THE AGE OF THE CONFESSIONAL

Anchorage in space is an economico-political form which needs to be studied in detail.

MICHEL FOUCAULT

Du 17e siècle, âge d'or de la direction spirituelle . . .

Dictionnaire de la spiritualité

"Le Confessionnal" is the title of a dramatic chapter in Alfred de Vigny's Cinq-Mars, a historical novel about the d'Effiat conspiracy (1641–42). The denouement is set in motion by a fateful rendezvous of the protagonists in a confessional in the church of St. Eustache. The lover-conspirators, Marie de Gonzague and Cinq-Mars, kneel on either side of the penitential stall, separated by their counselor and spiritual director, Abbé Quillet. But their fate is sealed when a hostile confessor, Père Joseph, chief of Richelieu's spy network, slips secretly into the box and overhears their confession of an outlawed betrothal and a plot to overthrow Richelieu. The young Cinq-Mars will be beheaded for treason, and Marie married off to the king of Poland to solidify one of Richelieu's European alliances.

The episode is reminiscent of a common theatrical scene, the concealed eavesdropper who listens en cachette to a conversation, but it also points to a historically specific scene of truth, desire, and surveillance, for the confessional was invented in the sixteenth century and introduced in France precisely during the period Vigny evokes. An art historian gives this account of the appearance of the new church furnishing:

L'histoire du Confessionnal débute ex abrupto avec l'époque que nous envisageons: elle n'a pas de préface médiévale. Jusqu'à la Réforme, le prêtre, assis dans une cathèdre ou dans une stalle du choeur, entendait les aveux du fidèle agenouillé devant lui ou à ses côtés; désormais, les deux interlocuteurs seront séparés par
The confessional is an architectural expression of the Counter-Reformation's insistence upon the sacrament of penance, which had been attacked by Luther and other Protestants. Confession and its vocal counterpart, preaching, were the twin disciplines by which the Church hoped to reestablish itself after the Reformation. The confessional and the pulpit, or "chaire de vérité," were innovations of baroque church architecture. In some churches an attempt was even made to unite them physically, in a single artistic composition. Such was the link between these two instruments of rhetorical conquest.

Even today, contemplating an ornate baroque confessional or pulpit in a Jesuit-style church, one can almost hear the echoes of a sermon from the great age of sacred oratory: "Qu'est-ce donc que ma substance, ô grand Dieu? J'entre dans la vie pour en sortir bientôt" (Bos-suet). Or perhaps this vision of Lazarist missionaries at work might suggest itself: "Ils prononcent leurs sermons les plus pathétiques le soir, à la lueur vacillante des flambeaux, invitant parfois la foule à crier 'Miséricorde!'" (Dompnier 209). Thus aroused by the sermon, the faithful are then led to the darkness and privacy of the confessional to declare their sins. The whole scene unfolds like a baroque painting, drawing its emotional effect from oppositions of light and darkness, public sermon followed by private confession.

These pastoral techniques, typical of the seventeenth century, were the creation of new proselytizing orders like the Jesuits and Lazarists, imbued with the spirit of the Council of Trent (1545–63). Theologically, the council did little else but reaffirm long-standing Scholastic formulas and condemn Protestant departures from doctrine. The subject of confession was treated during the council's fourteenth session, and Scholastic terminology such as "matter and form" and *ex opere operato* was used to define the sacrament. Against Luther and other Protestants who had declared auricular confession of human origin and recent date, the council declared: "To anyone claiming that confession is not a necessary part of the sacrament of penance for the remission of sins, according to divine law ... anathema sit" (Vacandard, 919, my translation).

But pastorally, the council helped define a new style of religion focused upon the ascetic, the subjective, and the personal. It provided an impetus for the counterattack against the Reformation and drew
its strength from the quasi-military discipline of the Jesuits and the individualizing spirituality of the Oratory. Artistically, the council moved against the neopagan spirit of the Renaissance and inspired the baroque style of masters such as Rubens and Bernini, whose works owe much to the new spirituality. Bernini, for example, was an assiduous practitioner of the *Spiritual Exercises*, and his paintings, like Loyola's book, make a direct appeal to the sensibility and imagination of the Christian. In the words of Emile Mâle, the sublime, classicizing Church of the Renaissance gave way to one that was "ardente et passionnée qui connaît l'angoisse, la lutte, et le martyre" (9). Church art represented and fostered these exalted spiritual states.

