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Witnessing and Literary Confession

Or, Confessing and Modernity: The Troubling Witness

In previous chapters, I have suggested that confession is an act of communication before it is a matter of conscience. This presupposes that a confession must be attended to or must be *witnessed*; and, further, given the importance of alterity to the construction of a self, the witness becomes a primary constituent of any confessional discourse. In this present chapter, I shall explore the role of witnessing and the function of testimony; and I shall concurrently advance further the argument relating to the question of whether it is ever possible to confess in one's own voice or whether the confessing 'I' must always be displaced on to an other person (both grammatically and substantively or ethically).

We can begin by looking at two literary examples of a confessional act, in writings by J.M. Coetzee and Seamus Deane; and we will then explore the questions thrown up by these examples in a more theoretical fashion. This latter will require some thought on the nature of translation and its effects on evidence. We will look briefly at a passage from confession of survival, Derrida's *Demeure*, and at a less familiar feuilleton by Robert Scheu, *Die Konversation in der Ehe*, where we can explore further the idea of confession being essentially akin to love.

Fictional testaments

In 2009, J.M. Coetzee published *Summertime*, a characteristically clever novel which, like a number of Coetzee's texts (especially, of course, *Boyhood* and *Youth*, the two earlier companion texts to *Summertime*), plays with the status of autobiography and character in fiction. The story is one involving a biographer who is putting together a volume detailing a key period in the life of one John Coetzee, a South African novelist whose life story matches fairly precisely the life story of J.M. Coetzee himself. At one level, this is characteristic of many late modern texts: the attention to a kind of hyper-reflexivity and self-consciousness, learnt from the moderns, that has the effect of leading us into

paradoxical thought. At another level, it is more serious than this: it addresses the question of what it might mean to tell the story of one's own life and, very specifically within that, to confess.

Near the end of the novel we find ourselves reading Coetzee's 'Notebooks: undated fragments'. In this section, by John Coetzee himself, we find what we must infer to be a clear act of confession. Although clear, the confession in question is neither direct nor straightforward, for in these 'Notebooks' Coetzee refers to himself in the third person. The confession is, as it were, displaced from the I to the he. The substance is as follows: after the Second World War, John Coetzee's father, who had been serving in Italy after the capitulation of Mussolini in 1944, had developed a 'newfound passion for opera'; and had bought a long-playing record of Renata Tebaldi singing various arias, especially arias from Italian opera. Coetzee himself preferred Bach, he tells us; and so there was a kind of musical war, between Tebaldi and Bach, between Italy and Germany and, of course, behind this between father and son. Then we find Coetzee's confession, in a voice displaced on to third-person narration:

One day, while no one was around, he took the Tebaldi record out of its sleeve and with a razor blade drew a deep score across its surface.

On Sunday evening his father put on the record. With each revolution the needle jumped. 'Who has done this?' he demanded. But no one, it seemed, had done it. It had just happened.¹

Thus, we are told, Bach triumphed over Tebaldi; and son over father. However, it is not as straightforward as that. For decades, Coetzee has felt remorse; and the confession recounted in *Summertime* represents a kind of unfinished business. The business is unfinished for the simple reason that, after the damage to the record, the father simply stopped listening to Tebaldi, even after the son, feeling guilt and shame, buys a new and unblemished record of her singing. In doing this, the father denies the son the possibility of redemption or of re-establishing a kind of economic balance between act and forgiveness; in ignoring the act, the father effectively precludes the possibility of Coetzee's confession having any efficacy or purchase on their relations. There is a kind of incompleteness in this confessional act. It is, as it were, something begun, but left hanging because of the father's disregard or refusal to witness the confession.

According to what I have already described as an economy that shapes a certain idea of confession, the act of confessing 'works' if and only if it is recognized, if and only if it is witnessed, as it were. When, as in this case, the ostensible required witness (the father) refuses to witness, then it follows logically that the speaker himself acts as a silent witness to his own voice. This partly explains that displacement from the I to the third-person narrative at work: J.M. Coetzee acts as witness to John Coetzee's confessional act in an effort to redeem him. In the refusal to witness adequately, the father in this case refuses to acknowledge his own pain and misery. The son's initial

act, intended to cause pain and suffering and to assert power and primacy within the relationship, is emptied of significance. However, the act has been committed and, unless and until its effect is recognized through an act of witnessing, it remains in a kind of historical vacuum or void, a now-time that lacks substance. This causes a literally untold misery in the son.

There is a parallel but different case in Seamus Deane's *Reading in the Dark* (published in 1996, just prior to the 1998 'Good Friday agreement' that heralded one proper attempt at starting a democratic organization for the north of Ireland). Again, in this novel, a father and son have a difficult relation. At the very heart of the novel, the son tries to assert his power and authority in a particularly nasty act that is parallel to that of Coetzee in its fundamental destructiveness. The son (the Deane figure) has brought shame on the family by appearing to collaborate with the police in June 1951. Threatened in the street by a gang who are going to beat him up, the son finds an escape by throwing a stone at a passing police car and thus drawing the attention of the police to what is going on. In the fraught and divided north of Ireland at the time of the novel's setting, this is a profoundly troubling thing to do. He has been forced into it essentially as an act of self-preservation; and the vindictiveness of the police ensures that his appeal to them for safety becomes fully apparent. However, the father's view is straightforward: the son should have taken a beating from his Protestant tormentors and the matter would now be over. By involving the police, he has brought shame and fear into the Catholic household.

The son tells his father that it is stupid to suggest that he should just have taken a beating; and, in a moment of fury at his insolence, the father strikes him: 'He hit me so fast, I saw nothing. My shoulder felt hot and broken. I got up, hating him ... My father looked at me, his face suddenly sad as well as angry. He was sorry he had hit me; but he wanted to hit me again.'² To ease his frustration the father goes out to prune and tend to the roses that he lovingly grows in the house's backyard. A short time later, in anger at his father's treatment of him, the son deliberately and savagely cuts down the rose bushes. In both this case and that of Coetzee, the assertion of filial identity depends upon a destruction of paternal identity. The Freudian and Oedipal aspect of this is less important, for present purposes, than the observation that, in both texts, the question of a necessary confession is tied to a breaking with the immediate forebear: the confession is called into play by a temporality that requires a breaking of the *Jetztzeit*, as it were.

