IN THE GRIP OF MINOS,
AT THE GATES OF PURGATORY

All the faithful of both sexes, after they have reached the age of discretion, must confess all their sins at least once a year to their own parish priest.

Canon 21, Fourth Lateran Council, 1215

At the dawn of the thirteenth century, Scholastic theologians had reached a consensus that there were seven sacraments, among them confession. In 1215 Pope Innocent III, a former student of the Parisian schools where the theory of the sacraments had been elaborated, issued a decree making annual confession obligatory (he also declared that women and laymen could no longer hear confessions). The pope and his bishops, assembled at the Lateran Council, had decided that the sacraments, and confession in particular, were the best means to sanctify the population at large and preserve it from the dangers of heresy. Annual confession, it was thought, would rekindle religious fervor and at the same time allow the parish priest to assess the beliefs of his flock. At the yearly confession sins were forgiven, but the penitent was also sounded out about his beliefs. If the priest detected widespread heresy, the Inquisition, which Innocent also instituted, was summoned. When the tribunal arrived, heretics were given a grace period within which they could recant and confess; following this, denunciations and interrogations began. This meant that in the small, closely knit parishes of medieval Europe, a new obligation was placed on every man, woman, and child above the age of reason: he or she had to confess once a year or risk excommunication, social opprobrium, and suspicion of heresy.

One historian has called this development “the most important legislative act in the history of the Church” (Watkins 1:622). H. C. Lea, in his monumental study of auricular confession, claims that, by this means, the Church “secured the control of the minds of its subjects to
a degree which no other body has enjoyed" and that "the Europe of the Middle Ages and the faithful of Latin Christianity today are what the teaching of the confessional has made them" (2:414). These are large claims. Today, one might think that social justice, peace, and bioethics are areas where Church decisions are more momentous. An ancient decree about confession seems a remote issue in Church history and even more so in world history.

Furthermore, self-expression and self-analysis are so much a part of the air we breathe that we assume them to be instinctive. "Know thyself," "To thine own self be true," and "Get it off your chest" seem like the wisdom of the ages woven into the fabric of modern life. From the Delphic oracle to Shakespeare through Freud and beyond, the imperative to self-knowledge seems part of human destiny. Beliefs and civilizations may change, but we assume that man has always felt the need to discover the truth about himself and speak it to others. Such a self-fulfilling activity seems eminently compatible with democratic and humanistic institutions. We hardly suspect that our habits of self-analysis have a very particular history or that the search for personal truth could be a political engagement. How could the cultivation of the self be linked to power? And what possible link could exist between our broadest principles of psychological hygiene and an episode in the history of "sacerdotalism"?

Perhaps we need the imagination of a Georges Duby or a Michel Foucault to restage the Lateran decree as a crucial moment in the acquisition of these moral habits, which could be as consequential to history as more conventional political events: "Qu'on s'imagine combien dut paraître exorbitant, au début du XIIIe siècle, l'ordre donné à tous les chrétiens d'avoir à s'agenouiller une fois l'an au moins pour avouer, sans en omettre une seule, chacune de leurs fautes" (Hist. Sex. 1:81). For Foucault, the habit of self-analysis and all the various modern institutions that employ confessional techniques—psychology, education, criminology, political autocritique, and even confessional literature—depend to some degree upon the universalization of the obligation to confess. What is now considered instinctive was first programmed into Western man by the Lateran decree.

Christian confession has specific features, and it is Foucault's contention that since Western man learned the language of confession from the Church, these features are still to be found in all its secular descendants. Our "Know thyself" is not the Delphic oracle's. By the vicissitudes of history, all of our modes of self-analysis pass through
the Christian experience. In an interview discussing The History of Sexuality, Foucault once stated that Freud's analytic techniques are essentially the same as those used by confessors and spiritual directors all the way back to patristic times. In the West when we confess, recline on the analyst's couch, or write autobiography we are repeating a gesture that runs "de Tertullien à Freud" ("Jeu" 77). Lateran marks the point at which confessional discourse became an obligation for all, and its influence can still be felt today.

For the theorist of "power/knowledge," such a phenomenon is just as decisive as any law or political decision; it could well be "the most important legislative act in the history of the Church." The Lateran decree is an example of a new and subtle form of power exercised for the first time on a massive scale, what Foucault calls pastoral power, the "government of individuals by their own verity" ("Omnes" 240). Unlike a conventional political act, the obligation to confess does not repress or limit any particular freedom, but its effects are all the more pervasive to the extent that it is not recognized as a law. The normal language of law is the restriction of freedoms—the peasant can't leave his land, the bourgeois can't bear arms—and the instance of enunciation of the truth is the sovereign body: the king or the pope declares that a tax must be paid or that a certain dogma is true. A law enjoining confession reverses this process; a subject is not restricted; on the contrary, he must express his or her inner thoughts and desires, and instead of accepting a truth, he produces a truth of which he is the sole guarantor.

In Western civilization, confession has become habitual, instinctive; speaking one's desires, it is assumed, is a liberating if not revolutionary activity. That is why the countercultural movements of the 1960s and 1970s thought sexual and political revolution were on the same agenda: both were a matter of raising a repressed voice. Foucault's historical work on the origins of confession and analytical discourse calls for a reevaluation of such assumptions.

Of course, it would be imprudent to accept only one historical scheme from a notoriously iconoclastic thinker without examining it in detail and comparing it with other historians' work on confession. The history of confession has inspired a vast literature, and its authors are far from unanimity on the subject of the evolution of the sacrament.

Church historians tend to stress continuity when treating the subject and to deemphasize the Lateran decree: "Il [the Lateran decree] n'apporte aucun changement dans la discipline de l'Eglise . . . il n'offre
rien qui ne soit conforme à la discipline de l'Église, telle qu'elle s'était développée au cours des siècles par une évolution progressive” (Vacandard 893). For the orthodox historian, the sacraments were instituted by Christ, and the Church has merely worked out the implications of these divine foundations; nothing can change or deviate too far from the founding moment, and these moments can be found in the Bible. This position was clearly stated at the Council of Trent concerning penance: “Rien dans le régime actuel de la pénitence ecclésiastique n'est étranger à l'institution du Christ” (Vacandard 833).

But even the orthodox “continualist” must admit that Lateran was a watershed that inspired a “vaste travail de révision dont les canons et déclarations du concile de Trente seront le terme d’aboutissement normal, l’expression officielle et définitive” (Vacandard 894).

Protestant and republican historians like H. C. Lea and Michelet, anxious to dissociate their own ideologies from the abuses of the confessional, emphasize the Lateran decree as an aberrant departure that was corrected by the Reformation and the Enlightenment. For Lea, as for Foucault, Lateran is a radical departure, a coup d'état for sacerdotalism. But according to Lea, the confessional epoch is over in enlightened Protestant countries, which have abandoned the confessional, eliminated the priest as guardian of the conscience, and made man once again “directly related to God."

Michelet is also sure that auricular confession belongs to a barbaric Dark Ages. Commenting on the plight of a young priest trying to hear confessions in modern France, he observes:

Les manuels qu'on met entre les mains du jeune confesseur s'appuient sur les casuistes que Pascal a enterrés. Quand même l'immoralité de leurs solutions n'eût pas été démontrée, daignez donc vous rappeler qu'Escobar, Sanchez, posaient des questions pour une époque horriblement corrompue dont, grâce à Dieu, nous sommes loin. Leur casuistique à son origine s'adresse au mode écumeux, fangeux que laissèrent après elles les guerres de religion. Vous trouvez là tel crime qui peut-être ne fut jamais commis que par les affreux soldats du duc d'Albe, ou par les bandes sans patrie, sans loi, sans Dieu, que traînait Wallenstein, vraies Sodomes errantes dont l'ancienne eût eu horreur. (Du Prêtre 222)

Michelet's young confessor is supposedly out of touch morally with his clientele. His confessants are not the depraved creatures of the six-
teenth century, and their consciences have no need of his intervention. They have not committed the horrendous crimes listed in the priest's manual, or else they lead complicated lives of sexual and financial corruption which the priest's seminary education is incapable of deciphering. Foucault's thesis, however, is that the confessional tradition continued unabated into modern times, not only in the Church but in other institutions as well, where the behavior to be analyzed was no longer treated as "sin." Nonetheless, any number of psychological and sexual aberrations were subject to essentially the same confessional mechanisms. Even the extreme criminal material of Michelet's casuists was as contemporary as ever in the annals of nineteenth-century forensic medicine and psychiatry. And on the level of fantasy, is not Michelet himself catering to a reader who very well imagines the crimes and confessions of the "affreux soldats"? Literature is always ready to exploit a confessional vein, to overhear in fiction what was intended only for the priest's or the doctor's ear.

Further evidence for Foucault's thesis is present in the same work by Michelet cited above. Continuities between the corrupt sacerdotal system and modern institutions become apparent. Michelet still finds a need for confessional dialogue but thinks it should be restored to the family. The father must recover the power of the priest, he says, and obtain total confidentiality from his wife and children. The priest is everywhere denounced as a parody of the father, but this is only because confessional discourse should flow between the husband and his guilty wife: "Le mal avoué, connu, est plus près d'être guéri" (xxiv).

Troubling continuities between the sacerdotal confessional system and modern, enlightened society are evident in Lea as well. At the end of his study, when a few counterexamples are offered of societies with higher moral standards than Latin Christianity, there are disturbing parallels to the system previously denounced. A common feature of the ethically superior society is always a surveillance apparatus comparable to the Catholic confessional system. Lea mentions approvingly the police who maintain discipline in Britain; the cast system in Brahmanism, with its "close supervision over every act"; and the Society of Friends, characterized by a "watchfulness exercised over its members" (2:432).

The difference, then, between Foucault, on the one hand, and Lea and Michelet, on the other, is that although he agrees with them that the Lateran decree inaugurated a new chapter in the development of Western consciousness, he sees that epoch as still continuing.
Confessional discourse wears various secular disguises in our Enlighten­ment institutions.

Other modern historians, less polemically engaged for or against confession, have drawn other lessons from its study than the abuses of sacerdotalism or the unfolding of a divine plan. They too point to the Lateran decree as significant:

It was not the first legal act to require confession to the priest and it can in no sense be said to have invented the necessity of confession. Nevertheless it was momentous; and even if it was originally designed as a disciplinary canon to allow pastors to know their parishioners and watch for heresy, its effects were in fact broader. For the requirement of yearly confession now had the authority of Pope and council, who had prescribed powerful religious sanctions to back it up.

For Thomas Tentler, whose opinion is here cited, obligatory annual confession is important because it increased the power of the clergy, who used confession to regularize sexual conduct. Their aim was to stabilize the institution of marriage, insure the legitimacy of offspring, and assure legal property transfer. Tentler assigns the Church a major role in shaping the institutions of medieval society. In addition to its role of social engineer, the Church also provided a sense of hope and relief; for Tentler the effect of confession was to "discipline and con­sole." So there is a dimension to confession other than power, and the Lateran phenomena must be understood as a response to a real need of the population—the need to be reassured about salvation. The repet­tion of absolution fulfilled this need.

