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978-0-521-17732-0 - Confession and Complicity in Narrative

Dennis A. Foster

Excerpt

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The confessional turn

The function of language is not to inform but to evoke. What I seek in speech is the response of the other. What constitutes me as subject is my question.

Lacan, *Écrits*

This is an essay about the motives for narrative. It arose from the problems attending the attempts of formalist theories to establish the boundaries of literary works and to exclude the wills and desires of writers and readers in the process of literary production. The idea that a poem, story, or novel could be understood as discrete, closed to the intrusion of other texts and authors, has provided limits to interpretation, assurances of meaning that console both readers and writers in the face of the endless interpretability of the open world. Recently, semiotic and post-structural literary theories have forced an acknowledgement of what we have always known, but perhaps not wanted to know: all writing exists in a larger world of writing, of intertextuality. The implications of such a context for the reading of literature are exciting to some – a promise of interpretive freedom – but discouraging to others, since interpretations of particular works can never be more than provisional, always contingent upon a wider horizon of writing. The meaning of a work cannot be found within its own boundaries.

At its most profound level, this notion of intertextuality unsettles the relation of writers to their productions. Despite the separation of writer from work in New Critical theory, the author remains the ultimate unifier of the text because the text represents an ultimately unified authorial consciousness. Helpful as it may be for readers to be assured of finding a meaning in the poem they are reading, can it compare with the writer's comfort in knowing that he or she is the source, if not the embodiment itself, of that meaning? New Criticism has maintained its lingering influence largely due to the anxiety that writers feel at the thought of giving up that status, and that readers would feel if that fountainhead were lost. Yet this loss of the author

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and authority is at the heart of contemporary theory, for it is not just the work that is opened to the universe of textuality; it is also the writers. The language they write with is not their own, their parents are not theirs to choose, and the meanings of the words they put down are not theirs to decide. From the past that intrudes into every aspect of language to a 'posterity' continuously appropriating every production to its own desires, the personal, authentic genius of each writer is dispersed along a thousand paths. All that should be original is given over to repetition; every story is an interpretation of those that have preceded it. And yet writers continue to produce narratives.

Their motives are not likely to be conscious, but when an attempt is made to speak them, the attempts appear more as symptoms of desires at work in writing than as accurate representations of what occurs. They tend to reflect various articulations of a communication model of language, models of expression, revelation, representation that assume the existence of a reality to be communicated to another. They imply the linguistic externalization of a personal knowledge, a knowledge peculiar to the writer as a perception, a feeling, a recognition. The work manifests what is the writer's own, peculiar originality. This conception of the writer's relation to the work reflects the hope that the work will equal the self, a hope founded in the unity of the sign where meanings truly were on the other side of the signifying coin. Consequently, the very discourse of representation as expression is symptomatic of the desire for a language that will make the writer the master of his meanings.

Confession may provide a form for exploring the motives for narrative. It seems clearly to be based on a model of communication, and yet it has been exploited by writers because it provides room for evasion. Usually, it involves a narrator disclosing a secret knowledge to another, as a speaker to a listener, writer to reader, confessor to confessor. A full confession would presumably require that a private knowledge be revealed in a way that would allow another to understand, judge, forgive, and perhaps even sympathize. In most confessions, of course, the forms of expression are purely conventional, an acknowledgement of the predictable, almost ritualistic nature of most sin. A confessor speaks in guilt, feeling estranged from God and, consequently, strange to himself. The ordinary failings of human nature are universal and all the sinner's words need to do is acknowledge that nature, not specify the sin. A listener would presume he already

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knew the essential story, as if the language were transparent rather than conventional. Consequently, to be absolved, it is enough to submit to the rite of the sacrament.

The great sinner, one who has strayed so far that he requires a book to hold his confession, would seem to be another matter, would seem to need more than convention to reveal his supposedly extraordinary sin. His words suffer the same limitation as other men's, but with this difference: where the usual confession arouses little interest, the writer's narrative says the truth is hard to tell and you must work to understand. I could not simplify the sin of Adam – nor Augustine, nor Dimmesdale – to the cliché of saying they loved women too much, though a woman is central to each story. For at the moment the supposedly sinful act occurs, faith has already lapsed. Still confessors speak of wine and women, hatred, and greed as if they were the cause of conscience's pain, while the mysterious loss suffered in sinning remains unrelieved. At best, the sufferer can articulate this sense of loss and thereby enjoy the small comfort of recognizing himself as lost. But then what has he told his listener? The listener is also only human, also a sinner. Putting a priest's formal powers of absolution aside, he is no different from the speaker. How could he not be infected with the doubt and loss evoked by the narrative of confession? He traffics in the sins of others, which must at some level recall to him his own sins, his own estrangement from God's coherent being.