In *Reading in the Dark*, the boy is exacting already what he thinks of as a kind of revenge on his father, who has struck him already for an act of insolence. The response of the father to the boy, after the roses are battered down with a spade and covered in concreting powder, is complex. First, the father tells the boy that he will be made to remember the act every day from now on. Next, with the help of some friends, he concretes over the entire yard where he used to grow the flowers. Now, every time the boy plays there, or

even walks there, he is reminded of his action: it becomes a kind of permanence of the moment, the cemented path a kind of monument or memorial. Later that same day, though, the boy lies in his room, half-asleep, and is disturbed by the realization that someone else is there in the room.

It was getting dark when I woke. Someone had touched me. I opened my eyes a slit, stared at the wallpaper and closed them again as my father bent over me. He kissed my hair. I slowly stiffened, from the toes up. In a moment, I would cough or cry; but the bed rose as his weight lifted, and I rose lightly with it, like a wave lifting. He thought I was still asleep. He whispered to himself something I didn't catch. The bedroom door closed and the stairs creaked their old familiar music as he went down.

That more or less ended it.³

The scene here depicts a love here that is not a forgiveness, but a kind of grace; and it depends upon the permanence of this *Jetztzeit*, the now-time of the savage act in the garden. Although we are told that 'that more or less ended it', we are also immediately reminded that the yard 'remained concreted' and that whenever the boy played on it or even walked on it after this time, it was 'like walking on hot ground below which voices and roses were burning, burning'.⁴ There is no excuse here; but, instead of a logic of accusation-exculpation, a logic of a capitalist economy, we have here another example of grace that disturbs such an economy. Here, though, the effect is salutary, in reminding us that the confession is, in a certain sense, not recognized: it is as unfinished, in its way, as that of Coetzee; and this is why it demands the typically stammered retelling or rehearsing in this fictional form.

The son is shocked by the generous grace of the act. By contrast, Coetzee is tormented by the non-recognition of his transgression; and that non-acknowledgement means that he is unable to confess directly, and that he has to have recourse to this fictionalized autobiography to do it. In the Coetzee case, the economy of confession is disrupted by a failure to recognize or witness the confession; in Deane, the economy is fractured by grace.

In his earlier *Youth*, Coetzee addresses also the fragility of any kind of confessional writing. Early on in the text, we hear of John's encounter with Jacqueline, the nurse who makes a sexual advance on him and then moves into his flat. He rapidly tires of her and one day comes home to find her about to leave, packing her bag in a fury. The trouble is that she has read the diary that he has been keeping, a diary that seems to comprise basically the pages that we ourselves have just read. John asserts his right to write and to confront what he calls the truth in that writing. However, there is a problem with the kind of confessing of the truth that he writes in a diary, a diary that is ostensibly meant for his own reading only:

who is to say that the feelings he writes in his diary are his true feelings? Who is to say that at each moment while the pen moves he is truly himself? At one moment

he might truly be himself, at another he might simply be making things up. How can he know for sure? Why should he even *want* to know for sure?⁵

In the next paragraph, we find him pondering why Jacqueline would believe him, given that 'he does not believe himself. He does not know what he believes.' This is one of the great paradoxes of the diarist, the confessional writer par excellence: we cannot know the truth of what we write. This is so because, as I have now amply demonstrated, confession is not a matter of conscience, it is instead a matter of communication; and the meaning of communication is never given by a solitary conscience, but is instead a product of the negotiated linguistic exchange. As Coetzee writes in the same passage from which I have just quoted him, 'when all is said and done, the fact remains that his first try at living with a woman has ended in failure, in ignominy'. This, the fact, is what constitutes the 'truth', not the materials stated in the diary: the failure of the relation is, as it were, the event that constitutes truth here; and that is a social matter.

These fictional tales, both of them marked by autobiographical impulse, set up the question of confession in relation to judgement, justice and witnessing. It is this that I want to address in this chapter. In what follows, I shall attempt to link confessing to modernity; and, perhaps not entirely obviously, my way into this will be via the question of translation. Although this is not immediately obvious, it should become clear that it is relevant as soon as we remind ourselves that confession is primarily an act of communication and not a prioritization of a conscience that communes with itself in some entirely interiorized realm of being. Translation, in fact, becomes a paradigm case of confession. It involves the speaking in a displaced voice; it involves a communication between different tongues, and all the struggles that ensue given such a lack of immediacy (or of unmediated transparency); and it involves a certain logic of love and of grace as a determinant of the equalities required for democracy in our relations to have any material substance.

Translation and witnessing

If modernity means anything, it implies making a break with the immediate past, a break that will allow for an alignment between the present and a more archaic origin, a more distant past. It is fundamentally an act of transformation and is thus akin to confession construed as an act that is constituted by a fundamental conversion. It is a kind of shot across the *Jetztzeit*, as it were; and in these cases just discussed, the question at stake is the relation between the now-time of the son and the immediate past of the father.

But in this, a new question of economy arises, akin to the structure of 'owing' that we saw at work in Esposito's version of the *communitas*. In this case, the economics derives from the temporal relation: to what is the now-time of the

present indebted and where does it find its grace or its possibility of advancing to futurity? There is a politics to this as well; and it depends upon the matter of testimony and surveillance. It is this that will form the cornerstone of my investigation of witnessing here.

The witness is the one who can say, 'I was there.' Yet, as witness, this subject cannot themselves be directly engaged in the action to which they bear witness. That is to say: the witness must have been there, but at the same time must also have been somehow distanced from the act being confessed. We see this enacted clearly in Coetzee's example. It is a confession told in the third person: 'he did this'; and that converts the confession into a witness testimony.

Agamben is helpful here. He considers the notion of the witness as martyr. As is commonly known, the Greek word *martis* means both martyr and witness: to be a martyr is to bear witness to a faith, in these terms. Agamben points out not only that martyrdom and witnessing are linked, but also indicates that there is an act of memorization going on here, an act that works across time, for the Greek term *martis* derives from a verb meaning 'to remember'. In his consideration of Auschwitz, he discusses a certain kind of 'impossibility' of testimony.