Tentler is an authority in the field, and few scholars can fault his findings, but debate remains whether the Church was initiating social policy through the confessional or merely following in the wake of wider social change. For example, one critic suggests, "L'Eglise est la garante d'un ordre social avant d'en être l'inspiratrice" (Lemaître 143). A broader study of the confessor's manuals and lists of sins which Tentler used in his work can lead to the conclusion that the Church was merely enforcing the collectivist morality of feudalism rather than embarking on its own program of mastery of the individual con­science. The importance of particular sins varied from place to place. In some localities, confession seemed to focus more on issues of vio­lence and respect for property than on sexual behavior, suggesting that
the Church was still concerned with the ills of feudal society rather than with cultivating a new private, urban ethic of chastity.

This debate leads in two directions, one a simple matter of chronology: at what point did confession start to focus on sexuality and inculcate a more private morality? Tentler and his followers in the Groupe de la Bussière say it was between the thirteenth and early fifteenth century, culminating in the work of Jean Gerson (1363–1429), who wrote the summa of the new morality. John Bossy, however, sees this development as coming later; he characterizes medieval confession as focusing on sins against the social order and argues that it wasn't until the sixteenth century that confession became an instrument of interior discipline for the individual as opposed to the earlier objective of collective behavior. This question could be a matter of the penetration of the new morality to the level of widespread practice. The adversaries in this debate agree upon the terms, private versus collective morality, the post-Lateran phenomena of the interest in sexuality and the complication of sins. It is a question of periodization: when does the Church become more preoccupied with sexuality than violence and other threats to the fabric of feudal society? There is no absolute chronological answer to this question, and the reply one offers will always be influenced by the milieu that is being analyzed. The upper echelons of society were first to be influenced by the new, more private morality. It encountered more resistance from the rural population than from the urban elite.

The other, wider question raised here is the role of religion in general and confession in particular in the evolution of society. Is confession merely an expression of the prevailing ideology, or can it take the lead in defining a new morality, and can that morality be anything but coercive?

In response to these kinds of questions, some historians are willing to extend even further Tentler's limited approval of confession. No longer simply "discipline and consolation," penance is defined by one as a "sacrament de la liberté" (Sot 20). This historian's frame of reference is strictly the actual sacrament of confession, but he does raise an issue with which Foucault's theory must contend, and that is whether a discourse like confession allows for any freedom of the subject. Foucault implies that anything a subject does or says ensnares him or her in a power structure. Doubtless he is right to demystify the pseudo-freedom of many forms of confession and analysis, but is confessional discourse from beginning to end necessarily caught up in a
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conspiratorial web of power? It can be argued that ideology does not have that firm a grip on human expression. Fredric Jameson, for example, has criticized the excessively pessimistic and systematic outlook of Foucault and proposed the dual principle of "ideology and Utopia" for analyzing social practices and cultural productions: "Even hegemonic or ruling-class culture and ideology are Utopian" (Political 291). He opposes Foucault's one-dimensional vision of societies as predatory networks of opportunistic power structures that recuperate and manipulate all forms of subjectivity. Instead, he emphasizes the contradictory nature of cultural forms, which never simply confirm prevailing ideology but instead draw it backward and forward toward the "affirmation of collective solidarity." He sees religious forms not simply as the instruments of class domination but as forces expressing genuine liberating and utopian aspirations.³

I will retain Foucault's notion of "pastoral power" in my analysis but remain open to the utopian possibilities of confessional discourse. The development of confession marks an expansion of human consciousness; it carries with it the threat of the tyranny of conscience, but it also allows man to gain some mastery over evil. The perspective of redemption appears, of a second chance, of a verbal repetition and working through of transgression. On the collective level, we see the utopian ideal of a society of permanent truth, where the transparency of consciences allows the group to function with one mind. Even in the most oppressive uses of confession, curious reversals occur: scaffold confessions arouse the sympathy of the crowd, the scapegoat becomes a hero. Repeated confessions of the flesh teach the laity a new language of passion as penance gives way to pleasure. Finally, in our own day, the spread of psychoanalysis has had several unforeseen consequences, with their utopian and ideological aspects: sex becomes a commodity and Freud's "perversions" are skillfully marketed in a consumer society. The language of psychoanalysis is taken up by various excluded groups to combat their sexual marginalization, and Freud himself becomes the object of a vigorous critique. Foucault does point out some of these reversals, but his analysis dwells upon the negative examples; he tends to see any use of confessional discourse as implying power and entrapment. I would seek to go beyond this perspective. Can't the words of the self be utopian or revolutionary? Doesn't the dreamworker ultimately defeat the analyst?
THE ORIGINS OF CONFESSIONAL DISCOURSE

To appreciate the singularity of the Lateran decree, it will first be necessary to trace briefly the history of confession. The key changes that emerge are the shifting of emphasis from a sacrament of penance to a sacrament of confession; the imposition of a single, coherent definition of confession based on the Scholastic notions of matter and form and the \textit{ex opere operato} definition of the sacraments; the development of a more subjective form of religion founded on contrition and inferiority; and the extension of power by the Church to the domain of the individual conscience and the use of this disciplinary power to combat heresy and control sexual morality. After discussing the historical evolution of confession, we will then examine our first literary example of confessional discourse: Dante’s \textit{Inferno} and \textit{Purgatorio}.

From Penance to Confession

With the imposition of the Lateran decree, a sacrament of \textit{penance}—chiefly fasting and other ascetic works of atonement—was replaced by a sacrament of \textit{confession}. As a modern theologian explains it; “The shame of the avowal becomes the expiation of what is confessed” (Rahner, “Penance” 397). The theologians whose opinions were to prevail on the subject of confession had decided that the words of the priest and the confessant were the essential part of the sacrament. In Scholastic terms, the sacramental sign consisted of the acts of the penitent (his sins, his contrition, and his words) as the \textit{matter} of the sacrament, while the absolution formula pronounced by the priest was the \textit{form}. Together the two elements formed a sacrament that functioned \textit{ex opere operato}, “by the work done.” Under a kind of speech act theory, it was held that the sacrament itself conferred forgiveness, and not the sinner’s contrition alone. The actual words, “Ego te absolvo,” were not declaratory on the part of the priest but judicial or performative, having operative power in themselves.

Expressive Signs: “Propter Meritum Erubescentiae”

From a political point of view, the Scholastic definitions emphasized the importance of the priest, but they also made the words of the penitent more important. St. Bonaventure says that confession must be spoken out loud because this increases the shame: “Tenentur proprio ore
dicere propter meritum erubescentiae” (qtd. in Vacandard 920). According to St. Thomas Aquinas, each sacrament uses expressive symbols to signify what it accomplishes, and since the essence of confession is to submit sin to the judgment of God, the human voice is both the appropriate means and symbol for self-inculpation. Thus in order to express outwardly the nature of the sacrament, confession should be “full of shame.”

Secundem quod est pars sacramenti, habet determinatum actum, sicut et alia sacramenta habent determinatam materiam. Et sicut in baptismo ad significandum interiorem ablationem assumitur illud elementum cuius est maximus usus in abluendo, ita in actu sacramentali ad manifestandum ordinate assumitur ille actus quo maxime consuevimus manifestare, scilicet per proprium verbum. (Suppl. q. 9, a. 3)

In so far as it is part of a sacrament, it [confession] has a determinate act, just as the other sacraments have a determinate matter. And as in Baptism, in order to signify the inward washing, we employ that element which is chiefly used in washing, so in the sacramental act which is intended for manifestation we generally make use of that act which is most commonly employed for the purpose of manifestation, vis. our own words.

Est autem confessio actus virtutis poenitentiae. Quae quidem primo initium sumit in horrore turpitudinis peccati. Et quantum ad hoc, confessio debet esse verecunda: ut scilicet non se jactet de peccatis propter aliquam saeculi vanitatem admixtam. (Suppl. q. 9, a. 4)

Now confession is an act of the virtue of penance. First of all it takes its origin in the horror which one conceives for the shamefulness of sin, and in this respect confession should be full of shame, so as not to be a boastful account of one's sins, by reason of some worldly vanity accompanying it.

The *sigillum*, or seal of secrecy, is another aspect of confession that Thomas saw as signifying the sacrament's inner reality: "God hides the sins of those who submit to Him by Penance; wherefore this also should be signified in the sacrament of Penance, and consequently the
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sacrament demands that the confession should remain hidden’ (Suppl. q. 11, a. 1). Like a seal stamped on a letter, the confessional sigillum is an engraved mark that signifies an absence, an effacement.

Extended further, the idea of sigillum suggests that a confession always conceals as much as it reveals and, more generally, that signs have about them a seal-like quality that allows one message to be read while another is hidden or repressed. Pursuing further and generalizing Aquinas's idea of the sigillum, one could arrive at a very modern theory of the sign reminiscent of Heidegger's etymological meditation on the truth as alethea, which is both “unconcealment,” the “opening which first grants Being and thinking and their presencing to and for each other” (68), and concealment: “Lethe belongs to a-lethe, not just as an addition, not as shadow to light, but rather as the heart of aletheia” (71). If sigillum belongs to confession, not just as an aftereffect or an act of professional discretion but as a hiding and an unknowing that are integral to the act of revelation itself, then perhaps the normal impediments to confession (guilt, shame, forgetfulness) are secondary to an intrinsic, formal difficulty. Confession will never be complete: not on account of moral shortcomings, but because the signs by which it is proffered always conceal other signs.

Within a metaphysics and a theology of presence lies a kind of signifying that “hides sins from the face of the living God” [occultatio pectorum ab oculis Dei viventis] (Quodlib. q. 12, a. 18). It is consistent with metaphysics that this negative kind of signifying, this dark side of the sign, be confined to writing and that the voice be privileged as the instrument of God’s grace and the sinner’s sacramental act (we recall St. Augustine’s commentary on Lazarus). However, the idea that every revelation is an occultation is also suggested by the movement from voce to sigillum. Speech reveals not only the inner nature of the sacrament but also, as sigillum effaces sin from the soul and hides the spiritual transformation, the return to life and Being effected by confession.

The Scholastic definitions were adopted as the official positions of the Church during the Council of Trent, and it was held that this sort of verbal confession had been instituted by Christ and had always been a part of tradition. As we look back to the origins of confession in early Christianity, we will see that a far different sort of penance existed.

To situate the Christian practice of penance correctly, it is necessary to invoke the precedent of the Old Testament. Admission of one’s sinfulness to God is a fundamental experience in the Judeo-Christian
tradition. Exhortations to confess can be found throughout the Old Testament. From the Psalms comes this typical passage:

I acknowledged my sin unto thee,
And mine iniquity did I not hide:
I said, I will confess my transgression unto Jehovah;
And thou forgavest the iniquity of my sin.

(Ps. 32.3-5)

The sinner feels that he has violated a personal bond with a God who takes an interest in his life, and that the way to make amends for his transgression is to admit his guilt. The point is not that one reveals a fault to an omniscient Being who knows it already, but that the admission of guilt is operative in obtaining forgiveness. The other important aspect of this confession is that it is made directly from the sinner's heart to God; there are no human intermediaries.

In the New Testament, there are instances of confession to other men. The Epistle of St. James commands: "Confess therefore your sins one to another." John the Baptist's penitents were "baptized of him in the Jordan confessing their sins" (Matt. 3.6), although it is not clear that there was auricular confession here. The Church interpreted Christ's granting of the "power of the keys" as a commission to hear confessions and loose or bind men to their sins. But even Catholic apologists do not maintain that there are clear-cut references to auricular confession in these passages: "Aucun passage des écrits apostoliques n'affirme avec certitude l'existence et la pratique de la confession auriculaire au temps des apôtres" (Mangenot 838). The same uncertainty prevails during the first three centuries of Christianity. There was a rite of penance, but its essence was not auricular confession.

