While he is recuperating in bed, Kernan is visited by the group of men; and, as they share a bottle of stout, the three men hold a conversation together. Kernan, excluded, asks what’s going on; and they reveal that they are going on a retreat on Thursday night, that they are going to confess and ‘to clean the pot’, as Cunningham puts it. Kernan agrees to come along.

The retreat begins with a sermon; but it is a sermon for businessmen. The priest acknowledges that there is a potential discrepancy between the life of a Catholic conscience and the life of being in the practical world of commerce and business-relations. In my terms here, he is aware of the discrepancy between the demands of a confession based on conscience, and a confession that is essentially a conversation with the world. He invites the men present to think of their lives in terms of accounts: and, if there is something untoward, then they should ‘by the grace of God’, rectify their accounts.

The confession being made here is, as it were, a bringing together of private and public spheres: the men present share a worldview, that of the businessman whose task it is to make financial profit. Yet, the task of the retreat is to find a way of reconciling this capitalist economy with their consciences, which tell them that they should be more just. Kernan, a convert to Catholicism, sits in the midst of this. Importantly, as a convert, he is part outsider to the

entire enterprise; and he is essentially conned into attending the retreat. Further, his damaged tongue is extremely important. Throughout the story, he cannot speak properly; and, as the men trick him into coming to the retreat, what is happening essentially is that they are speaking on his behalf. They are *representing* him; but they are, of necessity, *misrepresenting* him, and putting wishes and ideas into his head, or rather ascribing to him wishes that they themselves have. In order to maintain the community or to keep in with the public sphere of these men, Kernan allows himself to be ‘represented’ as if he had spoken assent. He is thus brought back into a public life again.

The question posed by the story is not just that of representing in our own voices those whose voices cannot be heard; it is also a question concerning grace itself. Is it a gracious act to try to ‘save’ Kernan for the public sphere, as it were? In fact, though it may appear so, it is not: the tricking of him is done for ulterior motives, and is thus inserted into an essentially commercial economy of investment and return. This is why the sermon makes sense: the soul is treated as an accounts book. If there is grace at all in this story, it lies elsewhere: it has left the story at the early stage with the young man on the bicycle who had helped Kernan, uncalled for, and who rides off, seeking no reward.

The retreat is grounded in a basic falsehood, for it fails to accommodate grace such as that shown by the young man: an act that is essentially for the good of another, but entirely gratuitous, like a gift. It is in this way that grace disturbs a capitalist economy, as it also disturbs a narrative economy here. If Kernan is temporarily silenced, the young man – grace itself – is, as it were, conditioned entirely by silence. Where the sermon offers a chiasmus between justice and economics, grace cycles off and plays no further part in such a confession. This is a silent witness, as it were, to the wrongs carried out in the capitalist economy that shapes the lives of these Dubliners.

I as we: first confessions and beginnings

More recently within this Catholic tradition, Seamus Heaney finds a ‘pattern’ for confession, in which the confession is always belated, a pattern where, the first time one confesses, one falls into ‘truthfunk’ as he calls it, because of a certain unreadiness for the act. He describes a first confession scene, where the confessant has to walk the length of the aisle of the church to tell his sins to the priest who sits as confessor at the altar. The speaker of the poem, called ‘The Pattern’, describes how he walks down this aisle, in a state of unpreparedness:

Unready as I was if much rehearsed
In the art of first confession.

What transpired next was meltwater,
A little trickle on the patterned tiles,
Truthfunk and walkaway, but then

In the nick of time, comeback
And a clean breast made
Manfully if late. The pattern set.¹³

The pattern for confession, then – in this case religious and Catholic confession – is marked by a repetition, but one where the story is never properly told first time, needing a ‘comeback’, through which a clean and clear identity (the clean breast made, the manful stance) can be established. Confession, as it were, at best stammers its beginning, and certainly has difficulty in knowing how to begin, no matter how well prepared for, no matter how well rehearsed. It is less a question of *why* confess, and more a question of *how to begin* a confession. At one level, it must always begin with ‘I’; but what if this ‘I’ is not the ‘here-now’, and what if it is also a covert ‘we’, a *representative* I or even a particular kind of *democratic* I?

It follows from the predicaments that I have described above that there is now a question regarding the very singularity of the poet. In what ways can his own specific life, ‘cleansed’ by confessing, become representative; in what way can the essentially private be always already somehow public or at least communal? How can Kennedy’s ‘I’ be ‘America’, or what is the founding condition of the possibility of this ‘democracy’? In the poetry discussed by Rosenthal as paradigmatic of the confessional trend, we find that the particular is always already universal, that Lowell (and also Plath, Roethke, Bishop and perhaps especially Berryman) become the democratic representatives of the whole that is America. Single becomes general. To put this more pointedly for the terms of this chapter, one becomes many.

We see this kind of thing clearly in a poem like ‘The Far Field’, published by Roethke in 1964. The concluding lines of the poem are both personal and yet oddly addressed to a national condition in the wake of the Kennedy assassination, and they use words that are themselves keenly reminiscent of Kennedy’s inauguration:

I am renewed by death, thought of my death,
The dry scent of a dying garden in September,
The wind fanning the ash of a low fire.
What I love is near at hand,
Always, in earth and air.¹⁴

Similar attitudes are to be found all the way through Berryman’s *Dream Songs*, perhaps especially in his addresses to the many other poets – Plath,

Delmore Schwartz, Randall Jarrell, William Carlos Williams and many others who actually constitute what he calls his 'inner resources' – in which he uses his own response to these poets and their writings in order to construct a version of an entire American culture, a cultural memory that constitutes a present identity for an entire community.¹⁵

Another way of saying all this is that, in this poetry, the I more or less systematically becomes or is displaced on to the we; that the confessing I, in the very process of confessing, becomes communal – even to the point that we could say that this confessing I is that which establishes a specific community (in this case 'America') as such. In this, we see a particular confounding of two possible grounds for the establishment of the social, a confounding that is of the essence of modernity: on one hand, the social is grounded in the *conscience* of the individual, the individual who becomes a 'citizen' precisely to the extent that they express that conscience in the agora (Aristotle); on the other hand, the social is established through the very fact of *communication*, not conscience as such, and in this communicative action (Habermas) we see the gradual move towards the intersubjective establishment of the public sphere in a rational dialogue.¹⁶

In one variant of democracy, this move (in which a single I becomes the multiplicity of we) is indeed how such a procedure of confession would be legitimized. The answer to the '*cur confiteor*' question posed by Augustine is answered: I confess as one, as myself, in order that a voice may be given to the many. Nixon, in an uncanny prefiguration of actual historical events, expressed it simply in his inauguration: 'For its part, government will listen. We will strive to listen in new ways – to the voices of quiet anguish, the voices that speak without words, the voices of the heart – to the injured voices, the anxious voices, the voices that have despaired of being heard.'¹⁷ Whitman, as the rather more stentorian poet, had expressed it differently and succinctly: 'I contain multitudes',¹⁸ as if his single voice was always filled with the voices of all others. One becomes many; and, by corollary, the many can be voiced in the one, the generality of a community can be voiced by a unified voice.

Yet this is also clearly a problem: by what right can the I arrogate to itself the humiliations, the suffering, and/or the guilty acts of a community? In one way, Derrida (and behind him Heidegger and Levinas) is wrong when he asserts in *The Gift of Death* that dying is the one thing that no one else can do in my place: confessing is also one such act, something to be done, in Heaney's words, 'Full face, four square, eyelevel'. In confession, I am called to some kind of absolute singularity – what I have been calling the assertion of the 'I-here-now' – and therefore the 'I' in such a confessional mode *cannot*, by definition, be in any way 'representative' of a whole. That, in fact, would be the structure not of confession but rather of sacrifice, of the scapegoat; and confession is and remains, at one level, a seemingly solitary act. Yet, at the same time, it must be addressed to an other, to a community of sorts.

On this sacrificial structure, anathema to confession, Agamben offers a useful gloss. He argues that religion is that which ‘removes things, places, animals, or people from common use and transfers them to a separate sphere’. That is to say, religion is that which mediates in some way between what might be called the sacred and the profane; and religion effects a transfer from one to the other, usually through this medium of sacrifice, which ‘always sanctions the passage of something from the profane to the sacred, from the human sphere to the divine’.¹⁹ In the terms that I have been using earlier, sacrifice here would be that which transfers something whose proper domain is that of communication into the domain of transcendence and thus of conscience.