His argument rests on the figure of the 'Muselmann' (literally 'Muslim') in the camps. He writes that the most likely explanation of this nomenclature 'can be found in the literal meaning of the Arabic word Muslim: the one who submits unconditionally to the will of God'.⁶ In the camps, the *Muselmänner* were those who could be defined by 'a loss of all will and consciousness'.⁷ They occupied a kind of interstitial state between living and death, or between the human and the inhuman, as Agamben prefers to term it. This is an important figure for the question of testimony and witnessing.

The argument goes that the witness of what actually went on in Auschwitz, the one who can testify in all truth to the fatal acts there, is, by definition, dead. Those who survive are, again of necessity, at a small remove from the central atrocity,⁸ and, thus removed or distanced, they cannot testify: they 'were not there', as it were. However, Agamben (obviously horrified at the banality of this argument) goes on to point out that we are essentially here in the presence of two types of testimony. Testimony, he writes, invokes two modes of subjectivity, two different subjects. Firstly, there is the survivor, 'who can speak but who has nothing interesting to say'; but secondly, there is this figure of the 'Muselmann', the man who 'has touched bottom' or, in the terms from my earlier arguments above, the 'man at point zero', and who therefore 'has much to say but cannot speak'.⁹ The question of witnessing relates, therefore, to both survival *and* to the necessity of finding the voice of another in which the events witnessed can be narrated. That is to say: the question of witnessing depends upon an act of *translation* in which a voice of another speaks and allows that which has happened to be re-presented.

To advance this case further, I will repeat (in a kind of stammering of beginnings, as it were) something that I already said in the last chapter: I will begin with a beginning that is not my own, and a beginning that is in translation and that speaks of translation. Here is a brief passage from Derrida's *Demeure*, a text that is both an act of a certain confession and of a testimony that witnesses the self surviving its own death:

This instant, at this very instant, I am speaking French, we are speaking French. This is a testimony. And this instant, as I am saying this, I pass and I have already passed from *I* to *you*. I am speaking French, we are speaking French. I can only say I am speaking French if it is assumed, as soon as I speak, this instant, in this very instant, that someone here, now, at least someone is able to understand this language that I call and is called French, and is able to form from the outset a *we* with the one who is speaking here this instant, with me, consequently.¹⁰

'I am speaking French, we are speaking French.' This is a testimony. In translation, it is a false testimony; and yet it is a false testimony to an event that, at the time when it was spoken, was true. '*Je parle français, nous parlons français*' is what Derrida said (if we believe him, of course). There is here, in the act and fact of translation, a problem concerning time. As in any confessional writing, there is that odd temporal narrative disjunction between two moments: the moment when the act is committed, and the moment when the confession of that act is pronounced. Although both are governed by an 'I', the 'I' in the case must be marked by an internal fracture or difference, and that difference is a kind of conversion. In this, the confessional I becomes the site, if you will, of *translation as such*. The translation occupies the position of the I that confesses; and the text translated occupies that of the original sin, the original act or transgression. Further, the text translated is said not for the first time, even if it attests to something happening for the first time. Translation is the site of an encounter, and in this kind of case, it is an encounter between an event that happens for the first time and (if you will) the second time of its happening for the first time. It thus calls into question the singularity of any event, and bears witness to something that *is* and *is not* true at the same time.

Not all encounters, especially those happening for the first time and in an international or translational (inter-lingual or trans-lingual) context, are encounters between equals. Landfall studies make it clear that those whose feet fall upon the land that has been trodden for years by others is often the more powerful foot, against which the native has to kneel, or before which the indigene is made to lay not a foot but a knee. This is so, further and perhaps especially so, precisely in encounters across time, between an I-then and an I-here-now. The I, translated across time, becomes problematic, as in the context of *Demeure*, say, the context of a survival and a witnessing of the self as it confesses and that thus survives its own death.

Things and persons, that is, can be brought together in ways that might even resemble an erotic encounter (as in the history of comic fiction, of course) but

as with many such encounters in an international context, the parties are not always equally free parties to the encounter. English can be brought together with India, and with Indian literature, for example; or Spain can be brought together with a certain 'Latin America'. I am inviting here questions regarding the status of translation; but I wish to hear the term in at least two ways: firstly, as meaning the use of a language that is not my own or my first, but that I use *as if for the first time*; secondly, as a word that involves *transformation*. At this point, we need also to bear in mind that I have already shown how any confessional text has to be a *conversion* narrative; and here I want to widen the idea of conversion to that of transformation.

I have argued in previous pages that there is, especially in any text related to confessional discourse, a problem regarding experience. What is the nature of *literary* experience? Experience as such, we usually intuitively claim, is a deep marker of the self, even to the point of being constitutive of the self. Character, we think, is nothing more or less than the sum of experiences that accrue to a particular individuated body. Experience, thus, is what makes 'me' different from 'you'; and yet, oddly, for an experience to be an experience in material terms, it must also be shared. Experience always involves a relation between a world construed as interiority and that construed as exterior to that interiority: self and other, in an older vocabulary. This is especially so in the kind of encounter of which I will write here, the literary textual encounter that constitutes the event of reading.

Perhaps paradoxically, it is the most intimate of experiences that we assume must be shared, such as love. On one hand, then, experience is what brings the self into an intimacy with itself, assuring the self of an identity and thus severing it from contact with the exterior world. It is intensely and constitutively private. Yet, at the same time, it is in experience that the self that engages with the world 'confers' with the self that knows about or that witnesses such an engagement. Experience is, in fact, that term that we use to describe such a conferring, a conference or a relation. This is another, but very different way, in which we see the kind of *dédoublement* of the self that de Man saw in his analysis of Baudelaire.

Yet literary experience is also, first and foremost, a linguistic experience or an engagement with language. I began earlier with a question concerning translation; and I want here to develop that thinking a little. The example that I advanced – 'I am speaking French, we are speaking French' – was one involving what Derrida called a testimony; and it was a testimony, as I indicated, that was at once both true and false. It is an intriguing example in that when it was said for the first time, it was said differently – *je parle français, nous parlons français* – and it was true; when it is heard by us, received by us, 'read' by us, it is in these different translated words – through words that are semantically equivalent – and yet it is false. The reading or translation falsifies the testimony. Is that what is involved in all reading? It is an act of translation that falsifies a testimony?