Public Penance

In the beginning, Christianity was a total lifelong engagement, a single definitive conversion like the experience St. Augustine describes. The practicing Christian in the earlier days had no need of a sacramental confession. As Vacandard notes, "Saint Augustin ne s'était vraisemblablement jamais confessé de sa vie" (892). One either tried to live up to the Christian ideal, or one left the community. To commit a grave sin such as adultery or murder was to quit the fellowship. At most, the early Christian was given one chance to rejoin the community. In the

Public penance was reserved for three grave sins—murder, adultery, and idolatry—that would be notorious enough to make auricular confession unnecessary. But this consideration does not suffice to explain the essential difference between this form of penance and the auricular confession of Lateran. Although we find during this period a few scattered references to people revealing their sins in private to a spiritual counselor before the ceremony, it was only for exceptional circumstances: an adulteress might be allowed to do private penance for fear that public knowledge of her sin would lead to her death; a man might reveal his sin to a bishop to ask whether it was grave enough to merit public penance. Verbalization was only an incidental part of this rite; its essence was the doing of penance, *agere paenitentiam*.

The technical name for this early penance was *exomologesis*. The first detailed description comes from Tertullian's (A.D. 160–220) *De paenitentia*. He speaks of the need for the sinner to manifest his sin externally: “So that it may not be only borne upon the conscience within, but may be also exhibited by some outward act. This act, which finds better and more frequent expression under its Greek name, is *exomologesis*, by which we confess our sin to the Lord, not because He knoweth it not, but inasmuch as by confession satisfaction is ordered” (qtd. in Watkins 1:115). Confession is made within the heart to God, and in order for *exomologesis* to be complete, the sin must be manifested outwardly by the body through a long period of public penance. Tertullian explains that one must “exchange the sins which [one] has committed for severe treatment” (qtd. in Watkins 1:115). The period of severe treatment was prolonged from several months to years, depending on the case. At the end of this period the sinner was brought into the church and allowed to rejoin the community. Again Tertullian provides us with a description of such a scene: “And you, introducing the penitent adulterer into the church to entreat the brotherhood, prostrate him in the midst all in hair-cloth and ashes, arrayed in disorder and repulsiveness, before the widows, before the presbyters, laying hold of the garments of all, licking the footprints of all, clasping the knees of all” (qtd. in Watkins 1:124). It was only at the conclusion of this ceremony that primitive penance was complete. The long ascetic manifestation of the body of the sinner is what accomplished forgiveness. Foucault comments that behind this experience is the model of martyrdom, of
union with God through loss of life and renunciation of the self. The penitent was dramatizing his state of sin and his desire to "get rid of his own body, to destroy his own flesh, and get access to a new spiritual life.... In the ostentatious gestures of maceration, self-revelation is at the same time self-destruction" ("About the Beginnings" 214–15). In Christian confession, one is obliged by divine injunction to simultaneously reveal and renounce the self.

Other philosophical schools have practices that resemble Christian confession and asceticism, but they aim at mastery over the forces of mind and body, which are considered fundamentally natural and good, not their systematic elimination and replacement by a divine principle. There is a unique note of alienation of the body and the mind by sin in the Christian tradition, and there is a unique solution to the problem: the obligation of the Christian to analyze and dramatize his sinful condition.

Sozomene, one of the Fathers of the Church, says that exomologesis is like confessing one's sins tamquam in theatro (qtd. in Vacandard 859). It is a public acting out of sin before the assembly of believers. Like the theater in ancient Greece, this ritual served as a social contract for the community. It drew the primitive Church together around the representation of certain sacred realities. The ideological and utopian possibilities of this dramatization are several: it can be a joyous rite of inclusion or a ritual of exclusion separating the individual from the community. It can manifest a uniquely Christian concern for the individual, expressed in the parable of the Good Shepherd leaving his flock to look for the one lost sheep, or it can produce a similarly unique culpabilization of the single scapegoat.

The rite of public penance has taken both forms through the centuries. It has been an occasion for collective renewal and forgiveness; the celebration of the carnival is founded upon public penance. But it has also produced ugly rites of exclusion like the auto-da-fé and the show trial.

Repeatable Private Penance and Monastic Exagoreusis

The practice of more frequent confession did not become widespread until monastic congregations spread their confessional practices to society at large. This happened in the East during the eighth and ninth centuries and in the West, with the generalization of Celtic monastic penance, as early as the sixth century. The word penance is still the key
notion to these practices because, although it could now be undergone more than once in a lifetime and involved the private revelation to a priest of secret sins, the emphasis was still on the work of penance to be performed to expiate sins. Penance remains an infrequent practice at this period and has yet to assume any canonical regularity. The literature of the period shows us saints still confessing their sins directly to God; men confess to other men when in need, or even to their horses or their sword (Beriou 77). Pilgrimages, almsgiving, and entry into a monastery are considered more significant ways of atoning for sin than confession.

Repeatable private penance was an adjustment of the old system to new social realities. The Christian populace was growing, and moral standards were necessarily lowered to accommodate a larger population that was not as fervent as the first Christian communities; allowances had to be made for people who repeatedly fell into serious sin. The anonymity of sin in a larger group also made auricular confession necessary.

This period is referred to technically as the stage of "tariffied" penance because it produced the first penitentials, books that established an exact penance for each type of sin. The classification of sins and a sort of penitential economy are starting to emerge at this period. It would be interesting to study the relation of this economy to that of feudalism. One can sense the ideological and utopian aspects of this system; it was "communist" to the extent that all penitential "laborers" had equal access to a divine means of production, but its ideological function was to postpone the just rewards of labor to the next life while leaving the social order intact. Chaucer’s pardoner is an example of an entrepreneur willing to translate the system into an actually functioning economy. He is a sort of protomercantilist who plies his trade between Rome and Canterbury.

Compared to later developments, this regime of penance seems to take an excessively quantitative, mechanical attitude to sin with little attention paid to the subjective aspect and the interior disposition of the confessant.

But alongside this kind of rare, severe penance for the population at large, there was a tradition originating in the Eastern Church of a more sophisticated monastic spiritual direction, the *exagoreusis ton logismoi* or "manifestation of thoughts" to a spiritual director. The technique involved a more rigorous search for sin in its mental, unconscious origins. The novice revealed his thoughts, not just his sins, to
an experienced elder gifted in the "diacritical" science of discerning thoughts. The aim was to render the soul entirely lucid to itself and to extirpate evil inclinations in their unconscious roots.

Reading Evagrius or Cassian, one enters a completely different spiritual world from that of the early Christian communities. Instead of the social ritual of *exomologesis*, we find the solitary battle of a monk against his evil thoughts. In this spiritual arena, the community is no longer threatened by adultery or violence; rather, a man striving for perfection is assailed by demons who send him tempting thoughts and illusions. They are legion. Although invisible, they can be detected by the truly gifted: St. Anthony can actually smell their presence; Evagrius warns that the demon of fornication lives by water; Cassian tells stories of the most virtuous ascetics laid low by false demonic visions, one monk's temptations even culminating in "Judaism and circumcision" (*Collationes* 2:8). Each demon wages an incessant war against the monk by sending him wicked thoughts, logismoi. Those who lead lives in the world are tempted by physical objects, whereas the monk is called upon to fight a more difficult, psychological battle, the "immaterial war" (*kata dianoian*) against evil (Evagrius 610). The spiritual analysis of thought was the chief resource of the holy man in this battle.

There were several principles at work in monastic analysis. One assumption was that the devil worked best in secret. He could inspire a wicked thought, but if the thought were revealed and brought out in the open, he would be defeated. The novice monk never knew whether a thought was inspired by God or by the devil; the most objectively meritorious idea, such as undertaking a long fast, could hide a secondary, wicked intention like personal vanity. The way to get to the root of the thought was to expose it to a spiritual director.

According to Cassian, who describes monastic analysis in his *Collationes* and *Institutiones*, the verbalization of a thought would reveal whether it arose secretly from God, the self, or the devil. Confession thus had moral as well as epistemological merit; it delivered the soul from the secret suggestions of the devil, and it clarified the subject's thought process to himself. A passage from Cassian dramatically illustrates the power of confession to free the sinner from Satan's grasp and reveal the truth. A young monk, Serapio, has stolen a loaf of bread because he can no longer endure a fast. The following day his spiritual director, Theonas, delivers a homily on the importance of honesty. Serapio removes the loaf from under his cloak and confesses his sin; immediately, "a burning lamp burst from his chest and filled the room
with the smell of sulfur.” The elder explains: “The Lord has made visible the truth of my words; He wanted you to see with your own eyes how the devil, who suggested the sin to you, was thrown out of your heart by your salutary confession, and how, once discovered, will have no hold over you any longer” (qtd. in Guy 30).

The actual words of the confession are the center of the story. Neither the petty crime of stealing the bread nor the revelation of the crime to the community is important; what counts is the interior drama of hiding a sin and then revealing it. God produces the miracle to dramatize for the monk his moral state and the merit of confession; the actual words of confession vanquish Satan and produce a miraculous revelation of self-knowledge. The text also shows the importance of confessing to an authority; it is not enough that the monk feels contrition in his heart. The elder interprets the meaning of the confession and miracle. One assumes that the symbols of the burning lamp and the sulfur were clear enough, but this is a relatively easy, straightforward case. God does not always intervene so dramatically to show the demon at work.

The monastic texts mention several hermeneutic principles involved in the interpretation of confessions. One is an attention to the physical manifestations that accompany the avowal: “The Fathers say it is the universal and evident sign that a thought is from the devil when we blush in admitting it to our spiritual director” (Cassian, Institutions 49).

Cassian discusses at length methods for deciding whether a thought is from God, the devil, or the self. Certain analogies are used for the process of discerning thoughts. The novice and his spiritual director stand watch as “sentinels” over the doors of consciousness, preventing any untoward thought from entering. In the Collationes he makes three comparisons of interest: a miller who selects only certain grains to be ground, a centurion inspecting his troops, and a money changer who rejects some coins and accepts others.

The fundamental principles of the Fathers’ science (gnostike) of discernment (Gk. diacrisis, Lat. discretio) are quite similar to psychoanalysis if one replaces the demonic terminology with Freud’s scientific language and familial mythology. Like the analyst, the spiritual father pays attention to the material and structural aspects of thoughts to decipher their unconscious meaning. The devil possesses an art, a technē, by which he disguises his temptations, much as the dreamwork disguises repressed desires. Therefore, the mental signifier must be scrutinized in all its aspects to uncover its true meaning. Evagrius goes
straight to the object represented to look for clues: the face of someone who has injured our pride is the sure sign that a hidden devil is trying to produce a movement of anger. For Cassian, in a curious reversal of the Freudian associative pathway, an image of the mother is the demon’s way of leading the mind on to libidinous thoughts of other women.