Roberto Esposito has exposed at least one of the flaws in such a position, in his exposition of the word ‘community’. Through an exploration of etymology and a fuller consideration of the history of the term, he shows that the real meaning of community – or *communitas* as he prefers to call it, maintaining the etymological origin of the word – is ‘I owe’. ‘The subjects of a community,’ he writes, ‘are united through a “debt” – in the sense of “I owe *you* something”, but not “you owe *me* something”.’²⁰ Such a debt is aligned with the grace of my previous chapter and with grace as explored in Joyce’s great story of that name. Esposito goes on to argue that the foundational existence of such a debt, constitutive as it is of the subject as such, shows that the subject in such a community is never his own proper master; the debt in question ‘separates’ the subject from that which is ‘proper’ to himself. In a community, this thing of darkness that I call mine own has no place, as it were. As Esposito has it, ‘the common is not characterized by the proper, but by impropriety – or more radically by the other’.²¹

Earlier in this study, I argued that there is a sense in which confession originates and has to originate in the I-here-now. However, it is now becoming clear that this I-here-now is itself dependent upon something that pre-exists it. There is, as a precondition of the very possibility of saying ‘I-here-now’ (*je suis seul ici, maintenant*), a realization that the real origin of confession, its real beginning, lies in something greater than I, greater than conscience: it lies in the community, the ‘we’ or at least the I as it is displaced in narrative on to some other grammatical person (you, he, she, it, they).

Such a position shows that a community cannot be an aggregate of ‘ones’, that it is not the sum of its parts, if we think of the parts as being self-contained and autonomous subjects. There would then be a difficulty with the idea of how confessional poetry works; and, more pertinently for my present purposes, a difficulty in seeing the relation between confession and the democratic impulse. It is this that I shall be exploring in the rest of this present chapter.

That exploration will require a meditation on the nature of ‘one’ and its relation to ‘zero’. At least two things follow. First of all, we need a consideration that will turn however briefly and inexpertly to mathematics – to a consideration of the philosophy of number – that asks whether numbers

'begin' at one or at zero. Secondly, we will be looking at a relation of the one to the many, a consideration, fundamentally, of the opening of fragment 418 of the *Pensées*: '*Infini rien*' ('Infinite nothing').²² At one level, this is clearly a question concerning the political, concerning democracy (and specifically a kind of bourgeois representative democracy where one voice stands in for many voices). However, in its manifestation as a question of the relation between particularity and universality, it is also a question of aesthetics or of what I have called elsewhere an *aesthetic democracy*.²³ Such a democracy has an intense relation to the confessional impulse.

Down to zero

In his analysis of the Henry James story, 'The Altar of the Dead', J. Hillis Miller finds a strange property of zero. The altar in question is the one at which George Stransom lights candles in memory of his dead friends, including his fiancée, Mary Antrim. The relation between these two occupies a kind of 'now-time', a dilatory moment, for 'She had died of a malignant fever after the wedding-day had been fixed, and he had lost before tasting it an affection that promised to fill his life to the brim.'²⁴ Stransom is caught forever in this odd moment, a moment 'between times' as it were, a kind of eternally recurring now-time that hovers between a past and a not-ever-realizable future. Miller describes Stransom's dead friends as being, like Mary, 'still alive, or dead-alive, hovering somewhere as ghosts or specters'.²⁵ They are neither dead nor alive, in a particular sense, but hovering, as a zero hovers, between states, between negativity and positivity. Stransom always has to light 'one more' candle, as if he will never reach the end of a series; but, as Miller points out, the moment when there would be no more candles to light – the zero moment – would need to be the moment of Stransom's own death. In this case, then, zero is equated with death itself, and James, like the reader, according to Miller, 'wants, understandably, to put off' the direct confrontation with zero. Miller then relates James's reluctance to finish this particular story (as noted in his *Notebooks*) to James's attitude to his own death, 'the Distinguished Thing' that he eventually did confront – and survive – on the occasion of his first stroke. How, asks Miller, does Fred Kaplan, James's biographer, know what James 'thought to himself' on that occasion? He goes on:

Kaplan knows presumably because James told someone that is what he thought. James bore witness to it, but can we believe James' testimony? To know for sure another person's interiority would be like knowing death through the death of another. This is an impossibility, alas. Perhaps all biography, along with all stories, like 'The Altar of the Dead', that end with the death of the protagonist, are attempts to do the impossible, that is, to experience the death of another from within and to survive that death.²⁶

According to Edith Wharton, in *A Backward Glance*, the person James told was Lady Prothero. Wharton's description is important:

He is said to have told his old friend Lady Prothero, when she saw him after the first stroke, that in the very act of falling (he was dressing at the time) he heard in the room a voice which was distinctly, it seemed, not his own, saying: 'So here it is at last, the distinguished thing!' The phrase is too beautifully characteristic not to be recorded. He saw the distinguished thing coming, faced it, and received it with words worthy of all his dealings with life.²⁷

In this, we should note that, according to this version, the voice that utters the phrase is *not* that of James himself: it is exactly as if his voice has been displaced into that of another; but another who speaks a phrase that is 'beautifully characteristic', and thus *like* the voice of James himself. If this is a confessing moment, then it is so precisely as I have been describing it: a confession but not in the voice of the subject confessing.

In Miller's reading of this, and in its relation to the candles in 'The Altar of the Dead', the zero is located explicitly as a kind of liminal point, a liminal point related to biography and autobiography. To be reduced to zero is, as it were, to confront one's own death. This, in many ways, is also the story of Blanchot's obsession with reduction, with the search for 'man at point zero', for simplicity or for obsequies and last words. More importantly, however, the relation of zero to one is a relation that makes possible the surviving of one's own death: if one can reach zero, but can also 'begin' again, as 'one' or as the start of number, then one can reach the point of death and yet also reveal the confession of a life that occurs properly at such a moment.

In short, confession is the rhetorical move that allows the self or subject *to survive its own death*; it is the movement from zero to one, and back into speech from the silence of death. It is the new beginning of which Kennedy speaks; it is the individual talent of an Eliot; it is the voicing of self that lies within Lowell or Heaney or Berryman. The survival of the subject beyond its own death is, as it were, a manifestation of grace.

Further than this, confession also becomes here a primary example of a specific type of witnessing. Agamben, in his *Remnants of Auschwitz*, makes a distinction between the *terstis* and the *superstes*. Both words are related to testimony, he points out. The *terstis* gives us a third or adjudicating voice between two other competing versions of events. More important for our purpose here is the *superstes*, described by Agamben as one who has survived something and who can thus bear witness to it. The grace of which I write in this present chapter is, as it were, the gratuitous 'living on' beyond a trauma, the survival of a subject beyond its own zero-point and its return to the positive realm of number. Having reached point zero, this subject 'counts' again, so to speak,²⁸ and they count as a matter of grace, the opposite of historical *Ananke* or necessity.

Grace is something that disturbs an economy, and above all it disturbs a capitalist economy. Capitalism requires a sense of equivalence and balance in its exchanges; and when there is imbalance, the supplement it produces is called 'profit'; but this profit is profit if and only if it also contributes to the growth of the economy in question: that is, it needs to be reinserted into the next level of exchange. This is capital's view of 'progress'. By contrast, grace works very differently. In a capitalist economy, there is no possibility of giving, no room for the 'gift': its offering, within capitalism, always calls for a balancing opposite, so to speak. That is to say, if I give you 'one' thing I make a 'one' from a zero, then capital says that you must 'owe' me 'one' back, you must reimburse me with something that is equivalent to my 'one'. It cannot accommodate pure giving, a pure one that does not call for debt or balanced repayment, a one that does not call for a matched future or, in short, a one that genuinely moves away from the balance and neutrality of zero. Grace, like gifting, is a giving that makes a radical break into the possibility of a future that cannot be accommodated within an existing system.

The relation of confession to one and zero is what we need now to explore; and, in the following argument, I shall do this through a close attention to Miller's work from the 1960s, the period in which confessional writing in American cold-war democracy becomes culturally significant.

One is, in arithmetic and the law of number, a way of beginning. So, 'Let me begin at the beginning.' This, of course, is and is not 'my' beginning: I am quoting from very near the beginning of Miller's 2001 book, *Speech Acts in Literature*,²⁹ a book that is in some ways precisely about the question of how we might begin to speak, to express the self, in writing. That beginning comes after the book's introduction, on page six. How does it take so long to begin? Haven't we already begun by page six of Hillis Miller's book; or by the sixth chapter of this book? 'And how shall I begin?' – this too a quotation, as T.S. Eliot 'quotes' the imagined J. Alfred Prufrock, again offering a question of beginning in the midst of things.

Let us note, in passing, that these beginnings are all versions of a stammered beginning; and, further, they are always beginnings that start in the voice of another. We are, as it were, in the presence of that vocalized 'distinguished thing', spoken for us even as we ourselves will speak.³⁰

Beginning is always the problem; and I want to suggest that, especially in Hillis Miller's early work, most particularly the books made in the 1960s, *The Disappearance of God* (1963) and *Poets of Reality* (1965), such beginning – the question of how we inaugurate a speech act (such as confession) in which the I is radically implicated – was a presiding issue, and one from which we can still learn a good deal about our present topic. My focus on Hillis Miller, while appropriate because he has recently written about 'zero', is meant to have a greater significance. I will focus on his work from the 1960s, that is, work from within the very moment that I have described in my opening

section above as symptomatic of a shift (especially in American culture) towards confessional surveillance. Although he does not write explicitly about confession as such, nonetheless I want to take him as paradigmatic of a particular trajectory within criticism.