It is useful here to turn to Theodor Adorno. In 1959, Adorno wrote a small piece, 'Wörter aus der Fremde' ('Words from abroad'), for a radio broadcast (for Hessischer Rundfunk). In it, he defended himself against his detractors and especially against those who had criticized him for his alleged fascination with 'words from abroad'. His case is that what irritates people who complain about 'foreign linguistic imports' is not the fact that foreign words are being used; rather, what they find troublesome is that they are being asked to comprehend *ideas* that are outside of their usual linguistic range of reference. That is to say, they are afraid, according to the logic of the Adorno talk, of the new *experience* of thinking that is invited by the words. Adorno thinks back to his own youthful fascination with words from abroad, and he explains it thus:

the fact that we happened upon foreign words in particular was hardly due to political considerations. Rather, since language is erotically charged in its words, at least for the kind of person who is capable of expression, love drives us to foreign words ... The early craving for foreign words is like the craving for foreign and if possible exotic girls; what lures us is a kind of exogamy of language, which would like to escape from the sphere of what is always the same, the spell of what one is and knows anyway. At that time foreign words made us blush, like saying the name of a secret love. National groups who want one-dish meals even in language find this response hateful.¹¹

In this passage – a passage in which he 'confesses' his craving for girls – Adorno makes explicit the relation between translation and a certain kind of erotic intimacy. The experience of the foreign word, like the experience of an erotic encounter, transforms the self, allowing it to escape from 'the sphere of what is always the same' into a mode of difference, transformation.¹²

I can introduce a final text here that will allow us to explore this issue of translation and testimony more fully. Sometime around 1920, Robert Scheu published a short text, *Die Konversation in der Ehe* (*Conversation in Marriage*). In his splendid introduction to his translation of this piece, Gilbert Carr astutely matches the business of translation directly on to 'the themes of erotic attraction and spiritual communion' that are actually contained in the narrative within the text. A text about conversation in marriage becomes also a text about translation or about the marriage of conversation in different voices, different tongues. For our present purposes, it also becomes a text about confession. If confession is communication before conscience, as I have been arguing, this text gives us an example of a specific kind of communication, in conversation. Conversation becomes a kind of bond between at least two people in a 'polar relationship of two beings, which conversation does not so much develop anew as make manifest'; and, as Scheu puts it:

When two people of the opposite sex observe such a polarity in themselves, that magical power which conversation has cast over them, they are at that point already in an intimate, erotic relationship, even if they do not at all care to admit it to themselves, even, indeed, if they consciously resist it.¹³

We might notice in this language a foreshadowing of D.H. Lawrence, who will also write at length about the polarity that constitutes love and erotic desire; but more importantly for present purposes, we should note that it is conversation, construed as a dialogue between two individuals whose dialogue *constitutes* the ostensible revelation of their souls, as it were. That is to say: confession here is a matter of communication, certainly; but it is also a communication that constitutes the very experience or possibility of love.

These cases all effectively recast a certain Kant. Kant makes a distinction between two modes of judgement, which are actually two modes of thinking. The first, which he calls determining judgement, is the kind of judgement that we make when our judgements are governed by rules or criteria. These might be rules such as those that shape Montaigne's idea of law in 'De l'expérience', as we saw in my opening chapter. Agamben offers a useful contemporary gloss on this when he points out that,

As jurists well know, law is not directed toward the establishment of justice. Nor is it directed toward the verification of truth. Law is solely directed toward judgement ... The ultimate aim of law is the production of a *res judicata*, in which the sentence becomes the substitute for the true and the just, being held as true despite its falsity and injustice.¹⁴

Another way we have of expressing this is in terms of the predilection for conformity with ideology in our judgements: a refusal, as Adorno would see it, to entertain the possibility of a new and perhaps exotic thought.

The second mode, which Kant calls reflective judgement, is that which happens when we are called upon to make a judgement, *but without rules or criteria* – as in judging whether a painting is beautiful, say, or as in judging whether or not to continue with an erotic relationship. The first kind of judgement, made in conformity with a rule and designed to consolidate it, gives us back the world that we already knew; the second, by contrast, forces us to expand our consciousness, to shape the world anew, to think of the world differently and from the point of view of another (or of the self-become-another). The former, in short, takes us back into our own conscience; the latter makes a virtue of the fact of our communications with each other and the necessity, therefore, of attending to the other: listening in the conversation that constitutes marriage, as it were.

In literary terms, this Kantian opposition is the difference between a criticism that is organized around a politics of identity and one that is organized around a politics of difference. Reading according to a politics of identity is a reading that will confirm our already existing prejudices about the world, a reading that will validate our everyday experience (but only an experience without content); reading according to a politics of difference is uncomfortable, in that it offers – or forces us to have – a new experience. This latter is the 'exogamy of language;' of which Adorno writes.

Thus, literary experience – writing and reading – becomes experience if and only if it is an act of translation. If we widen this, we can say that literary experience necessitates transformation; and if we narrow it back to our present concern, confession is always necessarily translation.

Blanchot helps us advance this further. For Blanchot, literature was firmly tied to what he called ‘the right to death’; and a way of understanding this is to see that writing involves us in a paradox:

a person who wishes to write is stopped by a contradiction: in order to write, he must have the talent to write. But gifts, in themselves, are nothing. As long as he has not yet sat down at his table and written a work, the writer is not a writer and does not know if he has the capacity to become one. He has no talent until he has written. But he needs talent in order to write.¹⁵

Blanchot’s writer here is precisely in the position of one who would confess: the problem is how to begin, as we have seen. Trying to make sense of the paradox, Blanchot offers an analogy with the primitive man who builds a stove or oven. The person who does this transforms certain raw materials (wood, iron, say) into a new thing, and a new thing that can do much more than the untransformed raw materials could ever have done. He has added to the world; and had added a certain potentiality. As Blanchot has it, the building of the stove ‘affirms the presence in the world of something which was not there before, and in so doing, denies something which was there before’.