The confessional narrative occurs, then, between two substantial, unsettled subjects. By 'subject' I do not mean an autonomous, centered being that founds the individual, but the representation of the self, particularly as it is objectified through language. The subject is that aspect of the self available to understanding. For those whose language is completely normative, the subject will be stable, though hardly individual. But the speakers in the texts I am examining have violated the norms of their language and defied conventional authority, making them comprehensible only as the extravagancies of sin or greatness – that is, they become outlaws, strange no matter how often seen. They may describe deeds of lust and betrayal or, like Socrates, recount searches for the perfect good, but neither sin nor truth are presented in their narratives. By calling on the listeners' need to understand, what they can do is evoke in them a sense of loss that is experienced as a desire for truth: that is, they can unsettle the listeners' sense of self-possession.

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This effect depends on a shared expectation of understanding implicit in the confessional relation, an expectation which, in the case of the writer's confession, is not discarded, but deferred as the conclusion fails to arrive: the writer will keep trying to tell the story if the reader will keep trying to understand. There is a conflict here between intention (to reveal the truth) and effect. Intention is not the origin of truth; as Nietzsche declared well before Wimsatt or even Freud, 'intention is merely a sign and symptom that still requires interpretation' (44). Specifically, it is a symptom of the narrator's desire to master his story. The issue is not persuasion, for there is no urging of a position; it is seduction. Obligated to understand, the listener abandons his position as one who knows and consents to listen, and thereby he enters the evasive discourse of the narrator, tracing a path that inevitably misses the encounter with truth.

We have lost the Author, the master of meanings, intentions, and language. But we have something more interesting, even if more insidious: a master who doesn't know, a leader with no course. The writer in this view has no truth, but has a language that has developed out of the labor and accidents of life, something peculiar to him, his to use but not fully to control: a discourse. This essay argues that the writer and reader meet in a discourse, less in a generous desire to share than in contention: the writer attempting to perpetuate his discourse, the reader attempting to appropriate it to his own uses. The result is the life of a work in an ever-expanding field of textuality as readers become writers interpreting, imitating, and denying what they read.

'The story was compelling,' we tend to say, even when we disclaim a conventional interest in character, plot, and closure. We like to be drawn by a story toward some conclusive interpretation. For most practiced readers, not even the most surprising, incongruous event has the freedom of pure contingency: the promise of organicism survives as a source of coherence and meaning. Hegel points to the attraction of the model to reasonable thought: 'The necessity in what takes place is hidden, and shows itself only in the End, but in such a way that this very End shows that necessity has also been there from the beginning' (Hegel 157). Within an organic model of reading, something can seem to stray beyond the boundaries only because its necessity has not yet been revealed through the illumination of the

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End, the promise of which makes the events' apparent straying all the more intriguing.

For Hegel, however, this notion of interpretation would be justified in only the most banal of texts, if at all. It is based on the narcissistic delusion of total mastery, on the idea that Reason can fully understand. Reason begins by looking to find itself reflected in the reasonable things of the observable world. The ultimate consequence of this assumption is that it 'no longer aims to *find* itself *immediately*, but to produce itself by its own activity. It is *itself* the End at which its action aims.' Organicism, that is, sustains the readers' belief that their own reasonableness can be found everywhere. And if Reason suspects that what it finds in the world is merely the arbitrary imposition of its own features, it obscures the 'disgracefulness of the irrational, crude thought . . . by unthinkingly mixing up with it all sorts of relationships of cause and effect, or "sign," "organ," etc.' (Hegel 209). The lofty activities of reasonable thought are a search for self under the guise of an objective examination of the world, interpretation here being a screen to rationalize vanity.

A confession is both a challenge and a temptation to a rational reader. Reason in the sense I have presented it is more than a mode of thought: it is a faith in the explicability of the world and, more importantly, in the existence and coherence of the thinking self. The confessor is a species of madman, someone whose deviance into sin suggests the fragility, possibly the illusion, of reason's grasp on knowledge. The desire to understand such tales is motivated in part by the pleasure of mastery, but linked to that pleasure is an obligation: you cannot count on knowing yourself if you cannot make sense of this other. Like the story told by the ancient mariner, it sets the listener to work.

The connection between the narratives of the confessor and the madman is strengthened by the sense of anxious obligation that often appears in Freud's texts. The challenge presented by his patients' stories was different from that which deviant disciples such as Jung offered to his mastery.¹ His neurotics challenged the idea of reason itself. In the case history of the Wolfman, for example, Freud repeatedly returns to the elusive episodes of the Wolfman's childhood, events confessed (or created), Freud says, only under the pressure of Freud's threatened withdrawal. But having elicited the tale, he cannot make sense of it and cannot, as history has shown, release his

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patient from his neurosis. The obligation to understand, however, does not let Freud go, and he introduces a series of explanatory structures to fulfill his debt: chronologies, patterns of displacement, of cause and effect, metaphors. These explanations sit uneasily beside (and beneath, in footnotes) each other, and are made more uneasy by the subsequent additions Freud made to the text over the years.