The question of beginnings and of the sources of literature (or of the beginnings of voicings, the linguistic inauguration of literary acts) is more fundamental in Miller than it was in Said's great exploration of beginnings.³¹ In *Beginnings*, Said was concerned with the questions of authorship in writing, with cultural authority, and with what he called 'inauguration'; and the beginning in question, while always being a beginning 'in the world', as Said would always have it, was considered in a fairly formal manner, one that found its core in the emergence of the form of the novel.³²

In many ways, Said's meditation on this theme can itself be referred back to Frank Kermode's 'Mary Flexner Lectures', given in Bryn Mawr in 1965, ten years prior to the first publication of *Beginnings*, and subsequently published in 1966 as *The Sense of an Ending*. There, Kermode pointed out that 'It is worth remembering that the rise of what we call literary fiction happened at a time when the revealed, authenticated account of the beginning was losing its authority', and that, now (in 1965), 'beginnings have lost their mythical rigidity'.³³

These, clearly, would be ponderous words for a reader such as Said; and, in many ways, this brief passage can be seen as a kernel of thought from which *Beginnings* emerges. For Said, however, the Kermodian formulation, focused at least tacitly on the primacy of sacred texts and sacred beginnings, is combined with a fully secularized thought that Said derives from the determinedly historicizing influence of Foucault. Where Kermode would next turn explicitly to an analysis of the Gospels, in *The Genesis of Secrecy*, Said would find that his own work would turn to questions of moral freedom and political liberty, so admirably explored in his subsequent and more overtly political work.

It is interesting to note that in the preface to the 1985 edition of *Beginnings*, Said explicitly distinguishes his own position from the kinds of 'uncanny' criticism described by Hillis Miller at that time, on the grounds that Said's own project was resolutely historical in ways that the typical kinds of criticism described and admired by Miller were not. Said was determinedly secular in these matters, his historicism being one that saw his writings as being intimately related to material actualities that were not in themselves necessarily literary: that is to say, though aware of how texts refer to each other, he always stood by the ground that his own writing had non-linguistic (even if signifying) referents in the world and that these referents were more or less directly accessible via language. On the face of it, this seems straightforward: a claim for the demands of history against aestheticist formalism.

However, I shall argue here that the question presiding over Miller's work, specifically in relation to the question of beginnings and to the act that we

might now call the inauguration of the confessional impulse might be expressed as something yet more fundamental than anything seen in either Said or Kermode. The question will be shown to be at once, and paradoxically, both more historical than Said and more theologically driven than Kermode.

For the moment, and as a kind of opening gambit to the substance of the thrust of my argument here, we can formulate this question in its basic and beginning sense – the sense that some of Miller's work explicitly addresses as we will see – as the question 'How can anything come about or come into being at all?' We might gloss this: 'How do we reach "one" from "zero"?' or, better, 'How, if at all, is something that we might call an *event* possible?' By 'event' here, we mean, broadly, a something that happens whose outcome could not have been predicted from what was the given case prior to its taking place. Thus, in other words, our gloss might properly read, 'How is *history* possible?' Assuming that it must be possible, there arises the further question: what is the relation between history – or an event's 'taking place' – and our understanding of it – our grasp of it here, now (which as we know from Miller, requires patience, a laborious and industrious 'taking time' that is required for any serious reading).³⁴

The assumption here is that a confession requires as a first operational move a moment of self-contemplation, an attempt to 'read' the self and its past actions, an attempt at self-understanding. Miller is at the forefront of those who would see this as anything but straightforward. It is not, as the Catholic Church used to have it, a simple matter of 'examination of conscience'; as we have already seen, some of the key questions depend upon the confounding of conscience with communication as the ground for any event at all, especially any event that tries to relate a private to a public sphere.

The focus is less on where speech, writing and actions originate, and more on how we get from the state of affairs in which there is nothing – zero – on the page to that different state of affairs in which there is something there.³⁵ In the terms that are pertinent to Miller, especially to his recent meditations on the zero, where is the beginning: do we start from zero or do we start at one? As Lear himself was forced to ponder: how might something come from nothing? As I might myself phrase it, in the context here, 'How do we get to "one" from "zero"?' Given that a confessing subject must, by definition, be 'peculiar' or singular, then how might 'one' confess itself, assuming that it has survived its own reduction to zero, to the bare and unadorned self?

If one returns to Hillis Miller's own beginnings, to those earlier works of criticism, we can see these questions being asked. Interestingly, they are being asked precisely at the same time as the coming to prominence, even to normality, of the confessional mode in American poetry. Let us trace the movement between *The Disappearance of God* in 1963 and *Poets of Reality* in 1965. In the earlier of these texts, Miller describes a literature that struggles with an increasingly transcendental Christian tradition. There, God is a foundational

ground that guarantees value; but God is a ground beyond human grasp, and so, a ground that is distanced and removed from human 'experience'. God is a ground 'outside' the human system, but nonetheless vital to it, precisely as the ground that makes such experience possible (as a deviation from, a derivation from, an outgrowth of that ground to which it is structurally indebted for its very being and doing) in the first place. On the other hand, *Poets of Reality* traces the paths of writers who find that, if there is to be a God, 'it must be a presence within things and not beyond them'.³⁶ As, in their different contexts, Virginia Woolf and Richard Nixon both famously put it, we must learn to 'look within' if we are to find what constitutes reality.

We can understand this Millerian shift as a movement between two attitudes to the literary: the first – the one that we see in *The Disappearance of God* – prioritizes the definitive relation between sign and thing. That is to say, it seeks truth, value and meaning in the possibility of a grounded and grounding referentiality. The second – the attitude that prevails in *Poets of Reality* – prioritizes a constantly varying and unstable relation between signs (which we have learned to call *différance*). The first finds a ground for writing somewhere outside of writing, and it rests its case for legitimacy on the writer's determination of authenticity: it is, as it were, writing as a matter of conscience, in which the conscience tries to bear witness to (or to confess) the reality that transcends it. The second is content with a realization that there may be no such transcendence available; but, in the place of a grounding conscience, it places the sincerity of communication, and the consequent values of a community that will seek to legitimize the conversation, the communications (especially confessional revelations) among subjects.

In these texts from the 1960s, written alongside the democratic poetry of common life, we might begin to see an analogy or at least a parallel in which Miller's thinking on the power and meaning of 'zero' is already silently at work. That is to say, metaphorically at least, the problem of the relation of zero to one was already there in his writings. A transcendent God would be akin to the 'zero' as described by Miller: it is somehow 'within' the system as a sign, yet is also outside of the system, as that which grounds the very possibility of signification, even if any reference to it must be a catachresis. This is, as it were, Miller's version of Pascal's *Deus absconditus*, a God whose presence is verified, paradoxically, by absence; and whose absence, paradoxically, confirms the eternal presence. The relevant passage in Pascal is in the *Pensées*:

S'il n'y avait jamais rien paru de Dieu, cette privation éternelle serait équivoque, et pourrait aussi bien se rapporter à l'absence de toute divinité, qu'à l'indignité où seraient les hommes de la connaître; mais de ce qu'il paraît quelquefois, et non pas toujours, cela ôte l'équivoque. S'il paraît une fois, il est toujours; et ainsi on n'en peut conclure, sinon qu'il y a un Dieu, et que les hommes en sont indignes.

If nothing of God had ever appeared, such eternal deprivation would be equivocal, and could equally well tally with the absence of all divinity as it could with

the unworthiness in which we would find men who know it; but, given that he appears sometimes, and not always, the equivocation is removed. If he appears once, he always is; and thus one can only conclude that there is a God, and that men are unworthy of him.³⁷

This hidden God, as Lucien Goldmann refers to it in his 1955 study of *Le dieu caché*, is like Miller's zero.³⁸ A God 'outside' or beyond the totality of experience is, as it were, like 'zero', structurally analogous to the operation of zero within number systems; while a God 'within', or a God that has been perceived somehow even once, is a zero so interiorized or experienced that it becomes 'my' ground or grounding, what legitimizes me and my actions, speech, writings within the system itself: 'one'.

A classic example of this – and one that is at least a silent target of Pascal – is Descartes. Crudely put, Descartes might be characterized in this way: having doubted everything external to the self, and then doubting the very self that thereby reduced the exteriority of the world to zero, Descartes is faced with a basic problem of how to reconstitute a world or how to begin it again. Fundamentally, what he does is to elide the difference between God and 'I' such that, while the *being* of the world might still depend on God, at least the *meaning* of the world becomes apparent to and through Descartes, I. In this, there is a silent identification of the self with God, and the one ('I') with the zero (the hidden number, the *dieu caché*, that grounds every possibility of numbers being in the world at all); and the consequence is that the world becomes less characterized in terms of its ontological substances or its being, and more in terms of its epistemological significances or meaning. Like Lowell, Descartes is 'catching himself in the process of becoming himself', finding or making the reality of a selfhood through an examination of the possible meanings of the subject, 'I'. The zero (or transcendent identity, 'God') *inhabits* and, as it were, speaks through the voice of a now representative (if special) 'one', the heroic Descartes. Augustine's worries from the opening of his *Confessions* are answered; and, with this answer, the entry into a specific modernity (with the prioritization of point of view, character, the autonomous self-as-such) is guaranteed.