More importantly still, however, the making of the stove transforms the conditions and being of its maker as well, for the resulting heat ‘will also make me someone different’: where I was cold, I am now warm. Writing, argues Blanchot, is the scene of this kind of transformation writ large and aid bare, and the book that the writer makes ‘is precisely myself become other’.¹⁶ This is exactly akin to the position that we have seen in a poet such as Lowell, for whom confessional writing was a process in which he catches himself in the process of becoming himself, as Rosenthal described it.

Thus, the making of the stove is like the procedure of beginning that we see described by Arendt, a process that aligns transformation and freedom. It is an act of inauguration in which the subject makes themselves, but makes themselves by transforming themselves (displacing their person, as it were), and in which simultaneously they assert a freedom. Yet it is also an act of inauguration that does one further significant thing: in transforming the self, it retroactively and paradoxically also creates an original self that was in need of transformation. This is exactly like that mode of expression or conversation that I describe as integral to confessing. Confessing is itself a beginning act; but it has to be a communication and not something that originates from within a discrete conscience. Rather, it creates that conscience through the act of confessional communication in the first place. In doing so, we also get an act of translation: the translation, however, is not just that

which goes on between two speakers trying to understand each other; rather, it is a translation of the entire arrangement in which the two find themselves in the first place. It is a *Konversation in der Ehe* that makes of the marriage a new thing.

Reading, a process in which the self becomes other, is always this mode of translation: always a displacement of the self that constructs the possibility of a freedom and a relation with alterity. Properly done, reading is always an encounter with foreign words. It is an act that bears witness to a self that can no longer be there; and in this regard, it is also a witnessing of the voices of the dead.

Witnessing the dead

At this stage, we have a number of interlocking strands in our argument. First, reading can be described as ‘precisely myself become other’; and in this regard, it is a procedure in which the voice of the self is displaced on to other voices, other persons. Next, we have confession as a mode of writing in which the self somehow paradoxically appears to survive its own death. Third, this relates explicitly to witnessing, a witnessing that involves memorization or memorial of that which has gone before. Finally, the witness is those who testify, but who testifies as from a kind of median position (like an interpreter or translator) between what Agamben called the survivor and the ‘Muselmann’, between one who can speak without substance and one who cannot speak the substance that constitutes the bare self or self at a point zero.

We should now seek to bring these strands together yet more tightly; and we can begin from translation and reading the voices of the dead. Literary modernism has made much of this. While it is the case that a common sense tells us that, in the usual course of things, we cannot ‘encounter’ our own death as a kind of material experience, we do frequently encounter the dead; and we sometimes call that encounter ‘literature’. Consider, for example, the opening of Eliot’s *The Waste Land*. When Eliot opens that text by writing that ‘April is the cruellest month’, he is ‘translating’ (and, of course substantially transforming, even reversing) Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* for us; and his text ‘converses’ in a kind of marriage with Chaucer’s opening (‘Whan that Aprille with his shoures soote / The droghte of Marche ...’). Eliot bears witness to the ghost of Chaucer, whose testimony regarding the nature of April is transformed. This is exactly like Derrida’s ‘I am speaking French’, a text and testimony transformed through translation – or simply through reading.

This, however, is not at all unusual as a literary operation. In fact, it is essentially normative and thus constitutive of our reading act itself. Our encounter with all and any literature, I shall now claim, is precisely such a witnessing of death, a bearing of witness to the testimony of the dead, the dead

who are the limit-point of experience. However, for this to be the case, we need as readers to be open to the possibility of the encounter itself: we need to constitute identity through a transformative conversation that may reveal or confess (and thus retroactively construct) our self.

To write is to be in intimacy with death in a certain sense; and to read is to bear witness not only to the fact of our own impending death, but also to bear witness to the testimony of those who have gone before. We can advance this further, bearing in mind the issue of translation that I have raised here. Consider Jorge Luis Borges, who will in some ways make this a theme of some of the stories in his *Labyrinths*. In 'Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*', we are presented with what is essentially a parable of reading itself. Pierre Menard sets himself the task of writing *Don Quixote*, the great text by the long-dead Cervantes. The task is unfinished, but perfect as far as it goes: 'Needless to say, he never contemplated a mechanical transcription of the original; he did not propose to copy it. His admirable intention was to produce a few pages which would coincide – word for word and line for line – with those of Miguel de Cervantes.'¹⁷

Yet this, of course, is in one way a perfect description of Menard actually *reading* the *Quixote*. The reading act here operates exactly like an act of translation; but the point that Borges makes here is that writing itself is always already an act of translation in any case.

Let us turn, though, to a more explicitly confessional text in Borges, 'The Shape of the Sword'. This is a confessional text, but it is anything but straightforward. As in Heaney, it is a stammering confession that needs to be re-read once one arrives at the end; and it is written in a fashion that is full of potential error and marked by a fundamental displacement of person. It is the story of 'the Englishman from La Colorada' who, it turns out, is not English but Irish. The Irishman tells the tale of how he got his facial scar, a kind of crescent-moon shape across his face; and he tells it in polyglot manner, in a Spanish that is rudimentary, cluttered with Brazilian and Portuguese, and in one brief but important moment, French.

The tale is a one of betrayal. This English-Irishman tells Borges of his history as a republican in the fight for Irish independence. His group is joined by one John Vincent Moon, who is presented as a Marxist and a theorist: that is to say, Moon is a Marxist who fears the material history that involves fighting and action, preferring books and, at a crucial turn in the tale, the telephone. The Irishman recounts the story of how, one evening, he saw an example of Moon's fear and cowardice. Walking late one night, Moon and the Irishman-narrator are confronted by a soldier. Standing petrified, Moon takes what turns out to be a superficial wound in the shoulder. Our Irishman says that 'This frightened man *mortified* me, as if I were the coward, not Vincent Moon'¹⁸ (stress added). That is to say, this frightened man effectively brought the Irishman into a proximate intimacy with death itself, and in such a way as to transform one

man into another, the Irishman into Moon. At this point, the Irishman offers a philosophical gloss on such a situation:

Whatever one man does, it is as if all men did it. For that reason it is not unfair that one disobedience in a garden should contaminate all humanity; for that reason it is not unjust that the crucifixion of a single Jew should be sufficient to save it. Perhaps Schopenhauer was right: I am all other me, any man is all men, Shakespeare is in some manner the miserable John Vincent Moon.¹⁹

We come close here, in this quasi-philosophical interruption of the narrative, to the core of the matter. It will turn out, in fact, that the Irishman is John Vincent Moon himself: he has 'displaced' or *translated* his confession from a first- to a third-person narrative; and, oddly, this makes theoretical sense, if we accept the logic that says that the narrator of a confession is distanced from – translated from, and transformed from – the person who committed the acts that are being confessed. The tale has been told from the point of view – and indeed in the very voice of – the man who has been betrayed and shot by the British. That is to say, the tale is told by a man who is proximate to death; and the telling of the tale is an enactment of betrayal as well, precisely *because of* its confessional nature. One can confess only the fault of another; literature (and especially literary confession) is the self-become-other.