The Wolfman's case – like Schreber's, like Dora's – unsettled Freud. He must also have been disturbed by the Wolfman's amusement with analysis and the interest he showed in setting Freud to work on his case, an amusement Freud attributes to repression. Each case presents personal and theoretical challenges to Freud's practice by recalling both his own personal inadequacy as a doctor and suggesting the ultimate inadequacy of his psychoanalysis either to understand or to cure. There is something in Freud's narratives that resembles the guilt and obligation that motivate the confessing sinner. And like the sinner, Freud would rather admit to a personal failing than allow the possibility that the sustaining order of his universe might be a delusion.

Freud does not hesitate in his later texts to report his own failures, as if he had learned something from the Wolfman's amusement, something about revenge. At the end of the still disturbing *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, he points to 'the starting point for fresh investigations' that 'in turn raises a host of other questions': 'We must be patient and await fresh methods and occasions of research. We must be ready, too, to abandon a path that we have followed for a time, if it seems to be leading to no good end' (Freud, *Beyond* 57–8). Far from being an admission of failure, this plea for patience complements a theoretical claim made early in the text that the ego, under the influence of the 'reality principle,' 'does not abandon the intention of ultimately obtaining pleasure, but it nevertheless demands and carries into effect the postponement of satisfaction, the abandonment of a number of possibilities of gaining satisfaction and the temporary toleration of unpleasure as a step on the long indirect road to pleasure' (Freud, *Beyond* 4). In repeating the metaphor of the detour (applied first to his patients' histories, then to his own writing), Freud suggests the secret satisfactions he obtains in failing to conclude his text: in leaving the tale unfinished, his readers would be obliged to work through what he had only begun. If he has been

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tormented by the stories he hears, many more people are fated to share his condition when they pick up his books.

The confessional relation, as I am presenting it, is not limited to religion or fiction. The works by Hegel and Freud that I mention suggest, rather, that narratives of many kinds reproduce patterns of power, desire, guilt and obligation that I find in confession.² When the knowledge offered by a text cannot be formulated within the rigid coding of a positive science, narrative is enlisted, a story whose message should be implicit, even though it may not be clear. Much, perhaps the most important knowledge of every culture, is contained and transmitted by the narratives that each of us is told, reproducing us in the image of our world.³ And when I claim that much narrative is informed by desire and obligation, I am also claiming that this narrative is allied with the grounds of passion provided by the family and religion, and with the stories they tell. Confession is not an incidental narrative form within these institutions: it is a mode by which people enter into the discourse of their culture, where they step beyond reiteration of the stories and into interpretation. It represents an attempt to understand the terms and the limits by which the people are defined, both as they listen to the confessions of others and as they recount their own transgressions. It is this demand for understanding that other narratives will repeat as an integral part of their production and effect.

The ultimate failure of even the most didactic narratives to deliver a clear, direct knowledge suggests a fundamental discontinuity between understanding (as a kind of mastery) and the knowledge being transmitted. And yet the failure to understand can mean one risks sin and pain. It is as if what narrative teaches is ignorance, every reader's lack of knowledge; it is a lesson that ensures the struggle to understand will find no conclusion. I am suggesting that this lesson of ignorance with its burden of passion is carried over to subsequent narratives. It helps explain why the story is so compelling.

There is something primordial about the motivations I am suggesting, something learned before understanding for its own sake could have been an interest. That is, the desire to understand – and the guilt and fear experienced in finding that one does not understand – repeats an earlier experience. Psychoanalysis provides one explanation for this repetition. Freud suggests that the drive we feel toward understanding is modeled on a drive much more primary.

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Writing of the fabulous achievements of modern man, Freud notes the dominance of the past in all movements into the future:

What appears in a minority of human individuals as an untiring impulsion towards further perfection can easily be understood as a result of the instinctual repression upon which is based all that is most precious in human civilization. The repressed instinct never ceases to strive for complete satisfaction, which would consist in the repetition of a primary experience of satisfaction.
(Freud, *Beyond* 36)

All appearance of progress is the elaborate deferral of a satisfaction that is lost in the past. Freud has previously identified this primary experience as an inertia (as a lump of rock is inert) and the drive toward perfection, consequently, as the wish to become 'inorganic once again' (Freud, *Beyond* 32). The inability to achieve this satisfaction, at least in life, results in a 'difference in amount between the pleasure of satisfaction which is *demand*ed and that which is actually *achieved* that provides the driving factor which will permit of no halting at any position attained' (Freud, *Beyond* 36). This pressure that results from difference is desire, a force whose true object, always repressed, must be replaced by an endless series of inadequate substitutions. 'The backward path . . . is obstructed . . . so there is no alternative but to advance in the direction in which growth is still free – though with no prospect of bringing the process to a conclusion or of being able to reach the goal' (Freud, *Beyond* 36). Having discovered (if not created) this backward path, analysis mimics the activity: it advances into the analysand's past along the detour of resistance and regression. The analysand's desire for a coherent, comprehensible ego leads to a series of ostensibly ever-earlier self-representations spoken for the analyst, though in reality the speaker must create them anew. Like confession, analysis transforms a feeling of alienation, of sickness, into an account of separation; it encourages one who is lost to trust his past to a listener who will make sense of it.