Thus we have the creation of what we have long since come to term 'point of view' that so dominates modern literature and criticism (and which, it might be argued, gives us the very idea of 'character' that grounds the modern form of the novel, or 'identity' that governs so much contemporary literary and cultural criticism); and, further, we deal with the identification of God and subject by effectively allowing that the world might be reduced to the condition of zero while yet remaining not only pertinent to, but also absolutely the ground of, 'one', of me, of the individual.³⁹

In this argument, in which we relate Miller's consideration of zero to his earlier work, we see that the zero argument is a metaphorical revisiting of some concerns that have been presiding and central to Miller's work as a whole. 'One',

then, we might describe as 'zero' interiorized, a zero that grants autonomy and that thereby enables the very possibility of history, of the unpredictable event, of the un-preprogrammed, of that which requires theorization precisely because it cannot be theorized.⁴⁰ In this way, however, not only via the consideration of Miller's 1960s work but also via this explicatory detour in Descartes, we can see that there is a theological imperative behind the mathematics; and I will return to this. It is important in Pascal, too, who figures at the root of Miller's thinking on zero, at least in the specific inflection given to Pascal by Miller's one-time colleague, Paul de Man.

We can see right from the start that a question of 'displacement', the displacement or not-quite-disappearance of God, the 'one' that is also already a 'zero', has been there always (and, of course, to disappear is precisely the trope of appearance, too). In the much later *Ariadne's Thread*, Miller identifies the displacement more precisely as a structure of allegory:

The name of this displacement is allegory. Storytelling, usually thought of as the putting into language of someone's experience of life, is in its writing or reading a hiatus in that experience. Narrative is the allegorising along a temporal line of this perpetual displacement from immediacy. Allegory in this sense, however, expresses the impossibility of expressing unequivocally, and so dominating, what is meant by experience or by writing⁴¹

In some ways, this is also a description of the confessional impulse. It depends upon the facts of experience (I really did this); and the telling of it involves not just narrative but also a kind of 'messianic' hiatus in experience (I stop – I arrest the flow of time, or at least slow it down – in order to tell the confession). And yet, as we have seen, precisely because of this divergence of experience and its relating, we cannot ever satisfactorily or adequately confess: at best, like Lowell, we provide an allegory of a sin that is not ours to commit in the first place, as it were.

Here, in these lacunae or hiatuses, are precisely the specific and incidental zeroes that interest Hillis Miller: moments of rupture that, on the one hand, are figurations of allegory and thus ripe for rhetorical analysis; moments that are also, on the other hand, moments of the possibility of autonomy, of self-starting, of beginning one's own beginning, of grounding oneself not in something outside the self but rather in the very fact of searching for a ground for the self itself, thus involving the self necessarily in a structure of narrative repetition (which is, of course, analysed most closely though not exclusively in Miller's *Fiction and Repetition*).⁴²

I started this part of my investigation with Miller's opening sentence on J.L. Austin. There, in *Speech Acts in Literature*, Miller points out that Austin's most influential text, *How To Do Things with Words*, is the narrative and enactment of a necessary failure. Austin had set out to establish a taxonomy of 'performatives', but as he tries to do so, the work signally fails. Austin, despite himself, 'conclusively demonstrated the impossibility of establishing

a clear and complete doctrine of speech acts'.⁴³ One reason for this is that Austin can't properly get started, because he keeps commenting on himself: 'Austin has a habit of commenting on what he is doing, to some degree from the outside, as though he were two persons, the one doing it and the other watching the first doing it. These comments are often wryly ironic, modest, or comic.'⁴⁴

Commenting on what one is doing is, almost by definition, the act – the performative act – of confession itself. Its contemporary technological equivalent is given by the phenomenon of 'tweeting' or that of texting or of posting status messages on Facebook pages. It requires, on the one hand, that the realm of action in the public sphere continues (I communicate with someone), while yet slowing time down or arresting it in the messianic style I described in my opening chapters. In some ways, this is also the structure of that mode of critique that sees itself as being based upon the necessity of disagreement, opposition. When Said described his position as being one that prioritizes criticism over solidarity, he meant to indicate the necessity of ongoing critique, 'even in the very midst of a battle in which one is unmistakably on one side against another' given that 'there must be critical consciousness if there are to be issues, problems, values, even lives to be fought for'.⁴⁵ Such a position puts the critic in exactly the position of one who confesses: maintaining a solidarity with or fidelity to the truth of certain events, while at the same time being able to distance oneself sufficiently to comment upon them; and to do this in ways that might expose the subject themselves.

Behind Miller's commentary on Austin, yet more importantly for present purposes, it is almost impossible not to hear the ghostly echo of the voice of another, that of Paul de Man. In 'The Rhetoric of Temporality', de Man examines Charles Baudelaire's great essay on comedy, 'De l'essence du rire'.⁴⁶ He focuses at one key point on Baudelaire's consideration of the problematic comic nature of a fall, a stumble in the street. For de Man, there is a *dédoublement* here such that there are, as it were, two men in the case: there is the man who falls, empirically grazing his knees; and there is the man who is conscious of himself falling, who watches himself falling, who might even be able to comment on himself falling ('I fall'), but who, even armed with the knowledge of the fall, can do nothing to prevent or arrest it ('I am fallen'). In this, we have a one that already becomes two, and thus opens our political issues here. This latter 'linguistic self', condemned by self-consciousness to inhabit the temporality of an ever-spiralling irony, is forever divorced from the 'empirical self' who escapes, as it were, from knowledge.

In the terms I used earlier in my brief description of what is at stake in Descartes, there is a fundamental and absolutely definitive distance now between the ontological and the epistemological. In his essay de Man effectively drives a wedge between knowledge about the world on one hand and the world as such on the other. As we might now phrase it, more succinctly, he establishes

the fact of a difference between consciousness and history, between, we might say, zero and one.⁴⁷

This is also the problem that we might call the problem of the ‘speech act’, of the word that is also simultaneously deed, of *logos* as *ergon*.⁴⁸ Yet the source of Austin’s problem, as Miller must always have known, is precisely mathematical. In 1950, Austin very certainly ‘did things with words’, with his own and with those of another: he translated Gottlob Frege’s *Die Grundlagen der Arithmetik*.⁴⁹ Through this, I will aim to show that Miller’s work, in its continual beginning, is driven fundamentally by a demand for singularity and, less immediately intuitively, a demand for an ethical democracy.

Of persuasion and the confessional ground of judgement

In Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Stephen discusses aesthetics with Lynch; and the vehicle of the discussion is an upturned basket on a butcher-boy’s head:

Stephen pointed to a basket which a butcher’s boy had slung inverted on his head.

Look at that basket, he said.

I see it, said Lynch.

In order to see that basket, said Stephen, your mind first of all separates the basket from the rest of the visible universe which is not the basket. The first phase of apprehension is a bounding line drawn about the object to be apprehended ... You apprehend it as *one* thing ... That is *integritas* ... Then ... you pass from point to point, led by its formal lines ... Having felt that it is *one* thing you feel now that it is a *thing*. You apprehend it as complex, multiple, divisible, separable, made up of its parts, the result of its parts and their sum, harmonious. That is *consonantia* ... [Then] you make the only synthesis which is logically and aesthetically permissible. You see that it is that thing which it is and no other thing. The radiance of which [Aquinas] speaks is the scholastic *quidditas*, the *whatness* of a thing.⁵⁰

It is worth comparing this passage with the version as written in the first draft of this novel, *Stephen Hero*. There are a number of significant differences to be noted. In the earlier draft (the stammered beginning, as it were), there is no actual object operating as the focus of perception and as the occasion for the ‘lecture’ as given by Stephen; rather, the conversation is held in abstract terms concerning the status of the ‘object’ as such. Further, Stephen is using the armature of Aquinas in the early version in a purely instrumental fashion, in order to allow him to advance his own aesthetic theory of the ‘epiphany’. An object ‘achieves its epiphany’, we are told, when its ‘whatness’ or absolute specificity ‘leaps to us from the vestment of its appearance’.⁵¹ Finally, the conversation in the early draft is between Stephen and Cranly, not Stephen and Lynch. Cranly is hostile to the proposition and even to the very fact of the discussion taking place at all. In the later version, Lynch is much more

sympathetic, much more companionable and indulgent. This last fact will be seen to be of great significance in what follows in my own argument here.