The testimonial confession here is at once true and false: true when it is spoken for the first time, false when it is translated. This is not the first time that the tale has been told. We know, if we return to the opening of the story, that it has been told already, to one Cardoso; and that that was how the English-Irishman came to be here, owning the fields to which Borges has come, this very night.

As in the case of Menard, reading/writing the *Quixote*, the reader of this tale is also thus translated in their act of bearing witness (or simply listening). A kind of chain of translations is set up: Cardoso becomes Borges; Borges becomes the reader; the reader becomes everyone. As in the brief moment of philosophizing, all other men are me. I am foreign. I exist only in translation, even for the first time, between Spanish and Brazilian, Portuguese and French, British and Irish. Literature translates its reader and its writer; or, more fully expressed now, confession *allows one thereby to survive our own death; and it is thus a testimony to our having been there*. To write is to be in intimacy with death in a certain sense; and to read is to bear witness not only to the fact of our own impending death, but also to bear witness to the testimony of those who have gone before.

When Adorno spoke of his love for foreign words as an exogamy of language, it is this that he meant. The foreign word – as most explicitly in the voices of others, the voices especially of the dead – is a kind of event, disrupting the categories of our stale thinking, of the mentality that we have been given by a language with which we are all too familiar. The foreign word forces us to

listen, as if for the first time; and this is what we call witnessing. If literature can be thought of in this way, as the site where we stage the death of the self, it is also the site of testimony. For it is here that we bear witness to our own death, to ourselves become ghostly: we are like Stransom in 'The Altar of the Dead', the James story I discussed earlier. We survive in the text as the record of our transformation: the text is our confession, and we need a listener, a confessor.

Listening, uttering: the question of evidence

If confessing is always displaced, then what might we say of witnessing the confession, in the sense of hearing it or just listening to it, 'attending' to it? The scene I have in mind to explore this is *King Lear*, Act 4, Scene 1, where Poor Tom witnesses the suicidal Gloucester in a near-death scene. Poor Tom says:

O gods! Who is't can say 'I am at the worst'?
 I am worse that e'er I was ...
 ... And worse I may be yet: the worst is not
 So long as we can say 'this is the worst'.

Here, saying 'this is the worst' is, of necessity, according to Poor Tom, a false testimony. If we can continue to speak – if literature survives – then we are not yet at death, not yet at the end, not yet at the worst or the point zero that has been reached by the figure of the 'Muselmann'. Yet the scene is more complex than this suggests. Poor Tom is, of course, not Poor Tom: he is Edgar transformed or translated; and Gloucester's death does not yet take place.

The entire scene resembles a Catholic confession, as recounted by Heaney in 'The Pattern' discussed earlier. The annual requirement for Catholic confession was set and established at the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215; and the scene here more or less accurately figures what that Council had put in place. Tom here is in the position of the confessor (like the priest who is and is not himself), Gloucester that of the confessant, revealing his innermost self to one whom he cannot see, and then doing a kind of penance (that imagined suicide) which for a moment at least purges and cures him, absolves him. Edgar here is not himself; rather, he appears – or, better still, *disappears* – into the figure of Poor Tom. It is as if witnessing, such as takes place in this literary confession, requires such a distance in which the confessor – and here we can substitute the term 'reader' – must distance themselves from themselves if they are to gain access to an experience that is truly recounted or narrated. This scene thematizes that distancing from the self, that transformation of the self, that is of the essence of the literary experience; and that experience is now, paradigmatically, the confessional experience.

As I have previously argued, there is a peculiar sense in which a confessional text cannot be unproblematically true. For example, given that Augustine's *Confessions* is a text that narrates a conversion, then the Augustine who signs it is not the Augustine who lived the story that he tells as the story of his life. The very act of writing transforms him; and he ponders explicitly what it might mean to say the words of a confession, or to write them, as opposed merely to communing directly with God in his thoughts.

It is in Book X, Chapter 3, of his *Confessions* – written obviously long before the Lateran Council – that Augustine asks himself what might be the point of confession and, more directly, the point of his writing this text. Why, he asks, does it matter if I speak my confessions aloud to other people? How would those people, his readers, know that he is speaking or writing the truth, he asks, and he quotes from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians: how do they know whether I am telling the truth, since no one *knows a man's thoughts, except the man's own spirit that is within him*'. In this Book of the *Confessions*, a book in which he famously confronts the conundrum of time, he asks:

what does it profit me ... to make known to men in your sight, through this book, not what I once was, but what I am now? ... many people who know me, and others who do not know me but have heard of me or read my books, wish to hear what I am now, at this moment, as I set down my confessions. They cannot lay their ears to my heart, and yet it is in my heart that I am whatever I am.²⁰

Here, we see confession as determined by communication; but it is a communication that can never be direct, given that it is a communication across time. Such communication, of course, is literature: a writing as from the dead to the living.