The role of confession in this reform within the Church was to refine the conscience and strengthen the bond between the priest and his community. As opposed to the Lateran Council, which simply required the sacrament annually, Trent asked for more detail: "Let each individual, after carefully examining and exploring all of the corners and folds of his conscience, confess his sins" (Session 14). Confession also became more frequent; leading spiritual authorities, like St. François de Sales, demanded weekly, and some writers even called for daily, confession. A new casuistry sprang up to guide confessors, and it too reflected a new relationship between the Church and the world:

Après le concile de Trente, une nouvelle casuistique moins juridique fleurira inspirée par un autre esprit. Le droit canon apportant des réponses de moins en moins adéquates à des situations nouvelles nées de la transformation de la société. Les références se feront non plus seulement à des lois écrites mais aussi à une loi morale inscrite dans la conscience; se développera en même temps la notion des circonstances atténuantes. (Delumeau, *Pêché* 224)

The accent was upon developing an acute conscience capable of disciplining itself in the changing circumstances of the modern world. Heretofore the individual had looked to religious authorities to lay down what was right and wrong; now a more subtle and efficacious discipline converted the believer into his own inner lawgiver.

Confession at this time also led to spiritual direction for an elite who, for the first time in the history of Christianity, were not exclusively members of the clergy. As we have seen in the preceding chapter, the methodology of direction goes back to the Desert Fathers, but the
seventeenth century marks the period when these techniques were first introduced to the lay population at large. In his *Introduction à la vie dévote* (1608), St. François de Sales says that his intention is to instruct those who live "ès villes, ès ménages, en la cour, et qui par leur condition sont obligés de faire une vie commune quant à l’extérieur" (*Oeuvres* 23). He paraphrases St. Teresa of Avila and, before her, the Desert Fathers on the scarcity of good spiritual directors: "Choisissez-en un entre mille, dit Avila; et moi je dis entre dix mille" (*Oeuvres* 40). To the "dirigé(e)," the voice of the director comes directly from God: "Vous le devez écouter comme un Ange qui descend du ciel pour vous y mener. Traitez avec lui à coeur ouvert" (*Oeuvres* 39). "Dévotion," which is de Sales’s new concept of a mysticism for all states of life, can improve any human relation; the ideal husband, for example, is "confit au sucre de la dévotion, car l’homme sans dévotion est un animal sévère, âpre et rude" (*Oeuvres* 239).

The confessional, then, is the emblem par excellence of post-Tridentine spirituality. Borrowing Fierens’s phrase, we could say that the *ex abrupto* appearance of this device signals a qualitative and quantitative change in the mode of confession and, beyond that, a new configuration of the self in the early modern world. The confessional is a monument to the age of spiritual direction, casuistry, the Jesuit-Jansenist controversies, and the Inquisition. As an ecclesiastical artifact it represents the beginning of a new age in pastoral techniques when, as Foucault says, Western man became "une bête d’aveu." Like the baroque emblem, it is both image and language; its physical disposition and artistic decoration impose a new order of discourse on the practice of confession.

The man who actually invented and promulgated the confessional was St. Charles Borromeo, prime mover at the Council of Trent and reforming bishop of Milan. Figure 5 shows a confessional bearing his statue alongside that of St. François de Sales, a fitting place for these two rivals in praise from the severe Arnauld: "Il semble que Dieu avait donné des grâces particulières à M. de Genève pour conduire les bonnes âmes à la perfection de la vertu par la mortification de l’esprit, et à S. Charles pour ramener les grands pécheurs à la vertu, par la mortification de leur chair et de leurs sens" (522). The passage is from Arnauld’s *De la fréquente communion*, in which the Jansenist theologian advocated a return to less frequent communion and severe penance involving suspended absolution. The inventor of the confessional is credited with chastening the flesh, and the popularizer of spiritual di-
rection is praised for mortifying the spirit. Arnauld interpreted the writings of de Sales and Borromeo in the most rigorist fashion possible, but it is interesting to note that confession and spiritual direction were essential to both the Jansenists and their "laxist" opponents, the Jesuits. All forms of Catholic spirituality paid homage to the figures carved into this Belgian confessional.