In the 'lecture' he gives, in both versions, Stephen is at pains to isolate the object/basket in space, and also to isolate the moment of perception of it in time. The argument is that the aesthetic moment is extraordinarily *singular*, unamenable to simple repetition. What, however, is the purpose of the argument or discussion in the narrative itself? The ostensible point of the exercise is, in fact, the same as is at stake in the essay by de Man that is at the heart of 'zero', a Pascalian *art of persuasion*. Joyce is proffering a version of critical debate, critical argument; and the point of it is to reach agreement between the two different characters, Stephen and Lynch, on aesthetic judgement. In one way, then, this is a version of deliberative democracy at work, or at least of a Habermasian theory of communicative action. This, though, is why it is important to compare the two versions of the scene. In the first version, with Cranly, Stephen immediately senses Cranly's hostility and their radical separateness from each other. He not only fails to persuade, he fails even to engage. The latter version, with Lynch, is much more positive, with Lynch encouraging Stephen on through the argument: 'Bull's eye again! said Lynch wittily. Tell me now what is *claritas* and you win the cigar.'⁵²

Yet, this art of persuasion is conditioned by its intrinsically problematic status, given the alleged non-iterability of the aesthetic event, given its unamenability to repetition. To persuade, in a sense, would be to allow Lynch, say, to echo verbatim, as if the words and thoughts were his own, Stephen's aesthetic theory. However, if the argument itself constitutes the aesthetic event (as it certainly does in the text and narrative of *A Portrait*), then, axiomatically, it cannot be reiterated in this way. What is being sought here is something that cannot itself be stated, cannot itself be articulated, but can only be felt (and thus present) as something not yet realized (as absence). What is sought is a ground that can be shared, between Stephen and Lynch, a ground that they can take for granted as a shared terrain or foundational land, and on which they can build something that we could call friendship, community or, in the end, society. Such a ground is absent in the *Stephen Hero* draft, but present in *A Portrait*. However, its very presence cannot be stated explicitly: it can only be known without being seen or shown.

In other words, at stake is the problem of how we would legitimize or provide the foundations, *Die Grundlagen*, of our judgements: how, that is, we would focus on the 'one' (the singularity of the basket or other aesthetic object) while revealing the 'zero' (the guaranteed truth of our judgements). Further, how might we do this in such a way as to preserve the empirical *fact* of the substantive existence of zero while yet not requiring its empirical visibility or presence? How might we see or at least *infer the presence* of a zero that underpins the clearly visible and substantial entity that is the one? How might we be sensitive to the fact of the zero within the one even when

it remains unarticulated, when it remains silent, when it has a zero-degree of existence? The important paradox here is that, while having a *zero-degree* of existence, this entity nonetheless *has an existence* even if its existence is as a non-existent or zero-degree existent.

We might refine this further if we recall from the Joyce example that, through the act of critical persuasion or argument, Lynch (assuming that he finds a common ground – a zero – to share with Stephen) becomes *as* Stephen himself. That is, the two would then share their own source or originating impetus: the two are *as* one, while yet remaining themselves absolutely differentiated and singular. There is a mathematical issue lying behind this, to which I will return below.

The question of what might be at stake in an act of persuasion is also what is at stake in much of Pascal. Here is an excerpt from the *Pensées*, another text (like Austin's) where we have but a beginning, a pre-text (a kind of zero-ground) for Pascal's great projected but never written apologia for Christianity. My passage comes from *liasse* number II, headed *Vanité*. Pascal writes:

Nous ne nous tenons jamais au temps présent. Nous rappelons le passé, nous anticipons l'avenir... C'est que le présent d'ordinaire nous blesse. Nous le cachons à notre vue parce qu'il nous afflige, et s'il nous est agréable nous regrettons de le voir échapper... Que chacun examine ses pensées. Il les trouvera toutes occupées au passé ou à l'avenir. Nous ne pensons presque point au présent... Le passé et le présent sont nos moyens; le seul avenir est notre fin. Ainsi nous ne vivons jamais, mais nous espérons de vivre

We can never remain within the present time. We recall the past, we anticipate the future ... It's that the present usually hurts. We hide it from view because it afflicts us, and if it is agreeable to us we hate to see it go ... Let each person examine his thoughts. He will find them all caught up with the past or the future. We hardly ever think of the present ... The past and the present are our means; only the future is our end. Thus we never live, but rather we hope to live⁵³

In this, the present moment is one that we run or fall away from. By not thinking in, of, or to the present, we also cannot live in the present; and yet the present is also the ground of our past and future, the ground, therefore, of all the moments in which we *can* live or know. The present, here, becomes a 'zero' that hovers, as in Miller's consideration of zero, between the negative and the positive numbers, an asymptotic point on a potentially infinite line.

'Zero' would thus always be precisely the midpoint of any such line, the point *in medias res*, the mirroring-point of a representation that would also be the point or locus of the possibility of transformation or of change itself. Our 'beginnings' thus are always Horatian: *in medias res*. Beginnings have always already begun and have always already been begun; and beginnings thus forever disappear. The name we usually give to this is *nostalgia*, that painful voyage homewards in which Joyce, for one, was always engaged. In the search

for the origins of an act for which the subject seeks redemption, in whatever form, we find a confessional impetus that is shaped by such nostalgia, a desire for the supposedly 'clean breast of it' that we allegedly once had. This is why, as in Heaney, confession is not only always to be repeated, but also always belated: 'In the nick of time, heeltorn, comeback / And a clean breast made / Manfully if late. The pattern set.'

Zero is the disappearing God that makes it possible, in its very asymptotic disappearance, to transform a negative into a positive. In mediating, literally, between the negatives and the positives, it operates like Milton's Satan, able to say, 'Evil, be thou my good', to turn a No into a Yes. What is this if it is not an act, as in Satan, of *persuasion*? Zero, in short, is that which structurally permits us and even enables us to *persuade*; or, in short, to bring about change or empirical history itself. Further, that change is substantively the change in the relations between those engaged in the acts of persuasion, those – like Stephen and Lynch – who can form a community of sorts or, at the very least, who can form a friendship. Zero, as the impossible point whose very impossibility makes possible – even necessary – the fact of change itself, becomes thus also the ground of our historical – and no also our social – being.

In 'The Rhetoric of Temporality', de Man had found that irony (in whose temporal order the philosophical falling subject is condemned forever to live) named 'a problem that exists within the self' for it demonstrates 'the impossibility of our being historical'.⁵⁴ By returning to zero, we find that that history is not only possible but also necessary again, redeemed now in a form that suggests two fundamental conditions of the historical.

Firstly, history is always already begun. At one level, obviously, this is banal; but at another level it is significant, for it precludes any revolutionary thinking that would proclaim a 'Year Zero', such as we might find it in myths of political movements (from the liberatory origins of the French Revolution to the abominations of a Third Reich) or religious movements (such as those that date history from the times of a guru or leader). The zero of the alleged year zero was always already there, and past, as the very ground and possibility of our being in the first place. It follows from this first condition not only that revolutions are structurally impossible, but also that 'new starts' or 'clean breasts' – fresh beginnings, including theological fresh beginnings – are also structurally impossible. The ghosts of the past, the guilts of the past, must weigh forever on what it is that gives our present condition its specific character: *there is no excuse*, as it were, despite whatever de Man might try to show in his 'Excuses' essay on Rousseau.⁵⁵

This – the fact that *there is no excuse* – is the scandal that simultaneously demands confession while also negating its power. There are major political consequences for this, not only in courts of law but also in major political settings such as those that shaped Arendt's descriptions in *Eichmann in*

Jerusalem.⁵⁶ There are also major theological consequences for any who would proclaim confession as a way of redeeming the self. In both cases, a certain idea of grace becomes a disruptive element.

Secondly, the history that has always already begun is one that can never be ‘mine’, for it is always necessarily conditioned by friendship or at least by the relatedness – the *Zusammenhang* – that we call the social. It follows from this second condition that, in a very strict sense, ‘autobiography’ is also impossible, and never more impossible than in those stories of a life that centre upon a transgression, an apostasy, a ‘turning-point’ or personal revolution. The autonomy that would ground an autobiography as the tacit condition of its possibility is itself now dubious.

Instead of considering the importance of autonomy in our modernity and in our modern cultures, we ought rather to be focusing more intently and seriously on those moments of singularity, those unrepeatable moments or, better, ‘occasions’ when our autonomy is called into question precisely by the *demand* for persuasion. Such a demand is of the order of ethics, for it inevitably situates us in the social position where, like Stephen and like Lynch, we have *something to say*, where we have to make that beginning that constitutes a mark on a page, a mark upon another consciousness. We must make there be something rather than nothing; but, in so doing, we also constitute the ‘we’ that shapes the occasion itself, an occasion that we can now identify with our being historical and our social being at once.

