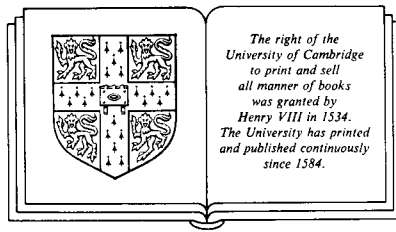


Confession and complicity in narrative

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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge
London New York New Rochelle
Melbourne Sydney

Published by the Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RP
32 East 57th Street, New York, NY 10022, USA
10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Melbourne 3166, Australia

© Cambridge University Press 1987

First published 1987

Printed in Great Britain at
the University Press, Cambridge

British Library cataloguing in publication data

Foster, Dennis A.
Confession and complicity in narrative.
1. Desire in literature
I. Title
809'.93353 PN56.D/

Library of Congress cataloguing in publication data

Foster, Dennis A.
Confession and complicity in narrative.
1. Reader-response criticism. 2. Confession stories –
History and criticism. I. Title.
PN98.R38F67 1987 801'.95 86-33404

ISBN 0 521 34191 4

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1

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 *demande*d and that which is actually *achieve*d 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

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oppositions that furrow Freudian thought relate each concept to the other like movements of a detour, within the economy of differance.

(Derrida, 'Differance' 150)

Life can move in only one direction, toward death, but the economy of the trace allows it to avoid the irreversible, unknowable investment in that end. Though it does not alter the end and in fact depends on death to orient desire, the effect of life is to discover all possible alternative routes. The detour is the swerving from death that is the very activity of life and of language.

There is a fertile dilemma here. The inherent inability of language to constitute *presence* itself is experienced by a speaker as alienation: we are lost from ourselves. The anxiety of that situation motivates a drive to produce oneself. But if that end were obtained, it would be tantamount to death, for such knowledge could only mean that in our individual presence, we are separate from Being. We are, in this situation, saved from ourselves by language. The mistake we inevitably make is to think of consciousness as a product of our Being rather than as an effect of loss and deferral. This error mirrors the simultaneous attainment of knowledge and sin in western mythology. In Derrida's formulation, consciousness is 'a determination and effect within a system which is no longer that of presence but that of differance' (Derrida, 'Differance' 147). Consciousness, then, is not a signified, a truth, but an effect of the displacements of differing and deferring of 'fallen' speech.

As I suggested in the discussion of Freud above, the act of confession provides a compensation in the power it establishes over another. The idea that 'consciousness' is only an 'effect' does not diminish the allure it presents to a reader: each confession appears to contain an as yet unexpressed truth to be discovered by interpretation. Consciousness is the seductive objectification of the subject, guaranteeing that the continuous deferrals of language are not babble but meaning. In a discussion of the relation between truth and knowledge in Hegel, Lacan makes the point that the subject must arouse in the other a desire to know. He defines 'truth' in Hegel's *Phenomenology* as 'that which knowledge can apprehend as knowledge only by setting its ignorance to work.' Knowledge depends upon the activity of ignorance, upon a 'state of constant re-absorption in [truth's] own disturbing element' (Lacan 296). Knowledge, that is,

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is never more than the momentary effect of the laboring beyond the boundaries of the known, in ignorance. Truth, as ignorance, is the impossible temptation to knowledge. In setting the readers' ignorance to work, the narrator shows readers what they lack, shows them why they do not know themselves. The desire to know, then, is a response to representation: readers cannot pursue Truth directly because the path to truth depends on another who seems to represent it. It is this desire, a mediated desire, that the writer can use to gain the complicity of the reader. Truth, like Love, would no longer be Truth if it could be possessed. But whether a direct knowledge of Truth and love is forbidden, or merely impossible, the desire for them is contagious.

The possibility that this turbulent element of truth and ignorance might in fact be contagious in language – and that a reader might thereby feel himself a sinner just by reading – is supported by one of Lacan's definitions of that other turbulent element of human life, the unconscious. Lacan calls it, 'that part of the concrete discourse, insofar as it is transindividual, that is not at the disposal of the subject in re-establishing the continuity of his conscious discourse' (Lacan, *Écrits* 49). This curious definition of the 'unconscious' helps account for the power one writer's discourse can have over the language and, consequently, identities of subsequent writers. It is inside the writer as 'concrete discourse,' not as knowledge, which means it affects all language without any individual being able to control it. The formal coherence by which a writer constitutes his own consciousness does not affect the unconscious element, yet this element is what enters the discourse of the reader, infecting his language, reforming him as a subject. What is important here is that intersubjectivity is conceived of not as sympathy or understanding, but purely as an element of a shared discourse.