However, we are also seeing something else going on in these passages. Firstly, we see a kind of demand for utterance: the requirement to confess aloud. Secondly, however, we also see a real uncertainty about the status of confession, especially confession that is (as I have argued) necessarily done in voices other than that of the self. In the introduction to his *Troubling Confessions*, Peter Brooks adverts to the legal case concerning Bill Clinton and Monica Lewinsky in 1998. The editorial of the *New York Times* of 12 December that year was, in the words of Brooks, 'a plea for Clinton "to say the words" – that he had lied under oath'. The editorial was pointing out that 'there could be no true contrition, and thus no pardon and no reconciliation, until Clinton said "the words," until he explicitly gave public utterance to the statement: "I lied."'²¹

As Brooks makes fully clear, however, the story could not ever end just there. Quite apart from the Cretan liar paradox that sits at the base of this particular confessional statement, there are other reasons for uncertainty:

Unless the content of the confession can be verified by other means, thus substantiating its trustworthiness, it may be false – false to fact, if true to some sense of guilt. The law records many instances of false confessions – and no doubt many have gone unrecorded. What is the truth of confession?²²

As I have argued in these pages, however, truth (considered as some kind of correspondence to fact) is actually less important here than something else: evidence itself. Let us then pose the question concerning the nature of evidence, or of testimony, in relation to confession as a communicative act.

At one level, we expect evidence to substantiate and to corroborate ‘a truth universally acknowledged’, so to speak. If it works to establish such a truth – that is, if it substantiates something that is essentially ‘self-evident’ or self-evidencing’ – then can it become something that is so taken for granted that it requires no further gloss or commentary; and if so, how close is it to ideology? In a court of law, evidence is that which is admitted in order to prove a case or a proposition. For instance, in the propositional statement: ‘I accuse you of killing this individual’, I might educe in evidence your fingerprints on a gun, a bullet-wound in an individual corpse and a forensic demonstration that shows incontrovertibly that this gun fired this bullet. These would be evidences in that they are themselves objective facts or singular states of affairs from which we can make implications or draw inferences.

W.V. Quine finds the nature of evidence such as this troubling, and, essentially, he replaces it with what he calls ‘observation sentences’. Such sentences might be, in his examples, ‘It’s raining’ or ‘That’s a rabbit’. Sentences like these he refers to as ‘occasion sentences’: they are true on some occasions and false at others. After all, sometimes it is raining and sometimes not, as he puts it. Then he gets to the core of our question here: ‘Briefly stated, then, an observation sentence is an occasion sentence on which speakers of the language can agree outright on witnessing the occasion.’ He will then add to this, first by claiming that observation sentences ‘are the link between language ... and the real world that language is all about’; before finally getting to the main issue for us: ‘An observation sentence for a community is an occasion sentence on which members of the community can agree outright on witnessing the occasion.’²³

This last refinement makes it clear that evidence is linked to two things: the first is a community and the second is instantaneity or a moment in time. With respect to the first of these, we have already argued that confession being a matter primarily of communication must also therefore be a matter pertaining to the construction of a community. It is a community that confesses, and that thereby produces individuals as such in a retrospective construction of the unreformed and untransformed self, the self that needed the confession for redemption in the first place. Further, the community in question is therefore understood to be made up of speech negotiations (or literature) and not of individuated consciences. The Borges tale just analysed shows this; and the earlier Coetzee and Deane examples indicate that this happens not only in a political context but rather, more forcefully, that it is actually constitutive of that political context. Confession constructs the community, but these are in a dialectic that constitutes the self that we recognize as the very foundational cornerstone of cultural modernity itself. With regard to the second point, the

issue of truthful evidence becomes problematic, we have seen, as long as it happens in time: truth, in these terms, is of the moment. Perhaps we need therefore to ditch the idea of truth and to settle instead for evidence, in what will necessarily be something of a lesser formulation.

In my hypothetical example, I might say that undeniably ‘this is your fingerprint’; and undeniably, ‘this is a bullet-wound containing traces of a bullet fired from the gun that bears your prints’. From these two observation sentences, we can then imply a narrative that allows us to say, ‘You pulled this trigger and fired this bullet from this gun into this body, causing death. That is, I accuse you of murder’; but the ‘I’ in this case needs to be ‘all men’ as Borges has it, a community or society that requires this guilt for whatever set of reasons. This is problematic if the accused denies the sentences. In that case, either they indicate that they are not a member of the community, or they imply that there is another community that can be organized around different observation sentences.

The question here really pertains to the relation between two phrases: ‘I accuse’ and ‘I confess’. I have indicated that there is a kind of economy at work in confession; and I used the examples of Deane and Coetzee to indicate this or, more precisely, to indicate its failure. Essentially, my argument is that ‘there is no excuse’. If this is so, then the appropriate response to a confession turns out to be something akin to grace. In many cases, we behave as if confession closes the case, closes the deal, as it were. That is to say: a wrong is done and reparation comes when the response to the ‘I accuse’ is an uttered ‘I confess’, in some sort of balanced economy. However, in that case, the confession falls precisely into the kind of paradox drawn by de Man in his reading of Rousseau – *qui s’accuse s’excuse* – and the confession undoes itself by fulfilling the economic demand placed on it through the *j’accuse*. As Brooks puts it:

Confession of wrongdoing is considered fundamental to morality because it constitutes a verbal act of self-recognition as wrongdoer and hence provides the basis of rehabilitation. It is the precondition of the end to ostracism, re-entry into one’s desired place in the human community ... Refusal of confession can be taken as a defiance of one’s judges ... whereas confession allows those judges to pass their sentences in security, knowing that the guilty party not only deserves and accepts but perhaps in some sense wants punishment, as the penance that follows confession.²⁴

This is a form of legal confession that presupposes and accepts the presiding idea of cultural modernity: that the self is autonomous, that it chose to do the action it did and that it exists entirely independently of the society upon which it exerted the act. The argument of the present book is designed to counter virtually all of this. Further, the argument of this book helps explain the more general tendency now towards a kind of acceptance, in grace, of guilt.

I pointed out above that we have a problem if an accused denies the observation sentences of his accuser. We have the possibility that either

the accused belongs to a different community organized around different observation sentences or that they are simply not a member of the community that makes the observation sentences. In short, we have the situation of a kind of *apartheid* here. The 'solution' to that problem is not to be found in the covert acts of economic and moral revenge that goes under the name of 'reparation'; rather, the solution is the discovery of new conversations, new observation sentences, that will allow both for truth (an acknowledgement of things that were done) and also for reconciliation, without the economy of modern 'justice', a justice that turns out to be not modern at all but rather more indebted to Old Testament versions of vengeance (the perfect match of eye for eye, tooth for tooth). This is the meaning of the truth and reconciliation committee. There is no excuse; but there is, instead, the attempt at the construction of a new community, a new time.