Confessing friendship and democracy

We need, clearly, to look more closely at this ‘one’. Following Frege (as Austin did in translating him), we can see that there is a problem with the basic formulation $1+1=2$. That formulation is fundamental not only to arithmetic, but also to any democracy that prioritizes ‘the many’ or the majority within a community. Frege argues that, in the case of $1+1=2$, the two 1s would have to be different (in what follows, let us think of these as Stephen and Lynch, say). If they were not different, then, asks Frege, how could they be distinguished from each other as separate 1s in the first place? That gives us a problem with 2, which can no longer be seen simply as the summation of $1+1$. For Frege, ‘number is not simply an agglomeration of things’, and:

If we try to produce the number [say, 2] by putting together different distinct objects [say you and me], the result is an agglomeration in which the objects counted remain still in possession of precisely those properties which serve to distinguish them from one another, and that is not the number [i.e. the ‘meaning’ of 2 is not and cannot be ‘you and me’, or ‘Stephen-and-Lynch’]. But if we try to do it the other way, by putting together identicals [I and I, say], the result runs perpetually together into one and we never reach a plurality.⁵⁷

In this formulation, we see the difference between the two accounts of Stephen's aesthetics in the two versions of *A Portrait*. The first version, *Stephen Hero*, delivers its aesthetic theory in purely abstract terms; the second, in the published *Portrait*, gives, by contrast, a very specific substance to the abstraction by imaging for us the upturned basket on the head of the butcher's boy. The mathematical account of reality – in which $1+1=2$, for example – depends, for its working, on something that evades the possibility of historical specificity by remaining purely formal and abstract. In this, therefore, we have the *form* of an arithmetical sum *without any content*.

Thus, it follows that it is correct – or ' $1+1=2$ ' is true – if and only if there is no specificity, no historical substance, to the 1s that are thus being 'counted' or accounted for in the 2. By simple analogy, most political constructions that we consider as 'democratic' are, at best, only formally democratic. Their democracy has no content. As Rancière has it, 'Societies, today as yesterday, are organized by the play of oligarchies. There is, strictly speaking, no such thing as democratic government. Government is always exercised by the minority over the majority.'⁵⁸

Frege complicates our thinking of number here by offering us a version of mathematics that is historical in that it has substantive content; and, when number is given a substance in this way, we find a certain impossibility or negation of formal arithmetic and its certainties, its formulaic truth. This is obviously important in its potential effect upon political considerations. This, of course, is not a justification of the totalitarian thinking of O'Brien and the Party in Orwell's *1984*: in that text, where $2+2=5$, or where $2+2$ can be made to equal anything the Party wants it to equal, we have precisely the validation of arithmetic as a purely formal and vacuous game. As Winston knows – and as O'Brien also knows – as soon as you give substance to 2, things become more complicated. Indeed, it is *only* if 2 remains pure vacuous form that $2+2=5$.

While Rancière analyses this as a profound hatred of democracy, it might be equally useful to consider the matter in less extreme form. We do not need any explicit (or even implicit) government by oligarchy to see the stakes of our question for a culture that vaunts itself as democratic by virtue of its release of many voices, in the Nixon mode. Today, the less offensive way that we consider these matters is by vaunting a mode of cultural relativism. However, such relativism, while ostensibly giving voice to the previously unheard, is itself intrinsically totalitarian insofar as it remains within the bounds of a merely *formal* democracy. Relativism is that state of affairs in which we claim that truth depends for its validation upon situatedness or upon ethnic or other 'norms' as agreed by any group. Thus, Pilate-like, we all have truths, but 'mine' may differ from 'yours', though we can make claims for the alleged validity of both. Obviously, this is a trivialization of truth.

Alain Touraine is useful as a guide here. He points out that democracy is, as we have always known, threatened by various forms of oligarchy. However,

in addition to this, democracy is also threatened precisely by the consequences of a philosophy that sees the point of democracy as being the simple release of many confessional voices in a society of 'deliberation', the kind of deliberative democracy that Martha C. Nussbaum places at the centre of a democratic education.⁵⁹ The name he gives to this threat is not relativism, but 'culturalism'.

In this 'culturalism', he argues, we push the respect for minorities to the point where we effectively suppress the very idea of there being a majority at all, the consequence of which is that we reduce the efficacy of any idea of there being a domain of a general law at all (what we might once have called a universalizing principle). The danger is that, in this extreme respect for differences, for cultural differences, we establish and encourage the formation of localized 'communities' which impose, within their own milieu, an antidemocratic culture; As he glosses this:

La société politique ne serait plus alors qu'un marché aux transactions vaguement réglées entre des communautés enfermées dans l'obsession de leur identité et de leur homogénéité.

Political society would then be nothing more than a market of vaguely regulated transactions between communities that are locked within an obsession with their identity and homogeneity.⁶⁰

That is to say, it can be that the very principle of identity leads to an anti-democratic condition. Against this, Touraine argues, rightly in my view, for a mode of democratization that is concerned with emancipation, rather than with 'mere' deliberation. To ground this more fully, we need a fuller consideration of the status of the subject in democracy, and the status of the individual, the one.

Democracies, in general, depend upon forms of counting and accountabilities. If we are to explore the political effects of Frege's thought, we might begin from a consideration of the idea of a one that is identical with another one: that is to say, we need to revisit the idea of duplication and reproducibility in what is Benjamin's most cited essay on 'The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction'. Part of the drive behind that essay lies in Benjamin's awareness that the work of art made for reproduction is a work that endangers the 'aura', which he defines as 'the unique phenomenon of a distance'.⁶¹ That which is 'unique' in this way – in my terms here, that which occasions the singularity of an event, especially of an aesthetic event whose substance is such that it requires *a change in the identity of the subject of perception* – is unique precisely because of its location in place and time. Such a location or situation is, by definition, unrepeatable.

However, modernity wishes to overcome this distance, to become more intimate with the objects that organize the levels, hierarchies and priorities within the values of its society; and Benjamin explicitly relates this desire to overcome distance with the rise of 'the masses'. Blanchot is useful here in his

devastating examination (taken from the work of Hubert Damisch) of the bogus democracy offered by 'paperback culture'. The invention of the paperback proposes a state of affairs where, ostensibly, everyone now has free access to culture in its widest sense: culture, as it were, has become transparent, and we are entering the age of a so-called 'transparent society' in which everything is available, and available or accessible *immediately*, without mediation. Culture becomes precisely the substance of the 'I-here-now', as it were.⁶²

This, liberal thought argues, is the very basis of a deliberative democracy, and is thus a good and progressive thing. However, this occludes what is really operational within such a culture, and especially within its economic realities. Here is Blanchot:

The paperback publisher ensures his profit not by selling many printings of any particular book but by procuring a large market for the entire series. Here we detect cheating: the series must reach the most varied public; it must therefore be made up of many things, heterogeneous, superficially broad, of a deceptive eclecticism and without any unity aside from its presentation – the colorful cover whose scintillation attracts the gaze and gives the buyer a luxurious pleasure: a luxury and quality within the reach of everyone.⁶³

In reality, this ostensible pluralism is deceptive. To work properly, this market needs extremely fast turnover: the books appear in the shops but for a limited period of time. You must rush to buy them, before the common interest has moved on to the next items. In short, according to Blanchot, distances of space and time are reduced to zero.

A very generalized 'culture' now 'acts as a substitute for each person'; and thus, difficult works are reduced to 'values', values that are always already known in advance, values that are confirmed by the works or by our alleged common understanding of them. Further, and even worse:

the work's *irreducible* distance, the approach of which is the approach of a remoteness and which we grasp only as lack – a lack in ourselves, a lack in the work, and a void in language – the strangeness of the work, the speech that can be spoken only a little beyond itself, is reduced to a happy familiarity, commensurate with possible knowledge and unutterable language. Culture is substance and full substance; its space is a continuous, homogeneous space without gap and without curvature.⁶⁴

This 'culture', then, is entirely anti-democratic. It works as a scandal allowing individuals to believe that they exist within a democratic condition, while simultaneously working in totalitarian fashion to reduce their heterogeneity and to fashion them as undifferentiated one from the other. If they are 'individuals' at all, they are so only in a purely formal and abstract way. In the reduction of time to instantaneity, and the reduction of distance to zero, they give a false or bogus version of democracy. This reduction of space and time to the instantaneously available is what we usually refer to as a culture of *transparency*.

The culture of transparency means the end of our right to a private life: in this state of affairs, we are forced to confess all, eternally and totally. In some regimes, this is called surveillance or, in more extreme and less quotidian form, the wringing of betrayals by political torture. In some situations, it is thought of as standing bare before a deity. But in other societies, (and this is especially so within modernity) it is called consumerism, a consumerism that pretends to offer a condition in which culture is available as a mass-effect. It is akin to what we have already seen in Perec's *Les choses*.