The comparison between the spiritual analyst and the money changer is perhaps the most suggestive; it is one of Freud’s models of the censorship process, although what Freud’s preconscious does and what the spiritual director does are opposites. Freudian censorship only allows the successfully disguised wish to pass through to consciousness, whereas Cassian’s money changer pierces the disguise and sends the evil thought away (Foucault, “About the Beginnings”).

The money changer image is also the most complex image of the discernment of thoughts. The thoughts of the confessing monk are treated like coins, which, unlike the miller’s grain and the passing soldiers, are symbolic objects. A complete poetics of thought interpretation emerges in Cassian’s prolonged discussion of this comparison. Again we are struck by the attention to the material aspects of the signifier: Is the coin-thought made of gold, that is, is it authentically Christian or is it contaminated by pagan ideas? Does the coin bear the image of the True King or the tyrant? Even the true image might be a counterfeit; in other words, an overtly pious thought or inspiration might conceal a sinful ulterior motive like vanity. The apparently true effigy is also compared to the temptation of false biblical readings: the devil misleads the monk in his reading of the Bible and this is the source of sinful acts.

Cassian thus paints a thoroughly modern picture of the insistence of the unconscious in mental life. Dreams, he believed, were the avenue of the unconscious; they revealed secret vices that the monk had not yet eradicated from his soul (Institutions 275). Choices of action, reading, even the most altruistic behavior can all be done to satisfy unconscious desires.

The analytic activity of the money changer also reveals a linguistic model of the psyche. Consciousness and the unconscious are levels of meaning to be deciphered in a constant poetic war between the spiritual father and the demon. One image from Cassian is particularly striking in this regard. He concludes his discussion of discretio by saying that hidden in the corner of the soul are the tracks or traces of demonic beasts, “bestia, vel leo vel draco, pertransiens perniciosa ves-
tigia latenter impresserit" (Conférences 106). These vestiges show the way to other "beasts"; evil has left its mark in the unconscious, and these pathways are waiting there to be reactivated. Discretio is the art of perceiving and eradicating these evil traces and substituting a sacred writing in its place. With the "plow of the Scriptures" (evangelico arato), the monk traces a new message into his soul. This linguistic model of the psyche is remarkably similar to one of Freud's models, precisely the one that is now considered the most sophisticated and that has kept Freud at the center of postmodernist thought.5

There are other obvious parallels between psychoanalysis and monastic direction. The intervention of the spiritual director is much like that of the analyst; both are intuitive, yet both also involve certain hermeneutic principles. Furthermore, the monks had already developed a somatic theory like Freud's "drives." For them, human behavior was dominated by eight unconscious inclinations or logismoi, which sprang from two hidden somatic drives: gluttony and libido. These two forces in turn were aspects of philautia, a self-love akin to Freud's primitive narcissism (Hausherr 1028). The Desert Fathers theorized the instinctual foundations of mental life long before Freud; the psychotextual territory was already there, psychoanalysis merely changed the place names.

Both practices rely on a mysterious heart-to-heart insight into the unconscious of the other. The Freudian analyst, like his monastic predecessor, must suspend his rational faculties, cease note-taking, and "bend his own unconscious like a receptive organ towards the emerging unconscious of the patient" (12:115). Likewise, the elder relied upon an "illiterate" (aggramatoi) gift of discernment to read the thoughts of his monks (Hausherr 1026). There was a science to his methods, as we have seen, but ultimately he relied upon an infused perspicaciousness. His own rational faculties were supported by a spirit within him. Barsanulphe, one of the Fathers, explains how spiritual direction works: "Saints do not speak on their own authority, it is God who speaks in them as He will, sometimes in veiled fashion, sometimes clearly" (Hausherr 1049). The only proper preparation for either science is a long apprenticeship that teaches the adept how to read the perverse rhetoric of the mind. The spiritual authors make a distinction between the enlightened reading of the Bible and the interpretation of thoughts; the most gifted confessor could be an idiota in this regard (Hausherr 1026).

Freud led his subjects along a verbal pathway to the recognition of
their Oedipus complexes; the monks wandered a literal and figural desert in search of the Father. In the words of Ignatius of Antioch, this journey was guided by an inner voice: *Deuro pros ton Patera*, which the *Dictionnaire de spiritualité* translates as: "Viens ça, vers le Père" (Haus­herr 1012). In the *Rule of St. Benedict*, the monastic vocation is confirmed by the joyous acclamation of the name of the Father; the monk cries out in recognition to his abbot: "Accepistis spiritum adoptionis filiorum, in quo clamamus: Abba, Pater!" (chap. 2). The inadvertent Lacanian language of the *Dictionnaire* helps us cast the genealogy of psychoanalysis back to patristic times. From the Desert Fathers to Lacan, there has always existed this paradoxical Father who solicits the voice of the unconscious and promises to restore meaning to the subject: "Viens ça, vers le Père."

Awareness of this continuity between analysis and confession will give rise to a more relative, historic use of psychoanalytic terms. By constantly provoking a confessional echo to the rhetoric of analysis, I hope to gain insight into another sort of paternity and power that Freud's method was blind to methodologically because it never escaped this kind of monastic fatherhood. Beyond the provisional role of transferential father, the analyst permanently plays the role of the Desert Father who breaks through repression and enjoins speech. The name of this father is not synonymous with negation. If I may be allowed a Lacanism myself, a homophonic pun that sounds like Nietzsche's "Ja-schaffende," the analytic father does not temporarily occupy the place of the "nom(n) du père" but rather exercises an unrelinquished paternity by a "ouï-dire du père."

Phonetically, the word suggests a discursive order and a power that are the opposite of the "non," and, as the dictionary definition suggests, "ce qu'on ne connaît que pour l'avoir entendu dire"—the only truth available in analysis is a heard truth. And finally, *hearsay* and *rumor* are opposed to juridically verifiable evidence. Paternal power is normally associated with the law, all desire coming up against the paternal law, and the paternal act par excellence consisting of the enunciation of the repressive law. But this "ouï-dire" or rumor of the father operates differently from this kind of law. Psychoanalysis and spiritual direction both deal with unverifiable evidence. At the core of the dream material lie primal scenes that may or may not be literally true, and in the depths of the monastic soul are true and false messages from God, the self, or demons. Only God himself can see the soul in its entirety. Both the analyst and the confessor receive a hearsay mes-
sage that passes through them; the rumor is never verified, just re­peated. The name of the father is invoked, but it is not synonymous with repression. The name and the law of the pastoral father is not silence, but speech. A final quote from one of the Desert Fathers explains how confession is essential to maintaining spiritual paternity in the monastic community: “Nothing is more important than the combat of confession [exagoreusin agonisma] and the heroic exploits of obedience: by these two exercises the soul is enlightened, and the will is mortified; by these two means are obtained the perfect unity of the spiritual child [gegennemenou] with the spiritual father [gegennekota]” (Migne, PG 99.812). The “agon” of confession is essential to holding the monastic community together; it forms the discursive bond between spiritual father and son. This is a paternal regime, and there is still an essential link between desire and paternal power, but this power is not juridical in nature; it is not a prohibitive law but rather a positive call to an “agon” of self-statement. War is the absence of law; it calls for rapid adjustments to a changing dynamic situation and the exploitation of the enemy’s force. The monks’ battle for control of the soul is an active process in which desire is forced to speak, not be silent. The monk’s desire is engaged, encountered, not simply suppressed. This war of self-statement is a unique Christian feature that must be taken into account in any phenomenology of power in the West. Power is not just the negative law of the father; it is also this verbal call to arms of desire which founds the analytic cohort of fathers and sons.

Did Freud know anything of his monastic precursors? The father of psychoanalysis insisted that his practice was different from confession: “In confession the sinner tells what he knows, in analysis the neurotic has to tell more” (20:189). But we have seen that many of Freud’s techniques were already in use in monastic confession. One wonders whether ignorance or deliberate deception on Freud’s part could explain this omission. Certainly Pierre Janet, one of Freud’s mentors and the coinventor of the talking cure, was aware of the precedent of spiritual direction.

In comparing monastic exagoreusis to public penance, several parallels and divergences are apparent. The goal of both practices is the same—the simultaneous revelation of man’s sinfulness and self-renunciation, the abneget semetipsum of asceticism. Public penance accomplished this through the symbolic destruction of the body; monastic confession achieved similar results by a total surrender of the
thought process to a spiritual director. One was an exceptional process for reconciling grave sinners to the community, the other a technique for exercising continuous control over a committed member. With the imposition of the Lateran decree, private confession became the sacramental rite of penance, but the other form persisted for some special circumstances—public sinners and, most notably, the hapless victims of the Inquisition, who were subjected to a sort of theater of the sinful body which hearkens back to *exomologesis*.

The general tendency was toward the monastic type of confession. Lateran was the first step in generalizing a monastic, *psychological* type of religion that responded to and, to some extent, helped create the modern individual. From Lateran onward, confession became more frequent and progressed logically toward spiritual direction, a process that would reach its full development in the seventeenth century with the popularization of spiritual direction.

**DANTE: “TUTTA SI CONFESSA”**

We will now consider a literary text based on the same discursive principles as the Lateran decree. *The Divine Comedy* uses obligatory confession to create a total vision of humanity governed and punished by its own verity. As the lost souls enter Dante's Inferno, they must pass before the Judge of the Underworld, Minos, and confess their sins:

\[
\text{Stavvi Minòs orribilmente, e ringhia:} \\
\text{essamina le colpe nell'entrata;} \\
\text{giudica e manda secondo ch'avvinghia.} \\
\text{Dico che quando l'anima mal nata} \\
\text{li vien dinanzi, tutta si confessa;} \\
\text{e quel conoscitor delle peccata} \\
\text{vede qual luogo d'inferno è da essa;} \\
\text{cignesi con la coda tante volte} \\
\text{quantunque gradi vuol che jiù sia messa.} \\
\text{(5.4–12)}
\]

There stands Minos, horrible, snarling, examines their offenses at the entrance, judges and dispatches them according as he girds himself; I mean that when the ill-born soul comes before him, it confesses all; and that discerner of sins sees what is the place for
it in Hell and encircles himself with his tail as many times as the grades he will have it sent down.

It is not enough that the souls are justly condemned according to God's justice, they must enact their damnation in their own words. Their confessions are the basis of their punishment; Minos translates their guilty words into a degree of corporal punishment by encircling himself a certain number of times with his tail. He initiates the punitive mechanism of Hell, which consists in turning the condemned into cruel illustrations of their sins. Their bodies become an ironic, vengeful representation of their confessions.

The *Purgatorio* is also founded on confession, if we are to believe the Dante scholar Edward Moore, who says, "It can hardly be doubted that the white marble [of the first step of the Gates of Purgatory] represents candid *Confession*; the dark and calcined stone cracked in all directions, broken-hearted *Contrition*; and the flaming red porphyry, burning *Love*" (47). The first step one takes in either of Dante's vast penitentiaries involves avowal; the confessing subject is either in the grip of Minos or at the gates of Purgatory.8

The very architecture of Hell and Purgatory is like the deployment of a medieval confession manual. The various *cornices* and *boglia* of Hell and Purgatory are based on the Schoolmen's classification of sin into Seven Deadly Sins, plus certain notions borrowed from Aristotle and Cicero (Moore 152–208). Furthermore, the successive confessions of the sinners are an essential narrative device of Dante's work, the bulk of which is devoted to recording the confessing subjects he encounters.9 On another level, the confession of the pilgrim himself at the end of the *Purgatorio* is the culminating event of his own spiritual journey; he too must confess before entering Paradise.