Intersubjectivity is not experienced, however, as discourse but as recognition, as the knowledge of something already known. Few feelings are more common (and few critical remarks more banal since Pope so succinctly formulated it) than the illusion that a writer has expressed one's own thoughts. Although the first response to a fascinating narrative may be the delight of seeing a bright verity disclosed, the more time one then spends working over the text, the more its truths seem one's own. In the activity of interpretation, a

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reader will almost inevitably find the text to be a confirmation of his own thoughts, both happy and fearful (or an almost personal attack on him, which amounts to the same thing). If the activity of the writer is motivated by a desire to confess his own sense of loss and desire, the reader will find himself engaged in the same motivations, though he may not recognize that the history he strives to comprehend becomes increasingly his own, not the writer's. The writer's work, in short, becomes the field on which the reader attempts to realize himself; or, as Hegel writes, 'to obtain through their action the consciousness of their unity with reality' (Hegel 234).

The most rewarding insights of reading are narcissistic. Such a conclusion would probably be denied by most readers since, as flattering as it may be to find oneself confirmed in another's text (and therein to feel one's mastery over it), that reflection also suggests one's redundancy. Such doubling indicates a discomfiting lack of a unique soul in the individual and, consequently, suggests that he is secondary, replaceable. As Freud said of the uncanny double, 'from having been an assurance of immortality . . . [it] becomes the ghastly harbinger of death' (Freud, 'The "Uncanny"' 141). The reader enters into a powerful tension in interpreting a text. Because recognition (finding what one already knows) contains this threat of the uncanny, interpretation produces resistance in spite of the desire to understand. That resistance, I will argue, appears in the denial most readers will show to the idea that interpretation requires readers to become complicit with the motivations of the writer.

It is this denial that transforms the dialogue of confession into a genuine struggle for power. Because we want to see ourselves as autonomous beings constituted independently of the words we speak, we fail to recognize the limits of our ability to control or possess our own language. To a great extent, our statements contain us, not we them.

Foucault has described the relations implicit in the exchange of narrative by considering statements in their most concrete form. As an object, a statement has a place within the economy of the world. Foucault writes: 'the statement circulates, is used, disappears, allows or prevents the realization of a desire, serves or resists various interests, participates in challenge and struggle, and becomes a theme of appropriation or rivalry' (Foucault, *Archaeology* 105). It is

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the activity a statement generates and participates in that creates value in the statement. Despite his own sense of guilt, a confessor commands a power over a listener because he controls the material the other is obligated to use to be the one who understands.

What is startling in Foucault's description is his recognition that 'statements' are not in practice freely produced. They are limited by the cultural situation of the users. Consequently, their value is determined not by 'the presence of a secret content' but by 'their capacity for circulation and exchange, their possibility of transformation, not only in the economy of discourse, but, more generally, in the administration of scarce resources' (Foucault, *Archaeology* 120). Discourse 'poses the question of power; [it is] an asset that is, by nature, the object of a struggle, a political struggle.' The confessor can produce his place in the world only on the capital of his discourse, and thus depends on expanding his influence through a sort of imperialism of discourse.

What begins as a personal sense of sin, of alienation, has inescapable social, political, religious implications because the only possibility of attaining atonement is through the elusive medium of a narrative. And because each narrative requires interpretation, readers are drawn into the economy of a discursive exchange. Each reader, becoming a writer, recognizes the secondariness of his language, that he has only the coin that has been minted by another, not the stuff of reality, to articulate his understanding. A confessor listening cannot maintain a position outside that of a confessor speaking: secondariness is contagious. But for some readers this language, this object of exchange, begins to shape the desires of others and thereby becomes a source of power. The hopes for meaning, understanding, and atonement become allied with modes of exchange, desire, and revenge.