Evidence nonetheless has some intimacy with truth, and to what Davidson calls a correspondence theory of truth.²⁵ In this, evidence is meant to display the nature of the facts of a case in such a way as to yield one and only one possible version of material fact; and the fact has to be considered as both true and truly understood by all parties to the case. Yet, as we know from literary criticism, fact always gives way to interpretation, and to interpretation based upon the 'one' or the point of view. In short, evidence has a relation to the disappearing God that has made itself apparent again: the zero becomes one, as it were. Evidence is tied firmly to *display*, or to the 'self-evidencing' that we have already explored under the sign of 'transparency'.

At this point, we should turn to Rousseau, though not to his *Confessions*. In the 1750s, Rousseau established himself as a public figure through his first two great discourses, the *Discours sur les sciences et les arts* and the *Discours sur l'origine et les fondements de l'inégalité parmi les hommes*.²⁶ In these discourses, Rousseau begins to articulate a version of democratic human relations, and he finds an abiding problem in human relations of what we might call 'theatricality'. Briefly, the argument is that for the social as we know it to exist at all (i.e. for there to be a viable public sphere), 'politeness' is required; but for Rousseau, it is in such politeness that we see the emergence of insincerity (or an opacity that is the opposite of transparency) in human relations and, yet more importantly, a dissociation of the human subject from itself.

This – an early version of inauthenticity – is the state of affairs that we have come to know from T.S. Eliot and Friedrich Schiller as a 'dissociation of sensibility'. In such a dissociation, it is not simply the case that the subject is able to watch himself 'at a distance', as if the subject exists like some puppet-master pulling the strings of a Lacanian mannequin whose function it is to represent the subject there where they are not. More telling than this is the fact that, for Rousseau, such a dissociation of the subject with respect to itself introduces into the very constitution of human subjectivity itself a *temporal* difference or distance, such that the being of the subject is now marked by temporality – and thus by

becoming – rather than by the essentially timeless continuous and homogeneous present tense of existence in Rousseau's conception of the state of nature.

The subject-in-time is one which cannot actually sensibly experience anything: its very interior temporality effects a rupture in the now such that the subject can never be found *in* a present moment. Politeness, it follows from all this, might be necessary for the social or public sphere; but it denies the possibility of our ever experiencing that public sphere in the first place. The social – the agora – is now an empty space, surrounded by vacuous subjects, subjects whose constitution is that they are continuously becoming, in search of an always elusive being.

It is in these great discourses that we can see the emergence of a logic that drives Rousseau to write his polemical *Lettre sur les spectacles* against Jean Le Rond d'Alembert (and, behind d'Alembert, Voltaire). Theatricality, and – as Rousseau begins to think this problem more fundamentally – representation itself become an abiding problem in human and social affairs. Rousseau, too, aligned himself with the logic of a certain kind of 'observation sentence' version of evidence and truth. His attitude to the growth and development of language as a mode of representation – a language that could re-figure or re-present the world as it is – was odd. It is developed in the second great discourse, the *Discours sur l'origine de l'inégalité parmi les hommes*.

In this discourse, Rousseau claims that language emanates originally from some great '*cri de la nature*', and he then derives from this a mimetic view of language in which a speaker represents a world outside the self by making a noise from within himself that somehow accommodates and represents that exteriority. We are back again at the old Augustinian and Cartesian questions of space, but this time construed as issues that will explain how it is that language can tell the truth or not. Rousseau then essentially makes every single utterance an observation-sentence that is tied firmly and absolutely to the singularity of its own specific occasion. As he put it in his description of how language evolved:

Chaque objet reçût d'abord un nom particulier, sans égard aux genres, et aux espèces, que ces premiers instituteurs n'étaient pas en état de distinguer; et tous les individus se présentèrent isolés à leur esprit, comme ils le sont dans le tableau de la nature. Si un chêne s'appelait A, un autre chêne s'appelait B: de sorte que plus les connaissances étaient bornées, et plus le dictionnaire devint étendu.

Each object received first of all a particular name, without regard to genres or species, which these first teachers were not in a state to be able to distinguish; and all individuals presented themselves isolated in spirit, as they are in the tableau of nature. If one oak was called A, an other oak was called B: such that the more limited knowledge was, the more extended the dictionary became.²⁷

In this, we have an attitude to truth that is *entirely* occasional and self-evidently true for each occasion. However, we lose the possibility of there

being any law at all, for there is no possibility of a general applicability of any statement. This is the condition of absolute transparency: but it is a condition in which society itself becomes absolutely impossible.

This, in fact is a condition in which everyone must axiomatically confess or reveal themselves transparently; but in which no one is able ever to listen. This is all utterance; and, as in our contemporary cultures where the demand for confessional transparency has become entirely normative, we end up only with insincerity and hypocrisy for, as I have shown, the culture of this mode of 'revelation of conscience' is condemned to inauthenticity. Rousseau saw this exactly: for society to exist and to persist, we need those forms of insincerity that we call politeness; or, in my preferred terms here, a kind of *Konversation in der Ehe*, an erotics of translation that effects future possibility, that keeps a society going.

Hypocrisy, in fact, becomes a condition of any confession that subscribes to the view that the act of confession is the expression of a conscience. We might turn here to Pierre Teilhard de Chardin:

Comme toute autre connaissance humaine, la Psychologie religieuse se construit sur des expériences. Elle a besoin de faits. Et puisque, en l'occurrence, les faits n'apparaissent qu'au plus profond des consciences, elle attend, pour se développer, des 'confessions' individuelles.

As with any other human science, religious Psychology rests on experiences. It needs facts. And since, as it happens, facts are apparent only to the most profound consciences, it has to wait for individual 'confessions' in order to develop.²⁸

The greatest or most authoritative evidence has often been taken to be this kind of confession. The text of a confession must axiomatically be sincere; but as it enters the public sphere (that is, as it is communication) it must also of necessity be not just absolutely singular but also (thereby) absolutely hypocritical, an enactment of the truth rather than a statement of a precedent truth. Confession, thus, is not and cannot be a statement of the truth; rather, it is that which produces the truth.

In my closing chapter below, I will thus write such a confession.