In conceiving his vast confessional empires, Dante combined elements of the classical mythological Underworld with different confessional practices of the Church. Different methods were appropriate to different spheres, from the crudest, most external forms of confession to establish objective guilt to the more refined forms of mental purgation.

In Purgatory, the penitents are afforded the benefits of canonical penance, involving contrition, confession, absolution, and satisfaction. Having availed themselves of the sacrament of penance in life, symbolized by the white marble gates of Purgatory, the redeemed sinners
can begin the process of eradicating the “memoria del peccato” and preparing their minds for God (Purg. 28.128). They lead a quasi-monastic life: celibate, ascetic, immersed in the liturgy, and freely confessing their sins. Witness the lustful souls of the seventh circle, who joyfully call out their sins before entering the purifying flames:

\[\text{soprgridar ciascuna s’affatica:} \]
\[\text{la nova gente: “Soddoma e Gomorrah”; }\]
\[\text{e l’altra: “Nella vacca entra Pasife,} \]
\[\text{perchè ’l torelo a sua lussuria corra.”} \]
\[(26.39-42)\]

Each of them strives which shall the loudest cry. “Sodom and Gomorrah” the new-comers shout. The rest, “Pasiphaë enters the cow that the bull may run to her lust.”

The atmosphere is one of a medieval pilgrimage or an Ash Wednesday procession. We know that Dante was familiar with the liturgical manuals governing penance and pilgrimages. Meersseman maintains that the presentation of confession in the Purgatory was directly inspired by such literature.¹⁰

In Hell, by contrast, confession leads only to classification of sin and punishment. The redeemed souls in Purgatory are saved by Christian mercy, whereas the \textit{lex talionis} of Jehovah and the \textit{contrapasso} of St. Thomas Aquinas fall vengefully upon the naked souls of the damned. “If Thou shouldst mark iniquities, O Lord, who should stand?” (Ps. 129).¹¹

The damned are in some respects like the victims of the nascent Inquisition, and some of them, like Farinata, were actually condemned by the Holy Office. Having refused the grace period of life and the opportunity of canonical penance, they are subject to the “question” and forced to confess. The public punishment of their sin hearkens back to \textit{exomologesis}, but it is a vindictive parody of public penance. It is not the meritorious asceticism of the contrite body but rather the ignominious humiliation of a recalcitrant flesh that, \textit{malgré lui}, will be made to signify the reality of sin.

Dante’s didactic intent was certainly to show the ease and generosity of confession within the Church as opposed to the terrible justice that awaited the unrepentant. Dante’s work is an expression of the Lateran age in that it treats confession as a necessary antidote to sin, but
one that still meets with great resistance. Many of the souls in the Inferno are there because they postponed confession for too long, and the Purgatorio abounds in stories of in extremis confessions that save the sinner from damnation.

MINOS

When one compares Dante's Minos with that of his Greek and Latin sources, the radical difference between the Christian and pagan view of the afterlife becomes apparent. The unique role of confession in the Christian scheme of divine justice and punishment is also evident. Let us briefly review the myth.

Minos was the son of Zeus and Europa and unfaithful husband to Pasiphaë, whose own union with the sacred bull of Poseidon produced the Minotaur. In revenge for his son's murder at the hands of the Athenians, Minos imposed a cruel annual tribute on their city. Seven young men and women were fed to the Minotaur, whom he had imprisoned in the depths of the Labyrinth at Knossos. The hero Theseus, incarnation of Athenian law and reason, traveled to Crete and destroyed the Minotaur, thus ending the religious and political oppression of Mycenaean Athens by the rival and alien Minoan Crete.¹²

However barbarously he may have treated the Athenians, Minos was revered by Homer, whose hero Odysseus evokes his memory in the nineteenth book of the Odyssey: "Here lived King Minos whom great Zeus received every ninth month in private council—Minos, the father of my father, Deucalion." Odysseus also encounters the legendary king in the Underworld: "There then I saw Minos, the glorious son of Zeus, golden scepter in hand, giving judgment to the dead from his seat, while they sat and stood about the king through the wide-gated house of Hades, and asked of him judgment" (bk. 11). Because of his reputation for justice on earth, Zeus made him judge of the Underworld. In the Homeric legend, we are still far removed from Dante or even Plato: "Homer says that Minos gives laws to the dead but does not act as judge" (Ringgren 206). There are a few great transgressors in Homer's Underworld—Tantalos, Sisyphos, and Tityus—who are punished for exceptional crimes against the gods, but there is no idea of an individual judgment awaiting all mankind followed by reward or punishment for the deeds of earthly life. Homer's nekyia describes a shadowy mournful existence where the dead regret their lives on earth.¹³
It was the Orphics and the Pythagoreans who moralized the myth and installed Minos, Rhadamanthus, and Aikos as judges of all souls entering the afterlife, sending them to the Isles of the Blessed or Tartaros. This is the version we find at the end of the *Gorgias*, with the added stipulation that the judges of the Underworld must use their own souls to pass judgment on the dead: “And the judge must be naked too and dead, scanning with his soul itself the souls of all immediately after death” (523e).

Virgil’s *Aeneid* describes a similar, although less mystical, judgment scene in which “Minos sits on judgment with a jury / chosen by lot and bids the silent gathering / Listen to evidence of their lives and the charges / Preferred against them” (“quaesitor Minos urnam movet, ille silentum / consiliumque vocat vitasque et crimina discit”) (6.432-33). Virgil uses the vocabulary of the Roman court to describe Minos; he is a *quaesitor* convening a *concilium.*14 His function is confined to hearing the cases of souls unjustly condemned to death, and no mention is made of confession. If there is a source for Dante’s “tutta confessa” in Virgil, it would be the description of Rhadamanthus, who, at the gates of the iron tower of Tartaros (*ferrea turris*), interrogates the wicked:

Gnosius haec Rhadamanthus habet durissima regna,  
castigatque auditque dolos subigitque fateri,  
quae quis apud superos, furto laetatus inani,  
distulit in seram commissa piacula mortem.  
(6.566-69)

Rhadamanthus of Knossos rules this place  
With an iron hand: hearing each case of deceit  
And fitly condemning it he compels each victim  
To confess to the gods those crimes whose expiation  
They had postponed in life—in their fatuous self-congratulation at having concealed them—and death came too late.

Dante has radically altered these images of the just judges of antiquity. First, he has combined the roles of Minos and Rhadamanthus. Second, in typical medieval fashion he has transformed a quasi-divine character from pagan mythology into a demon, complete with the tail of a snake.
The confession that Dante’s Minos extorts is not the same as that which Rhadamanthus demands. Virgil’s “fateri” has none of the sacramental connotations of “confessa.” Virgil’s judge is a Roman *quaesitor*, whereas Dante’s is a “conoscitor delle peccata.” In Virgil’s Avernus, as in the Rome of his day, confession is not a universal moral obligation but an exceptional juridical procedure reserved for certain deceitful criminals.

More important, Virgil is not really interested in the avowals that Rhadamanthus hears; his hero, Aeneas, does not record a single conversation with Rhadamanthus’s clients. In Dante’s Hell and Purgatory, on the other hand, every single soul must confess. It is a decisive act of the greatest spiritual significance, *in malo* for the damned and *in bono* for the saved. It is the focus of Dante’s whole poem; for the first time in Western literature, every single human being has a story that demands narration.

The pagan gods do not insist on man’s confession. There is a steady increase in moral obligations to truth and justice as we move from the Homeric world to Plato, but nowhere can one find the ritual obligation to tell the truth about oneself. The *oracle* is the ritual by which pagan gods and men communicate; the *god* speaks the enigmatic truth about man. In Christianity, the verbalization of the truth must come from the individual, in this life or in the terrible encounter with Minos.

A look at the iconography of Minos through the ages confirms the different interpretations he was subject to. Figure 1 is a restored fresco of the priest-king of Knossos, whom Sir Arthur Evans identifies with the legends of Minos: “Here we recognize Minos himself in one of his earthly incarnations” (779). This is presumably as authentic a representation of the Cretan Minos as we possess. His crown is inscribed with the symbols of “the Snake Goddess of the Delta” and the “Minoan sacred flower” (776).

Recent scholarship, however, has challenged Evans’s reconstruction and interpretation of the priest-king fresco. In *The Chalice and the Blade*, Riane Eisler describes Minoan Crete as a “prepatriarchal civilization,” and notes the preponderance of female imagery in its art: “At the great palace of Knossos it is a woman—the Goddess, her high priestess, or perhaps, as Hawkes believes, the Cretan queen—who stands at the center while two approaching processions of men bear tribute to her” (31). Citing the work of the anthropologist Ruby Rohrlich-Leavitt, Eisler contests Evans’s interpretation of the fresco: “It is modern archaeologists who have dubbed the young man just described the
Figure 1. Priest-king from Knossos, identified by Sir Arthur Evans as Minos. Reprinted with permission of Art Resource, New York.
'young prince' or the 'priest-king,' when in fact, no single representation of a king or a dominant male god has yet been found” (37). In some sense, then, Evans's The Palace of Minos prolongs later Mycenaean myths about Crete. The Victorian archaeologist was looking through male, European eyes when he saw Minos in the frescoes of Crete.

This study is concerned only with the Greek legend of Minos and its Christian reinterpretations, but it is enlightening to know that one of the distortions of the Greek myth is the suppression of a matriarchal civilization. According to Eisler, “Minoan Crete was the last, and most technologically advanced, society in which male dominance was not the norm” (39). Perhaps this explains why the Theseus legend portrays Minoan sexuality as bestial and depraved. The myth encodes an anxiety of matriarchy, the repression of maternal Crete by patriarchal Athens.

Figure 2 shows the idealized lawgiver imagined by the mainland Greeks many centuries later. All authentic Cretan elements have disappeared, and we see a bearded Hellenistic ruler. This representation is in conformity with the dignity of Homer’s and Virgil’s Minos. Figures 3 and 4, a fifteenth-century illumination and Doré’s nineteenth-century illustration, represent Dante’s demon of confession preying upon the souls of the damned. Figuring prominently is the tail that Minos wraps around himself, the precise number of times corresponding to the circle where the condemned soul will be hurled. This is the one detail that clearly demonizes Dante’s figure.

Much critical ink has been spilled over the meaning of this tail. In search of a source, Luciani discusses a case of serpent divination in the Odyssey and a passage from Servius’s commentary on the Aeneid in which a snake forms seven coils with its body to indicate that
Figure 3. Inferno 5.4–8. Ferrare illuminated manuscript, detail, 1474. Reprinted with permission of the Biblioteca Vaticana.
IN THE GRIP OF MINOS

Aeneas is about to begin his voyage to Averno (50). Perhaps Dante remembered the story of Laocoön when he created this image of constriction and fatality, or he could have been influenced by Virgil’s Tisiphone, who pounces on Rhadamanthus’s subjects as soon as they have been judged, brandishing in her left hand a “tangle of snakes.”