The need for an authority to understand, and thereby to confirm that the transgressor was lost and is now found finds a unique expression in narrative. Jacques Lacan provides an explanation for this role for narrative through his investigations of the place of language in psychoanalytic practice, specifically in his definition of the self as 'subject' in relation to the 'discourse of the other.' The formulation

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of desire that Freud articulates in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* reappears in explicitly linguistic terms in Lacan's writing. Because the 'primary experience of satisfaction' we have all at one time had remains always beyond the articulation of speech, we have no way of saying what we want. It remains forever a 'need,' the speaking of which, if it were possible, would allow us to seek, and perhaps find, our real object. Speaking it would be nearly equivalent to its satisfaction, to the *jouissance* that transcends all limits (Lacan, *Écrits* 211). However, because whatever can be announced in language (the demand) is always inadequate to the need, a gap opens between the two. The desire that arcs across that gap provides the force that prevents a speaker from ever coming to rest in a complacent approximation of the truth.

Desire makes sense only if one can imagine that some other exists who already has the desirable thing, and who might therefore provide the desiring subject with what he needs. A demand is always presented to another who may or may not respond. In Lacan's formulation, an actual response from the other is never required to sustain the sense of that other's existence: 'every speech,' Lacan writes, 'contains its own reply.' This reply arises from within the speaker's own words, but not from his conscious intention. Speaking, that is, moves one from a primal isolation into a social realm of signification that is not completely within the speaker's control. Because the limited possibilities of language determine how a demand can be expressed, the desiring subject is not fully present in his own speech. He cannot, therefore, find out who he is by questioning himself, but must seek his confirmation in the reply of another who can say, 'I know you.'

For Lacan, this sense of estrangement from one's self is implicit in the structure of the sign and the way the subject is, consequently, represented in significance. In his definition of a signifier ('there is no other'), Lacan writes:

A signifier is that which represents the subject for another signifier. This signifier will therefore be the signifier for which all the other signifiers represent the subject: that is to say, in the absence of this signifier, all the other signifiers represent nothing, since nothing is represented only *for* something else. (316)

Rather than being the foundation and source of speech, the observer of the world, and the rational discoverer of truth, the subject is

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'nothing' but a locus indicated by its relation to a structure of meaning of which it is not itself a part. It is the signifier, that is, not the subject, that participates in meaning, and that signifier represents the subject only when it engages other signifiers. Consequently, any attempt to pass beyond the signifier to apprehend the unmediated subject can only lead to the vanishing of the subject or the end of speech.

Within Lacan's formulation, one cannot say that any speaker has a stable, coherent presence, that his desires, meaning, and language are his own. Introspection is a delusion, since each person has to seek his meaning through the speech of others. Confession, in this context, is an attempt to objectify the self – to present it as a knowable object – through a narrative that 're-structures' (Lacan 48) the self as history and conclusions. No matter how one's experiences may be present in memory, the events of these narratives are understandable only when they are transformed into objects for consciousness, into histories rather than sensations. It is apparently a perverseness of language that condemns each of these confessions to failure insofar as they always leave the crucial gap, the 'censored chapter' that Lacan claims for his own analysis (Lacan 50). The failure of speech to be adequate to its subject calls for exegesis; confession engenders interpretation, drawing the listener into the production of meaning.

The ontological question of self-presence, of Being, is, for western culture, a matter of life and death. In the tense paradox of our conception of individuality, to be separate from oneself is as dangerous, as deadly, as separation from the source of Being. This paradox, as I will discuss further later, develops in each infant as an almost inevitable consequence of becoming human in the western world with a western language. The advantage of conceiving of narrative as confession rather than expression is that it allows us to see the pathos of the simultaneous pursuit and evasion of meaning in narrative. It also reveals, coincidentally, the tragedy and irony implicit in the semiotic revision of psychoanalysis. Using Freud's notion of the 'memory trace' to provide a bridge to linguistic practices, Derrida writes:

Following a schema that continually guides Freud's thinking, the movement of the trace is described as an effect of life to protect itself *by deferring* the dangerous investment, by constituting a reserve. And all the conceptual