Much of what I have been claiming about narrative does not depart from what has been said elsewhere in psychoanalytic and semiotic studies. What I am more concerned with is the persistence which this sense of loss, a loss that seems implicit in the linguistic structure of narrative, is interpreted as a form of sin: as failure, error, inadequacy, or original damnation. The 'religious' function of narrative to reconcile the contradictory elements of existence helps to explain why we in general resist anything like a semiotic interpreta-

The confessional turn

explain why we in general resist anything like a semiotic interpretation, and why the 'failure' of that function should produce the passions of guilt, desire, and obligation to which I have pointed. The form of confession allows me to explore the narrative response to loss in connection with the powerful metaphysical traditions of western culture. These next few paragraphs will look more directly at confession within that tradition.

In *The Symbolism of Evil* Paul Ricoeur sees the language of confession as the means of connecting a sense of guilt (unworthiness, the separation from God) to the myths of first sins. The sense of guilt can be made meaningful by introducing it into a symbolic order, transforming blind oppression into an obligation. Ricoeur recognizes that because all action in a fallen world is misdirected, perverted, it requires interpretation. 'Experience is abstract, in spite of its lifelike appearance . . . because it is separated from the totality of meaning' (Ricoeur 10). Action, like reading, produces an experience of being different, extra, that divorces the actor from the sense of totality. Any disruptive, transgressive experience, any new experience, violates that totality we call the self, so that one sees oneself simultaneously as strange, beyond familiar boundaries of comprehension, and familiar. Yet commonly, strangeness feels like guilt, and since every effect requires a cause, there must have been sin, a violation of the divine totality.

When Ricoeur speaks of the confessional re-creation of a transgressive act as sin, he identifies the original act with writing:

The experience of which the believer makes avowal in the confession of sins *creates a language* for itself by its very strangeness; the experience of being oneself but alienated from oneself gets *transcribed* immediately on the plane of language in the mode of interrogation. Sin, as alienation from oneself, is an experience more astonishing, disconcerting, and scandalous, perhaps, than the spectacle of nature. (Ricoeur 8; my emphasis)

In its appearance as difference (as uninterpretable strangeness), the experience can be understood only as writing, not as an immediately self-disclosing nature. The experience of strangeness allows one to see oneself as both doubled and different, as inscribed in an event that can then be *transcribed*. The sense of self-unity is lost in the face of this representation of the self, and the actor asks, Who am I? What have I done? Sin, for Ricoeur, is not the transgression of a prior law, but a concept springing from the very attempt to question and explain.

Confession and complicity

This questioning itself is not subject to reflection or analysis. In the confessional situation the 'believer' submits his question to God: he locates the problem in sin, in a metaphysical rather than ontological fault. 'Sin makes me incomprehensible to myself: God is hidden; the course of things no longer has meaning.' What was known face to face is lost. In the sinner's interrogation of God, he is 'warding off meaninglessness' (Ricoeur 8). The recreation of experience as sin is revision, a *Nachträglichkeit* that attempts to establish a foundation of law and myth to account for what is strange. It gives meaning to what was 'disconcerting and scandalous' by transforming it into repetition of a mythic first sin. Ricoeur locates the means for effecting the transformation in the confession of sins, for in confession the event is reenacted in a context that reestablishes the boundaries of the violated law. Confession recalls the sinner to himself.

The importance of confession, and of the language of fault in general, lies in its power to interpret; but Ricoeur, like many others, does not see interpretation as an innocent activity. Sin cannot be immediately known. As he points out, the language of fault 'is itself already a hermeneutics . . . : defilement is spoken of under the symbol of a stain or blemish, sin under the symbol of missing the mark, of a tortuous road' (Ricoeur 9). Sin can be spoken of only in symbols of negation, interpreted through what is concretely present. But while the pain of loss is felt by all people, the state of being prior to sin is inconceivable except as the opposite of sin, the negation of a negation: the tortuous road has its referent in life's toils, but where is the life so free of sin that it would correspond to the straight way? So although the confessor hopes to regain his innocence by constructing a wholly comprehensible, coherent representation of himself, he must pursue his goal through the detour of negation: he can only speak of innocence by speaking of sin, reenacting in the language of confession the loss he feels.

The ambivalence of the sinner's position appears in Ricoeur's statement on the desire to interpret sin in confession.

Sin is perhaps the most important of the occasions for questioning, but also for reasoning incorrectly by giving premature answers . . . [The] unseasonable answers of gnosis and of the etiological myth testify that man's most moving experience, that of being lost as a sinner, communicates with the need to understand and excites attention by its very character as scandal.

(Ricoeur 8)