Above all, the tail must be seen as a bestial sign of perdition, like the “bestial segno” alluded to in Inferno 32.133. On that occasion, the pilgrim is appalled to see Ugolino gnawing on the head of Ruggieri, and he calls out to him: “O tu che mostri per si bestial segno / odio sovra colui che tu ti mangi” [O thou who by so bestial a sign showest thy hatred against him thou eatest]. Ugolino silently chewing on the head of Ruggieri is a bestial parody of normal communication. Instead of proffering speech, the mouth consumes human flesh. All communication in Hell gravitates toward this regression to the bestial.

This is in keeping with Dante’s linguistic doctrine expounded in the De vulgari eloquentia. There he contends that speech is the distinguishing characteristic of man: “Only to man was it granted to speak” (49).
Human beings communicate by signs that are at the same time “rational” and “sensible”:

Oportuit ergo genus humanum ad communicandas inter se conceptiones suas aliquod rationale signum et sensuale habere: quia, cum de ratione accipere habeat et in rationem portare, rationale esse oportuit, cumque de una ratione in aliam nihil deferri possit nisi per medium sensuale, sensuale esse oportuit. Quare, si tantum rationale esset, pertransire non posset; si tantum sensuale, nec a ratione accipere nec in rationem deponere potuisset. (46)

Hence for communicating its thoughts mankind had to have some rational and sensible sign: for it had to be rational, since it must receive from reason and transmit to reason; and it had to be sensible, since nothing can be transmitted from the reason of one to the reason of another except by a sensible medium. Hence if it were only rational, it could not pass between them; if only sensible, it could not receive from reason nor deposit in reason.

The purely sensible sign is how animals communicate; Minos’s tail is such a sign of the beast.

In Inferno 27.124–27, Dante adds a picturesque detail that underscores the role of the tail as beastly sign. Minos has just heard the confession of Guido da Montefeltro, and as he renders his sentence he bites his own tail: “A Minòs mi portò; e quelli attorse / otto volte la coda al dosso duro; / e poi che per gran rabbia la si morse, / disse: ‘Questi è de’ rei del foco furo’” [He carried me to Minos, who coiled his tail eight times about his rough back and after biting it in great rage said: “This is one of the wicked for the thievish fire”]. Even when Minos does speak, he inexplicably bites his own tail as though he could not escape a compulsive and bestial rage, as though his speech, like Ugolino’s, had to be embedded in a bestial sign. The “sign” of Ugolino can also be read as a parody of the Eucharist. He chews on the head “as bread is devoured for hunger” (Inf. 32.127), a grisly literalization of the Sacrament, the “Bread of angels.”

A similar sacramental irony is intended in Minos’s bestial tail. Confession is being parodied; instead of the healing words of forgiveness and the power to release from sin which Jesus commissioned the Apostles to do through confession (Matt. 16.19, 18.18), we have only the silent, menacing binding of the tail. As we imagine the scene, the
sinner tells his or her story while Minos's tail slowly inscribes on his own body the descending spiral of *catabasis*, the narrative of descent to the Underworld.

**INFERNO: “PAROLE E SANGUE”**

Confession and punishment are closely related in both the *Inferno* and the *Purgatorio*. As we have observed, entry into either realm is predicated upon confession, and once inside, enforced verbalization plays a key role in the punishment of the condemned and the reformation of the contrite. All the inhabitants of Hell must relate their crimes to the two poets on command. As Vanni Fucci makes clear, “Io non posso negar quel che tu chiedi” [I may not refuse to answer thy question] (24.136). In addition, the manner of confession has special significance for the sin and its punishment. What is said of Cavalcante, that he was recognizable by his voice and his mode of penance, “Le sue parole e 'l modo della pena” (10.64), is true of all the sinners. In fact, the voice and the mode of punishment are one. Voice is, according to St. Thomas Aquinas, the “determinata materia ad significandam” of confession (Suppl. q. 9, a. 3) and, as we have seen, of particular significance for Dante. Thus each confessant has a particular speech impediment or inflection of voice that signifies his or her crime and its punishment.

At almost every station of the pilgrim's journey through Hell, a similar protocol is observed: Dante asks of his guide, “Who are they?” or “What was his or her crime?” (“Maestro, chi son quelle / genti che l'aura nera si gastiga?” [5.50]; “Chi è colui, maestro?” [19.31]). To which Virgil usually replies that the condemned souls must explain their crimes in their own words: “da lui saprai di se e de' suoi torti” (19.36). Dante frequently describes in great detail the *prise de parole* of the sinners, and their speech is always marked by a particular difficulty related to their crime. Their entry into the Symbolic causes literal mutilation and castration; their confessions are “parole e sangue” (“words and blood”). Let us consider some of the more striking cases.

Paolo and Francesca's tale must be told quickly during a moment's respite from the infernal wind that blows the Lustful about, and although it affords them some peace, the telling of the tale cannot be separated from its punishment. Francesca's speech is at the same time a weeping and a saying: “dirò come colui che piange e dice” (5.126), and it causes Paolo to suffer in exactly the same way: “Mentre che l'uno spirto questo disse, / l'altro piangea” (5.139-40). Nevertheless,
their confession is a moving, noble form of suffering compared to that of the souls in the lower circles.

The Wrathful, for example, are submerged in slime, and their sighs cause the surface of the water to bubble: "Sotto l'acqua ha gente che sospira, / e fanno pullular quest'acqua al summo" (7.118–19). Their confession, which they sing collectively as a "hymn," must pass through the water: "Quest' inno si gorgollian nella strozza, / chè dir nol posson con parola integra" [This hymn they gurgle in their throat, for they cannot get the words out plainly] (7.125–26).

The formal aspects of the voice are particularly important in Piero della Vigne's confession. His voice speaks plaintively from the branches of the tree that imprisons his soul:

Come d'un stizzo verde ch'arso sia
dall'un de' capi, che dall'altro geme
e cigola per vento che va via,
si della scheggia rotta usciva insieme
parole e sangue; . . .

(13.40–44)

As a green brand that is burning at one end drips from the other and hisses with the escaping wind, so from the broken splinter came forth words and blood together.

Here is perhaps the clearest illustration of a confession that is itself a specific form of punishment related to a sin. "Words and blood" issue from the broken branch like the hissing sound of gas escaping from a burning stick. Because through suicide Piero showed no respect for his body, his soul has been humiliated by being cast into a tree. His spirit is now at the mercy of a baser form of body. He has lost control of his bodily functions, chief among them speech. When Dante breaks the branch, Piero's voice and blood escape uncontrollably to punish him for the deliberate taking of his own life. Significantly, he is unable to stop his speech, "non posso tacere" (13.56).

The uncanny atmosphere of the barren wood and the bizarre, pitiful confession of the "spirito incarcerato" have a haunting, dreamlike quality about them that evokes the mystery of suicide and the tragedy of della Vigne's career. His imprisonment in a tree is such a powerful, expressive condensation of so many aspects of his life. It is related to his very name, "Vigne," as though in the unconscious, in the Under-
world, his name had become a thing. We know that della Vigne was "of humble origins" (Sinclair 177), and this rustic sounding name seems to predestine him, however high a state he achieved in life, to a catastrophic fall from power. Anthony Cassell has observed that such wordplay appealed to the medieval mind, and, in fact, Vigne's name had already been subjected to imaginative puns.

The imagery of the mournful voices in the branches and the idea of a man's spirit imprisoned in a tree seem to revive primitive, animistic beliefs about the mobility of human life within nature. Perhaps Freud was right that there is such a thing as the death wish, Thanatos, and that it would be fitting for Dante's suicide victim to inhabit a tree, since he was ultimately moved by a desire to return to the vegetative if not the inorganic state.

Confession has a specific signification in the case of Vanni Fucci as well. He was known as a brute and a brigand, but in life he managed to hide an even more serious sin by letting another man be hanged for a crime he committed, the robbery of a sacristy. Thus he must endure the shame of owning up to this sin for the first time:

\[
\text{'Più mi duol che tu m' hai colto}
\text{nelle miseria dove tu mi vedi,}
\text{che quando fui dell'altra vita tolto.}
\text{Io non posso negar quel che tu chiedi:}
\text{in giù son messo tanto perch' io fui}
\text{ladro alla sagrestia de' belli arredi,}
\text{e falsamente già fu apposto altrui.}
\]

(24.133–39)

I suffer more that thou hast caught me in the misery in which thou seest me than when I was taken from the other life. I may not refuse to answer thy question. I am put down so far because I was a thief in the Sacristy of the Fair Ornaments and then it was laid falsely on another.

Fucci is further punished, or at least forced to accomplish the opposite of what he passed his life doing, by prophesying—telling the truth about the future of Florence.

Confession is directly parodied in the circle of the Simonists, where Dante, "like the friar confessing one fixt in the earth for treacherous homicide," listens to the confession of a pope who is stuck upside
down into a baptismal font. This scene is emblematic of all confessions in the *Inferno*. It is an ironic reversal of canonical penance; it brings no relief but rather mocks the sinner and intensifies his punishment. Here the sinners are thrust into the earth; their speech is reduced, literally, to dirt.

**ANALYSIS WITH A VENGEANCE**

Everywhere in Hell one is struck by the vengeful materiality of the punishments. The sinners are unable to rise above the Real to the Symbolic; instead, the very words of their confessions are dragged down into materiality and subjected to a perverse sort of analysis. Each sin appears as a corporeal hieroglyph imposed by divine justice and deciphered by Dante and his guide, Virgil. Like hysterical or catatonic symptoms, these mute bodily signs are made to “join in the conversation” of the sinners’ confessions. But the scenes of confession and analysis in the *Inferno* are deliberate failures of the cure. Minos uses the sinners’ words merely to decide in which circle they belong, and the poet-confessor’s interventions cannot alleviate the suffering of the lost. The symptoms can be understood, as they are to varying degrees by the condemned themselves, but no one can relieve repression or unbind desire from its destructive fixations.

Freud himself used the metaphor of the Underworld to refer to the unconscious and primary process, quoting a line from Virgil, “If I cannot bend the Higher Powers, I will move the Infernal Regions,” to describe how the dream state is the kingdom of repressed desires and primary process, which are otherwise unable to breach consciousness (5:608).

Such a comparison could be of assistance in understanding the means of representation employed in the *Inferno*. There, the condemned express the most primitive, brutal desires of mankind; their psychic energy is “unbound” as it flows unimpeded toward its immediate expression, employing the rhetoric of the unconscious to arrive at its ends: displacement, condensation, and overdetermination. But simultaneously, their desires are subject to a terrible censorship process; the very means of expression of their impulses turns against them. The words and gestures at the disposition of the damned assure that their desires will always be reduced to a brutish immediacy and that they will never be able to understand the nature of their wants or sublimate their needs.
Censorship is really the wrong word to describe the punitive mechanism of Hell because the process is set in motion by Minos's extorted confessions, and it continues in the dialogues between Dante and the sinners. Hell is being forced to state one's desires in a hostile code subject to an abusive hermeneutic authority, to be imprisoned in primary process with only Minos for an analyst.

The rhetoric of punishment in Purgatory is, to pursue the analogy, closer to secondary, conscious figuration. In distinction to the damned, the penitents have access to the signification of their symptoms. They can read traced upon their foreheads the seven Ps, corresponding to the Seven Deadly Sins, which are progressively effaced as the soul purges its guilt (9.112).