Benjamin writes that 'Every day the urge grows stronger to get hold of an object at very close range by way of its likeness, its reproduction.'⁶⁵ If we, in mass society, cannot hold the *Mona Lisa* before our eyes in the intimacy of a private epiphany, then we can at least have access to the reproductions of the image. Something inevitably happens, however, as we saw in the case of Jérôme and Sylvie in Perec's novel. According to Benjamin:

Unmistakably, reproduction as offered by picture magazines and newsreels differs from the image seen by the unarmed eye. Uniqueness and permanence are as closely linked in the latter as are transitoriness and reproducibility in the former. To pry an object from its shell, to destroy its aura, is the mark of a perception whose 'sense of the universal equality of things' has increased to such a degree that it extracts it even from a unique object by means of reproduction.⁶⁶

Here, Benjamin identifies the logic of reproduction (the logic of formal arithmetic, as it were) with a mode of perception that has given up on the possibility of evaluative differentiation, or of aesthetic discrimination and judgement. All things become universally equal; and all are equally worthy of critical attention.

Interestingly, there is a rather unquestioning acceptance of this mode of thinking among those critics who have abandoned the literary in favour of something called the cultural, especially in the form of 'cultural studies' or, more recently, 'cultural criticism'. In cultural studies, reading becomes essentially a content-free activity, a formal methodology whose modes (derived from a 'theory' that has fundamentally been reduced to semiotics) can be applied equally 'to Canaletto and to Corn-Flake packets – why not?', as in the recent journalistic formulations of Catherine Belsey, for example.⁶⁷ Those engaged in this kind of activity proclaim that it is critical and even radical in its political roots as well as in its implications and consequences. However, given that it is content-free in this way (unable or unwilling to distinguish the singularity of Canaletto from that of Corn Flakes), it is actually entirely complicit with the conservative politics of those governments that conceive of education in purely instrumentalist terms, where the formal acquisition of rather neutral 'skills' replaces the content and substance of 'the pursuit of knowledge'.⁶⁸

More important still is what these critics ignore in Benjamin, which is that the alleged equality of aesthetic (and other) objects is a by-product of the fact

that in mass society, such objects – reproduced objects – have been denuded of their content which, for Benjamin, means essentially that they have been stripped of their historical being, substance and location. We attend, then, to the form of an object ('what an enigmatic image is that of the *Mona Lisa*', which we can compare *as an image* with all the other paintings in this or that volume of reproductions, say) while being denied its content (the historical struggles, plays of force and of powers that made the painting possible and even necessary at a certain place and in a specific moment – which is unrepeatable, difficult of access, distant and certainly not available for us-here-now).

In contradistinction to all this, my case is that the critical point about art is its difficulty of access. A critical approach that subscribes to the possibility of an art 'confessing' itself is a critical approach that will eventuate in only one thing: the 'confessions' of the subject of criticism who falls into autobiography instead of criticism. Worse, this mode of critical practice proceeds as if the I-here-now that constitutes such a subject is constitutive of identity and not of difference. In this valorization of a critique that is essentially a modulation of identity-politics, we end up with a claim for a democracy that attends to individual acts of reading, but that does so in a purely formal and vacuous manner. Further, this 'democracy' believes that a social formation is made up arithmetically of the sum of its individual parts, whereas a society that is a genuine social formation is always geometrically formed as a structure that cannot be reduced to constituent elements in this simplified way.

In Benjamin, this reduction of the content of an object to its pure form might be used to explain the difference between the two versions of aesthetics in Joyce. Filled with content (the basket), friendship, communication and the socially historical become possible (Stephen and Lynch finding their common ground). Denuded of content, by contrast, and left as pure abstraction, friendship and the social – in sum, the grounds of our being or becoming historical – are denied (Stephen and Cranly).

When the objects of perception become formally equalized in this way, then so too do the subjects of perception; and this is what we see in the cultures of transparency. There can now be no perception better than any other, for the subjects of perception have themselves been abstracted from history. This gives us all a purely formal equality before the text, as it were, in a gesture that can only be described as a 'bogus democracy'. We are all now equally 'one' so to speak. Yet now, how would we evaluate and discriminate? How do we make judgements at all in such a case? More fundamentally still, how might we validate such judgements or give them a legitimacy that transcends 'my' own subjectivity?

However, if we are to establish community at all, in the sense of those historical and social friendships to which I have adverted above, then it follows that we must seek to persuade: we cannot accept the absolute relativity of all judgements, for to do so would be a denial of our historical and social being. Yet we lack the grounds – the zero – on which to formulate our separate 'ones'.

At this point, we reach one root of the mathematical politics here. The usual resolution of the problem is not one where we genuinely try persuasion by argument; rather, the majority wins out. We simply count those who have similar judgements and call the resulting majority view 'truth' or at least the authoritative or legitimized version. This, obviously, is not too far removed from the totalitarianism criticized in *1984*. One other name for this state of affairs, of course, is ideology. However, within humanistic studies, we have tended to confound it with 'democracy'. The problem, as we can now see courtesy of this detour via Benjamin, is that we have the *form* of democracy without any *content*.

A fuller reading of his essay reveals, further, that Benjamin identifies the condition in which we evacuate objects (and people, subjects) of their recalcitrant substantive content, replacing that content with the more easily manipulable vacuities of form, as a condition in which we are complicit with those forms of fascist thinking which, while acknowledging as Benjamin puts it that 'the masses have a right to change property relations', nevertheless see their fascist salvation 'in giving these masses not their right, but instead a chance to express themselves'.⁶⁹ Benjamin famously goes on to say that 'All efforts to render politics aesthetic culminate in one thing: war'; and, by analogy, all efforts to evacuate objects of their content and to evacuate the singularity of an aesthetic occasion of its content also culminate in this same thing.

Yet, in this final section of my argument, I want to revive the idea of an aesthetic that can drive politics: an aesthetic democracy. Our 'democracies', such as we know them, depend upon an arithmetical falsification, for they depend upon eliding the singularities of the various subjects whose voices can be 'counted'. In this, the formality of the count trumps the content of the vote, as it were. Instead of an arithmetical democracy, which has the defect that it elides historical content from the democratic act, we might start to consider the possibility of a redefinition of what constitutes a democratic relation among human subjects. In the light of foregoing chapters, such a relation might be thought of not just as an *intimacy* but a friendship or even a relation of love.

Love and friendship do not depend upon the confessing or telling of our loves, nor on the revelations of the contents of individualized consciences. Rather, both friendship and love are relations in which 1+1 does not ever arrive at 2 in any simple way. This is so because these relations give full regard to the absolute disjunction between the two 1s in the case. In friendship, neither one tries to subsume the other; instead, friendship is conditioned precisely by the constant awareness of alterity as such, while yet demanding greater and greater intimacy. In friendship, it is not the case that one 'confesses' oneself to another; rather, it is the case that the relation itself is conditioned by forms of *persuasion*, sometimes construed as seduction. In this case, therefore, the very fact of relatedness or friendship makes it possible for each several human subject within that relation to realize herself or himself precisely as a subject in the first place.

The resulting subject is marked by two things: a) the action of developing *as* a subject (the conversion of selfhood that we argued earlier is constitutive of the confessional act); and b) the ongoing demand for persuasion or change as a structural condition of the subject's emergence. From the first condition here, we have a subject marked not as a being (or identity) but as a becoming (or difference); and from the second condition, we have a subject that is necessarily structurally communal and in pursuit of freedom, in open pursuit of non-determination, in open pursuit of seeking to emancipate their others.

In this form of democracy, we acknowledge difference as well as unity. Indeed, for a thinker such as Touraine, democracy properly understood is that system that allows a society to be both one and diverse simultaneously. Democracy '*est définie par la combinaison de l'universel et du particulier*' (Democracy 'is defined by the combination of the universal and the particular'); and this, for Touraine, does not eventuate in any kind of homogenizing drive at all (that is to say, a resolution of the conflict individual-universal in favour of the universal) but rather results in what he calls a release of '*individus-sujets*' or subject-individuals.⁷⁰

Two things need explaining. First, the question of the aesthetics that lies behind this democracy, this regulation of the claims of individual and universal; and secondly, the nature of this '*sujet*', the nature of the subject of this new democratic condition, a democracy of action.

Aesthetics begins, at least in its modern formulations, precisely as a question of how we might regulate the competing claims of the individual and the universal, the particular and the universal, as a location for the perception of beauty and, behind that, of truth. Francis Hutcheson argued that the perception of beauty lies within the relation of what he called 'variety within uniformity' and vice versa. In this, he finds a quasi-mathematical foundation for aesthetics:

The figures which excite in us the ideas of beauty seem to be those in which there is *uniformity amidst variety* ... what we call beautiful in objects, to speak in the mathematical style, seems to be in compound ratio of uniformity and variety: so that where the uniformity of bodies is equal, the beauty is as the variety; and where the variety is equal, the beauty is as the uniformity⁷¹

Aesthetics then begins as a mathematical problem concerning the regulation of particular and general, variety and uniformity. What Hutcheson is trying to do here is to find a mode of legitimization of our statements regarding beauty: do we ground the truth or value of those statements on the individual (conscience) or upon the community (communication, discussion)? If based on the community (or the primacy of the uniform) then we eschew experience and give up on the idea that beauty is something that can be experienced or perceived by the individual subject as a condition of their living; if based on the individual (variety) then we eschew law and thereby suggest that beauty is so entirely in the eye of the beholder that we cannot seriously discuss it, or

its occasions and objects, for we have retreated into a solipsistic view in which there can be no possibility of deliberated agreements.