There is a long association in the Judeo-Christian tradition between sins as unconscious, guilty writing and forgiveness as effacement: "They that depart from me shall be written in the earth, because they have forsaken Jehovah" (Jer. 17.13). Christ writes in the sand to disperse the crowd that has gathered to stone the adulteress (John 8.4–10). St. Augustine says that, as a result of Christ's death on the cross, "the handwriting which was contrary to us was blotted out" (Confessions 113). St. Robert Bellarmine (1542–1621) comments on a line from Psalm 50: "'And blot out all my iniquities,' to make the pardon a lasting, permanent one, for he that turns his face away from a piece of writing, may look on it again and consider the matter of it, but when the writing is destroyed, 'blotted out,' it can no longer be read, a proof that when sin is forgiven it is thoroughly forgiven" (158).

John Freccero has studied the ironic use of writing which characterizes punishment in the Inferno. Calling it "mimesis with a vengeance," he draws a convincing parallel between Dante's uses of writing and that theorized by St. Augustine in the De genesi ad litteram. For Augustine, there were three kinds of vision: the corporeal, the spiritual, and the intellectual:

Corporeal vision was vision in the ordinary sense through the organs of the body. By spiritual vision, Augustine meant imaginative vision, whether stimulated directly by the senses or indirectly by writing, memory, or dreams. Finally, intellectual vision was of the highest order, bringing total understanding with it. . . . The vision represented in the Inferno is clearly corporeal; the souls of sinners are to be seen and even touched by the pilgrim.
Augustine's prime example of "corporeal vision" is the story of the handwriting on the wall which King Nebuchadnezzar could see corporeally but was unable to read spiritually. The prophecy of his own doom was inscribed in all its materiality on the walls of his palace, but he could only perceive it as a thing, an icon, not a sign. For Freccero, this same type of material, ironic signification is the basis for all representation in Hell, starting with the gates, whose inscription calls attention to itself as a thing, and continuing with the bodies of the damned, which are vengeful material reductions of the soul. There is a deliberate frustration of spiritual signification.

For me, this process is especially visible in the speech of the damned, where what is most distinctively human and promises the greatest liberation is deliberately and cruelly reified. The contrapasso attacks what for Dante is most human in man, his speech, and reduces it to guilty materiality.

To return to our study of the expressivity of confessions in the *Inferno*, we take up the case of Ulysses. His narration starts out according to the same principles as the ones cited above. From within the flame he shares with Diomed, he is compelled to speak. Dante notes how the infernal flames that imprison Ulysses are stirred up and burst forth in epic discourse:

\[\text{Lo maggior corno della fiamma antica} \]
\[\text{cominciò a crollarsi mormorando} \]
\[\text{pur come quella cui vento affatica;} \]
\[\text{indi la cima que e là menando,} \]
\[\text{come fosse la lingua che parlasse,} \]
\[\text{gittò voce de fuori, e disse: "Quando} \]
\[\text{mi diparti’ da Circe, . . ."} \]

(26.85–91)

The greater horn of the ancient flame began to toss and murmur just as if it were beaten by the wind, then, waving the point to and fro as if it were the tongue that spoke, it flung forth a voice and said: “When I parted from Circe, . . .”

This, along with the tale of Paolo and Francesca, is perhaps the most ambiguous of the confessions in the *Inferno* because the crime supposedly being expiated—false counsel and seductive speech—is actually reenacted by Ulysses’ stirring tale of his final voyage in search of
knowledge and experience. Like his companions, who were beguiled by his words and sought to transgress the ordinary limits of human knowledge and civic obligations, we can't resist the sway of Ulysses' words: "Li miei compagni fec'io si aguti, / con questa orazione picciola, al cammino" [My companions I made so eager for the road with these brief words] (26.121-22).

Even in Hell, confession can produce a stirring narrative; the aesthetic provides momentary relief from the torment of enforced self-statement. Like Camus's Sisyphus rolling the rock up the hill, some infernal confessants seem to gain a measure of meaning and dignity by their avowals. Their poetic discourse offers a respite from desire and torture. One is reminded of Schopenhauer's idea that only art delivers man from the infernal cycle of desire and torture: "This is the painless condition that Epicurus praised as the highest good and the condition of the gods; for a moment we are delivered from the vile urgency of the will; we celebrate the Sabbath of the penal servitude of volitions; the wheel of Ixion stands still!" (qtd. in Nietzsche 105).

No such ambiguity concerns the confessions of three sinners from the deepest circles of Hell: Bertran de Born, Nimrod, and Brutus. The mutilated, inarticulate, and, in the last case, silent manner of their avowals can but produce horror.

Bertran is among the "seminator di scandalo" (28.35) whose insinuating words have torn apart medieval society's most sacred bonds: religion (Mahomet), the political order (Piero da Medicina, and Mosca dei Lamberti), and, worst of all, that between father and son (Bertran himself). Because they have threatened the organic unity of society, a unity expressed in the king's body or the Mystical Body of Christ, their own bodies are horribly mutilated. Bertran has been decapitated; in order to make his confession he must lift up his head to bring his words to Dante, "per appressarne le parole sue" (28.129). The manner of his confession dramatically signifies his crime. For having incited Prince Henry of England to the Oedipal crime, Bertran is beheaded instead of being blinded. The contrapasso severs his vocal cords and topples his mouth from its position of authority above the body, as though, for Dante, the Oedipal crime was a sin against speech rather than an offense against reason and vision.

As the pilgrim makes his way to the pit of Hell, he encounters Nimrod the giant, one of the "sons of the earth" ("figli della terra") (31.121), who serve as Lucifer's bodyguards. He speaks to Dante and Virgil in totally meaningless sounds: "Raphèl mai amècche zabì almi" (31.67).
According to legend, it was Nimrod who tempted men to build the Tower of Babel, and hence he is responsible for the confusion of languages sent by God as a punishment. In Hell he is reduced to an imbecile incapable of understanding any languages and whose own speech means nothing. It is pure material signifier, an inert message which might tempt the most skillful psychoanalyst to unravel it, but which for Dante and Virgil signifies merely that Nimrod is plunged into a prediscursive, infantile state of stupidity.

Only Brutus is more bereft of humanity, deprived absolutely of speech as he suffers: "vedi come si storce e non fa motto" [See how he writhes and utters not a word] (34.66).

**Purgatorio: "I buon sospiri"**

One of the first souls the pilgrim encounters in the Ante-Purgatory is Manfred, son of the emperor Frederick, who was killed in the battle of Benevento. He is as mutilated as any of the lost souls of the *Inferno*, with his eyebrow cleft in two, but the manner of his speech immediately reveals that he lives under a different regime of self-revelation: "sorridendo disse: 'Io son Manfredi, ...'" [smiling he spoke: "I am Manfred"] (3.112). He narrates the story of his life, which is not without its grave sins, with a smile because he avoided damnation *de justesse* with a last-minute act of repentance.

Such is also the case of Belacqua, whose story likewise produces a smile, this time that of the poet: "Li atti suoi pigri e le corte parole / mosson le labbra mie un poco a riso" [His lazy movements and curt speech moved my lips a little to a smile] (4.121-22). Belacqua suffers from the sin of sloth, but he also escaped Hell with a last-minute confession. He must wait a long time in the Ante-Purgatory because, as he explains, "io indugiai al fine i buon sospiri" [I put off good sighs to the last] (4.132). The good sighs of repentance and confession have saved Belacqua, and in the *Purgatorio* this is the mode of confession—speech that promises relief from suffering and progress toward self-understanding.

Dante drives home the lesson of the merit of last-minute repentance with one more story, that of Buonconte da Montefeltro, who relates with great pathos the end of his life and his last moments of consciousness. Mortally wounded in battle, he stumbled to the edge of a remote stream: "fuggendo a piede e 'nsanguinando il piano. / Quivi perdei la vista e la parola; / nel nome di Maria fini'" [with the throat
deeply cleft, fleeing on foot and bloodying the grass. There I lost sight and speech. I ended on the name of Mary] (5.99–101). Here again bodily mutilation is transcended by speech; the last whispered name, the final fleeting thought saves him. The Devil is so angered by this last-minute escape that he sends a flood to wash Buonconte’s body away so that it is never found. But he cannot harm the dead soldier’s soul, which has escaped the punishments of Hell by pronouncing the miraculous name.

When Dante enters Purgatory proper, he beats his breast three times to show contrition, and the angel inscribes the seven Ps, representing the Seven Deadly Sins, on his forehead. Unlike the inscriptions of sin in Hell, these signs of sin are visible and readable; they can be effaced by the meritorious suffering and speech of the penitents.

The salutary shame of confession is especially evident in the case of Guido Guinicelli, Dante’s poetic “father,” who explains to the poet what sin his group is expiating: “però si parton ‘Sodoma’ gridando, / rimproverando a sè, com’ hai udito, / ed aiutan l’arsura vergognando” [therefore they go off crying “Sodom,” as thou has heard, in self-reproach and by their shame they aid the burning] (26.79–81). Guido and his group are atoning for the sin of homosexuality; by their loud vocal confessions they deliberately fan the flames they endure. The operative principle of this confession is the same, literally, as that described by Thomas Aquinas: “vergognando” (verecundia).

The culminating event of the Purgatorio is Dante’s own confession in cantos 30 and 31. Like those noted above, it occurs in a similar collective and liturgical setting: the pageant of revelation which occupies the whole of canto 29. Matilda’s words, “Beati quorum tecta sunt pec­cata,” are an intimation to the poet that he cannot join the Church Triumphant until he has undergone penance himself. When Beatrice appears, she renders Matilda’s message explicit: “God’s high decrees would be broken if Lethe were passed and such a draught were tasted without some scot of penitence and shedding of tears” (30.142–45). The pageant has momentarily come to a halt, and Dante, who is directly named by Beatrice, is called upon to make a personal revelation of sin.

Sinclair has seen the importance of the break between the pageant and the personal religious experience that follows: “The twenty-ninth canto is occupied with revelation and the Church; it is all public and impersonal. The next two cantos are the most intimately personal in the Divine Comedy” (411). The whole poem has reached an important
historical turning point, which, according to Georges Duby, was prepared gradually by the twelfth century and culminated in a radical change in mentality between 1300 and 1350:

Les marques évidentes des conquêtes d'une autonomie personnelle se multiplient dans le cours du XIlle siècle. . . .

. . . L'idée prend corps, bouleversant, parmi les savants qui méditent sur le texte de l'Ecriture, que le salut ne s'acquiert pas par la seule participation à des rites, dans une passivité moutonnière, mais se 'gagne' par une transformation de soi-même. C'est une invite à l'introspection, à l'exploration de sa propre conscience, puisque la faute n'apparaît plus résider dans l'acte mais dans l'intention, qu'elle est censée se blottir dans l'intimité de l'âme. A l'intérieur de l'être, dans un espace privé qui n'a plus rien de communautaire, se transportent les procédures de régulation morale. On se lave de la souillure par la contrition, par le désir surtout de se rénover, par un effort sur soi, de raison, dit Abélard, d'amour, dit saint Bernard, l'un et l'autre d'accord sur la nécessité d'un amendement personnel. ("Situation" 505, 506-7)

The Scholastic reinterpretation of the sacrament of penance with its insistence on confession is symptomatic of the change that Duby here describes. The progression from collective pageant to personal sacrament which we observe in the Purgatorio marks the emergence of a new form of religious subjectivity.

As we have already seen, confession is a fundamental discourse of the Comedy, but here its importance and modernity are particularly striking because it is the poet himself who is obliged to confess. His individuality is more strongly asserted than that of any other subject in the poem because he alone makes a confession entirely alone, without the collective backdrop of a group of sinners. His individual spiritual experience stands out most pointedly from the collective liturgical form of religion.

As many commentators have observed, Dante is in exact conformity with the Scholastic definitions of the sacrament as consisting of contritio cordis, confessio oris, and satisfactio operis. As remorse wells up within his heart following Beatrice's accusation, he experiences contrition. Three metaphors express this emotion: the melting of ice, the shattering of a crossbow that has been cranked up too far, and the uprooting of a tree. These images seem to be an almost etymological
meditation on the word *contritio*, which means "to break." Apropos of the crossbow, Singleton states: "The simile is one that finds its allusive relevance in being precisely one of a 'breaking,' the literal meaning of *contritio*, so that contrition of the heart is here continued into the act of confession" (Commentary 2:758). As with all the other personae in the *Comedy*, Dante's own confession is as significant in its expressivity as in its content:

Dopo la tratta d’ un sospiro amaro,  
a pena ebbi la voce che rispose,  
e le labbra a fatica la formaro.  
Piangendo dissi: "Le presenti cose  
col falso lor piacer volser miei passi,  
tosto che 'l vostro viso si nascose."

(31.31-36)

After heaving a bitter sigh I had hardly the voice to answer and the lips shaped it with difficulty; weeping, I said: "Present things with their false pleasure turned my steps as soon as your face was hid."

He has been accused of betraying the spiritual desire inspired in him by Beatrice for that object "beyond which there is nothing to be longed for" (31.24). His actual confession is generic and perfunctory: "Present things with their false pleasure..." There is no detailed account of every sin ever committed, no casuistical weighing of mental states and degrees of assent; that will be the product of a later period that will continue what Dante and his age have begun here. It is more important that words express outwardly the inner transformation wrought by contrition. The voice breaks, and weeping signifies the inner melting of the heart, "piangendo dissi." Words must become motivated signs by the performative power of the sacrament and participate in the great order of similitude which is spiritual reality:

... Le cose tutte quante  
hanno ordine tra loro, e questo è forma  
che l’universo a Dio fa simigliante.

(Par. 1.103-5)

All things whatsoever have order among themselves, and this is the form that makes the universe resemble God.
These words are the beginning of Beatrice’s lesson to Dante in Paradise about the order of the universe. They express the ultimate theological basis of medieval semiotics, the idea that all of creation is a divine book held together by a hidden order or resemblance (“simigliante”). Sacramental signs, aided by grace, are those that come closest to expressing man in his “real” presence to the world. This is why for Dante the form of confession is inseparable from its content.

Only absolution remains for Dante’s confession to be complete, and this is signified by his immersion in the waters of Lethe by Beatrice. The heavenly chorus chants Psalm 50, familiar to Dante as one of the most beautiful hymns of the liturgy: “Asperges me hyssopo et mundabor; lavabis me, et super nivem dealbabor.”

Like Virgil’s Lethe described in the Aeneid, the river that separates Paradise from Purgatory completes the purgative process by erasing from memory events from a sinful past life. But as was the case with the judgment scene of Minos and Rhadamanthus, this Virgilian element reveals as much about Dante’s originality and historical specificity as it does about his borrowing from a classical source. Dante’s confessional scene contains many echoes of Virgil, but significantly Virgil himself, Dante’s “dolcissimo patre,” has left him. This is because Dante-the-epic-poet, named by Beatrice, has become Dante-the-confessant, and his narrative has shifted from the story of a heroic voyage to that of a sacramental confession. This is why his epic guide and precursor disappears just before Dante begins his confession. The great pagan poet can be of no assistance when Dante turns sacramental discourse into literature.

Many of the key Virgilian symbols are given a final reinterpretation in this scene. Tears, the “lacrimae rerum” (Aen. 1.462), become the tears of contrition. Memory, the anticipated consolation of Aeneas, “forsan et haec olim meminisse juvabit” (Aen. 1.203), becomes the salutary recollection of sin, something entirely different. And finally the Lethe itself acquires a totally different meaning in the Christian eschatological scene. In Virgil it prepares men for reentry into history, and it allows the Latin poet to prophesize and glorify the “imperium sine fine” of Rome. Dante, on the contrary, crosses Lethe to discover Paradise, the permanent abode of Christian saints who dwell in a medieval utopia of eternal familiarity with God.24
THE SIMPLICITY OF CONFESSION

Most confessions in *The Divine Comedy* lack the detail that confession in the West would eventually acquire, with Lateran acting as the catalyst for more and more detailed confessions. At the dawn of the age in which man became a “bête d’aveu,” in Foucault’s words, confession was still a simple narration of one’s sins, often told only once in a lifetime.

Following the imposition of annual confession, the Church embarked on a pedagogical mission to educate priests and the laity regarding their duties to confession. A vast literature of *Summa confessorum*, *Modus confitendi*, and *Summa de casibus conscientiae* followed in the wake of Lateran and brought the exacting, scrupulous distinctions of the Schoolmen to the population at large. But this was a slow development that did not really get into high gear until the invention of printing and the spread of vernacular editions of the casuists. The works of Jean Gerson (1363–1429), Angelus de Clavasio (author of the *Angelica*, 1480), and Andreas Escobar (d. 1427) were not “publishing phenomena” until the sixteenth century (Tentler 28–46).

The refined dissection of sin and the scrupulous conscience were products of a later age. In Dante’s era the pedagogy of confession was conducted largely by sermons, and the faithful were taught to analyse their sins according to a simple rhetorical formula: “Quis, quid, ubi, quibus auxiliis, cur, quomodo, quando.” An authority on such literature summarizes the popular attitude that priests hoped to foster among the faithful: “L’image du péché reste encore très objectivée. On se limite aussi, semble-t-il, à une conception stricte de la confession” (Beriou 88). This succinct representation of sin and guilt is consistent with Dante’s own laconic confession in the *Purgatorio* and the terse confessions throughout his work.

Of course, a work of art would not presume to be as frank as a real confession, since it would give scandal. A real confession was protected by the *sigillum* or confessional seal of secrecy. But the simple description of sin is not explainable by prudishness or the censorship of art; medieval literature was much less controlled by rules of “bienséance” than later forms of expression and is typically much less inhibited or “repressed” in its treatment of sexuality and violence. The *Inferno* especially will not be found lacking in explicit cruelty.
ONE FLESH

To a large extent, if sexuality in *The Divine Comedy* is not as florid and tortured an affair as in later works, it is because in actual life it had not yet been so complicated. The teaching of the moral theologians had not been extended to the population at large; obligatory annual confession was the instrument by which a more complicated sexuality would be disseminated. In Dante's great seduction scene, for example, the lovers Paolo and Francesca submit to their passion with an almost natural resignation; there is no prolonged resistance and inner drama. Their passion as it is lived seems to lack the dimension of guilt which only comes after the fact. The act itself hardly seems worthy of mention; Francesca simply says, "We read no more that day." For Dante and his age, sexuality was not yet the complex affair it was to become.

The tragic couple are guilty above all of transgressing the laws of marriage. The real evil that ensues is of a social nature—adultery leads to jealousy and murder. For the laity, sexuality must simply be made to conform to the laws of Christian marriage. It is treated first and foremost as a threat to the fabric of personal relations upon which feudalism rests. The Paolo and Francesca story illustrates the violent results of adultery, as does the "source" of the lovers' behavior, the story of Lancelot and Guinevere. The idealized society of the Round Table was brought down by Lancelot's transgression of the feudal bond of personal loyalty to King Arthur.

As I have mentioned above, the "sexual" content of Dante's story is almost nonexistent. For the laity, sexuality is not yet haunted by all the deviations and pathologies of a later age. Doubtless the monks had already been waging a more complex and solitary war of analysis against sexuality, but mandatory confession and spiritual guidance were only beginning to spread these notions to the population at large. At this juncture, "sexuality" had not yet arrived on the scene. What does exist in Dante's text are the "peculator carnali," and their sins of the flesh are quite different from our notion of sexuality.

Attention to the details of the lovers' narrative reveals some of the key features of the concept of the flesh. The first noteworthy aspect of their narration is the prevalence of "we" and "us" throughout their story: "Noi udiremo ... Amor condusse noi ad una morte ... Noi leggiavamo un giorno per diletto ..." (Inf. 5.95, 106, 127, emphasis added). All the sinners in this circle appear in pairs, and Francesca tells us that Paolo "may never from me be separated more" (5.135). The early
Christian idea of the flesh implies that sexuality forms an irrevocable bond between two people. The subtext here is doubtless St. Paul's commentary upon marriage: “et erunt duo in carne una” (Eph. 5.22).

This explains why the lovers appear together and their entire confession is in the first person plural. From beginning to end, their carnality has been an intersubjective experience. It starts with an intimate joint reading. Side by side the young wife and her husband's brother follow the tale of Lancelot and Guinevere until the moment when “that smile, so thirsted for, was kissed by such a lover” (5.133-34). At this point, the word of the romance becomes flesh as Paolo kisses Francesca and the book is put aside: “We read no more that day” (5.138). Medieval carnality is based upon an easy transitivity between the word and the flesh. Books become people, the text has been a “Galahalt” to the couple, and literary kisses become actual ones, as the two lovers become caro una. Whether it be a narrative of sin or of redemption, sexuality and textuality are unitive experiences within this culture.

It is interesting to note that, for Freud, the kiss hearkens back to infantile sexuality and the autoeroticism of the oral stage. The kiss is a sign of the “erotogenic significance of the labial region” (7:182). This “perverse” origin of adult sexuality threatens to reassert itself as certain types become “epicures of kissing,” resort to “perverse kissing,” or drink and smoke in excess.

Dante’s transgressive kiss is of a different nature. It is the moment of an illicit unification of the flesh which threatens the social order, but it carries with it no sign of a disorder within sexuality itself. The kiss can stand unproblematically as a synecdoche for the whole unitive carnal experience, whereas Freud singles it out as an emblem of the autoerotic curse hanging over adult sexuality. In the Middle Ages, reading, carnality, and confession are still shared experiences, and the word evokes total human presences in the flesh.

The notion of the flesh was about to undergo certain profound changes, however. The clerics who shaped the consciousness of medieval Europe were hard at work elaborating their theories and pondering cases of conscience. A few years before Dante wrote the *Comedia*, Albert the Great had carefully analyzed what positions were licit for sexual intercourse, and confessors were being instructed to interrogate their married penitents closely on such matters (Tentler 189). In the centuries following Lateran, the casuists would develop ever more elaborate lists and nuances in sexual deviations. Hervé Martin observes: “Les moralistes, dans leur hantise du sexe, établissent une
échelle de gravité très détaillée des péchés de la chair. Dans la Brève et Générale Confession, ils sont répartis en seize catégories par ordre de gravité, depuis le baiser impudique jusqu’à la zoophilie” (124). Confession in The Divine Comedy is a relatively straightforward declaration because it was such in actual practice. As the centuries passed, confession would grow in complexity and refinement. The unitive experience and discourse of la chair would give way to the solitary passions of the soul. The great chain of “simigliante” would be broken by the theory of representation.