To maintain the proper democratic relations between law and experience, then, we need to find what is essentially an *aesthetic* basis for our democracy. The proper such basis, I claim, is that which releases as much variety as possible while still maintaining the necessity of law: that is to say, we need to maximize human experience but to do so in a fashion that acknowledges that experience has a grounding in law.

Law, in this, is not and cannot be grounded in a simple arithmetic majority. We do not vote on truth, as it were. Frege has already shown us that this is illegitimate for any such positing of a majority is based upon the ignoring of actual experience, of actual subjects, based on the evacuation of experience from the lived existence of those subjects.

What, then, is the nature of the subject of democracy? Arendt and Touraine would agree with the philosophy of a much earlier thinker, John Macmurray. Macmurray's entire philosophy was based upon the idea of the 'person in action'. True to a Scottish tradition of philosophy, he saw thought not as something abstract but rather as something practical. Further, the most serious way of validating action was in terms of its contribution to freedom, which he argued was something that not only 'has a higher value than happiness' but also 'is the defining character of man'.⁷² Interestingly, he describes the paradox of freedom in ways that are reiterated in some of the thinkers discussed earlier in this book. First of all, he points out that freedom is indeed 'conditioned' and is thus relative rather than absolute: it is an ever-ongoing negotiation between potentially unlimited technological advance and potentially always unsatisfied desire (given that our desires, insofar as we are human, always transcend our present condition or state). He describes this paradox as that which lies in the difficulty we find in being ourselves', reminiscent here of Rosenthal's description of Lowell above. Further, he traces this to St Paul whom he cites to the effect that "it doth not yet appear what we shall be" and he goes on in his own words, 'We are and yet are not ourselves; and in this is our freedom'⁷³. Our human nature is something not given as such, but rather something that we must fight for, or, as Touraine would have it in his description of the human subject:

J'appelle sujet la construction de l'individu (ou du groupe) comme acteur, par l'association de sa liberté affirmée et de son expérience vécue assumée et réinterprétée. Le sujet est l'effort de transformation d'une situation vécue en action libre; il introduit de la liberté dans ce qui apparaît d'abord comme des déterminants sociaux et un héritage culturel.

What I call a *subject* is the construction of the individual (or of the group) as an agent, by the association or its affirmed liberty and its lived experience that is both acknowledged and reinterpreted. The subject is the effort of transforming a lived situation into a free action; it introduces freedom into that which first of all appears to be social determinations or cultural heritage.

Or, more succinctly still, the subject '*est ce travail, jamais achevé, jamais réussi, pour unir ce qui tend à se séparer*' (the subject 'is this work, never completed, never achieved, to unite that which tends to atomization').⁷⁴

This subject of freedom, then, is both single and diverse, both individuated and communitarian at once. It is a one and a many; and it is a recognition that it is the many that allows for the possibility of the emergence of a one. Macmurray is helpfully clear on this:

Freedom is our nature. But our nature lies always beyond us, and has to be intended and achieved. The obstacle lies in our fear, and the craving for security which expresses it. So at every crisis we are faced with a free choice between freedom and security. If we choose security, and make that our aim, we lose freedom, and find in the end that security eludes us. If we choose freedom, then we are debarred from aiming at security; for that would mean imposing our bondage upon others.⁷⁵

In this, we see an attempt to persuade us to a generosity; and such a generosity not only acknowledges alterity as a founding condition for the subject, but also a founding condition for the possibility of freedom. Freedom is not that which is achieved by speaking in my own voice; rather, freedom requires the voice of the other, and a listening as well as a speaking. It is, as it were, a confession of community as such.

There is an example of the kind of thing I am arguing for here in the fully developed reading protocols of Hillis Miller, whose work is often marked precisely by an attention to singularities: to the singularity of the work of art, the singularity of the subject engaged with it, the singularity of the many diverse occasions of reading. The resulting 'democratic reading' is one that will not 'theorize' in the sense that it will not elide differences in the name of abstraction; but instead will maintain and even multiply differences, with all the attendant difficulties. The democracy that results is a kind of 'aesthetic democracy', depending upon a rigorous attention to the kinds of alterity invited by a meditation on the anomalous position of 'zero', upon its relation to any and every single 'one'. The persuasions effected between participants or readers here depend upon a respect for '*le tout autre*' (or 'completely other'), for a maintaining of their singularity, while yet also striving to effect what is an impossible possibility: communication between a 'one' and another 'one' who, in being disjunctive with respect to each other, cannot possibly add up to a '2'. The name that we usually give to such a relation, of course, is love (which, as Miller indicates, is another word for 'zero').⁷⁶

Consider Miller's readings of Johann David Wyss's *The Swiss Family Robinson*, described with great affection in his *On Literature*. There, we find someone with a basket not on their head (as in Joyce) but on their back. Miller describes one of his earliest memories 'of being carried in a "pack-basket" on my father's back on a camping trip with the rest of my family and another family to the Adirondack Mountains in northern New York State'.⁷⁷ It would

be only through legerdemain that I would claim that we have here taken Joyce beyond Joyce, as it were, in finding a content for that butcher-boy's basket; but it is as if the content of the basket, tumbling out as it is upturned, is nothing other than Hillis Miller himself, son not of a butcher but of a minister. Yet, in this 'addition' to the Joyce story, wherein I seek to give yet more content to the original object than was originally the case, I am following a beginning provided for me by Miller in his own beginning act of reading *The Swiss Family Robinson*.

Looking back at the text now, Miller finds that one of its defining characteristics is:

the way reader after reader has been so taken by the virtual reality *The Swiss Family Robinson* reveals that he or she feels authorized to extend the original with new episodes. It seems as if, once you are inside this alternative world, you can explore and record even those parts of it Wyss did not happen to write down, so powerful is the reader's persuasion of its independent existence⁷⁸

Addition and persuasion here are central to the singularity of the occasion of reading. Indeed, they are what constitute its singularity as an event. This, though, is an addition with substantive historical *content*, however ostensibly anecdotal or conventionally 'confessional' it may be; and, more importantly, it is a persuasion made in the interests of friendship (the families camping together), hospitality and the historical sociability to which we properly give the name 'democracy'.

Finally, then, let me return to *De l'art de persuader*. There, Pascal knows that:

quoi que ce soit qu'on veuille persuader, il faut avoir égard à la personne à qui on en veut, dont il faut connaître l'esprit et le Coeur, quels principes il accorde, quelles choses il aime

whatever it is that one wants to persuade someone about, it is necessary to have regard to the person who is to be persuaded, and you must be familiar with his mind and Heart, with what principles he holds to, what things he likes⁷⁹

Persuasion is always historical, always social, always partly demanded by the other; and, in fulfilling such a demand, it becomes possible for the subject to articulate their own 'becoming', their own historical mutability. A culture of transparency, in which all is supposedly revealed, is a culture of anti-democracy. It proposes, falsely, that the primary condition of human being is the interiority of a self-contained subject that is purely individuated, and whose 'freedom' is assured solely by the choice between revelation and concealment. The result becomes a society whose abased 'democracy' is founded upon a condition of an alleged equality, grounded in the rhetorical trope of a near-chiasmus: 'I'll show you mine if you show me yours'; and such a culture can only be based, in fact, upon inequality and shame. It is always unequal because of the preconditions

on which a human relatedness is based (the 'deal' between the two confessing selfhoods); it is shameful because it always presupposes that the interiority, if revealed, can only be humiliating.

Agamben, following Levinas, has refined our understanding of this kind of shame. He points out that Levinas had argued, in 1935, that shame 'does not derive ... from the consciousness of an imperfection or a lack in our being from which we take distance'. Rather, shame is in many ways precisely the opposite of this, deriving instead from what I called in earlier chapters a crisis of intimacy, but an intimacy of the self with the self, an intimacy that proclaims a full self-possession grounded in what must always be a false idea of self-coincidence. As Agamben has it, 'shame is grounded in our being's incapacity to move away and break from itself.'⁸⁰

Against this, we might usefully consider confession as an act that is primarily one of persuasion; but a persuasion whose impetus is to persuade us to a freedom, and a freedom that is necessarily conditioned by our always becoming, always differing, always releasing more and more diversity, always pursuing freedom – and above all, pursuing the freedom of the other. Confession is always, or should always be, about the release of the prisoners and perhaps, first and foremost, about the release of the self from the imprisonment of the culture of transparency. Behind the alleged transparent nudity of the self lies nothing, in fact; for the self is always preconditioned by its relations to other selves. As Beckett so rightly knew, there is, as it were, 'nothing to communicate', while there is also simultaneously an absolute demand to communicate. Confession, thus, is always the profession of a relation to alterity; and, properly understood, it is thus akin to love and to the democratic drive that shapes the very possibility of love, understood now as the elaboration of freedom.

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