Borromeo gives an exacting description of the confessional in his *Instructionum fabricae ecclesiasticae*. So concerned was he with uniformity that some editions of his book even contain a line drawn to the exact length of the cubit to be used in building the structure. Figure 6 represents a model drawn to his exact specifications. Figure 7 shows a page from a French translation of his influential *Instructions to Confessors*.

The author of the *Instructionum* is concerned that the confessional should keep the sexes apart: "In every parish church two confessinals
should be set up so that men are not mixed with women or stand too close together” (67). The function of the crates, the small perforated window separating the priest and the penitent, is to limit all possible contact between the two. It is stipulated that “the perforations should be the size of peas. On the side of the confessor, a thin veil of serge cloth or linen should be hung in front of the window” (70). Until Trent, confession was a face-to-face affair, as can be seen in figure 8, which represents a scene from the late Middle Ages. There were some precedents for Borromeo’s box, however. Women were required to veil their faces when confessing in order to maintain propriety during a potentially embarrassing moment for the penitent or a dangerous occasion of scandal for the priest.
FORME D'ÉCRIRE L'ÉTAT DES ÂMES.

Famille de Pierre.

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<th>Nom</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Condition</th>
<th>Lectures de bon livre</th>
<th>Mort de</th>
<th>Livres</th>
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<th>Pénitence des Sacrements</th>
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Figure 7. Format for keeping account of parishioners from French translation of Borromeo's Instructions to Confessors. Reprinted with permission of the Yale Divinity School Library.

Schlombs maintains that the probable origin of the crates was the grill that separated cloistered nuns from the outside world and that allowed their confessions to be heard by a priest. The illustration in figure 9 shows that, in this particular case, the grill served to divide a women's cloister from the men's. This underscores the confessional grill's signification as a barrier between the sexes. Christianity exalts the ideal of virginity, and some authorities even claim that sexual difference is a result of the Fall. As early as the fourth century, St. Athanasius had said: "God's first intention was not that man be born out of marriage and corruption, but by the transgression of His commandment, Adam's iniquity led to the necessity of sexual union" (qtd. in Delumeau, Péché 333). From this perspective, desire itself is a result of the Fall, a punishment for the first act of disobedience.

The confessional grill is emblematic of a peculiarly Christian discourse in which the opposite sex is unattainably other as a result of Original Sin. The confessional dramatizes the fact that the two sexes are divided and that discourse separates as it unites the lovers. Penance is the verbal acknowledgment of this state of fallen desire. This is implicit in Vigny's Cinq-Mars, where the lover's discourse in the confessional consecrates an inseparable distance.

In a concrete, historical sense, then, the confessional is a piece of the cloister in the world at large, and it served to generalize the core of
cloister spirituality—confession and spiritual direction—with all its implications of an alienated, fallen, human sexuality that could only be transcended by a talking cure.

But there is something peculiar and arresting about confessing to an unseen voice of authority. Separation of a female penitent from the priest is not the only ascetic connotation of the confessional, since men also confessed in this manner. H. C. Lea describes the confessional as "a box in which the confessor sits, with a grill in the side, through which the kneeling penitent can pour the story of his sins into his ghostly father's ear without either seeing the face of the other" (1:395).
The grill symbolizes the chaste separation of the sexes and the mortification of the body, but it also institutes a strange conversation with a "ghostly father." As such, it is characteristic of a religion that was shifting from a physical semiotics of the flesh toward a hidden spiritual reality, from an askesis of the body toward one of the soul.

This is evident if we consider the evolution of the grill itself within the symbolism of penance. Figure 10 is Cesare Ripa's allegorical representation of "Penitenza." The accompanying commentary reads: "An exhausted woman, with emaciated face, melancholy and poor dress, looking very intently towards Heaven, and holding with both hands a grill ('una craticola') which is used as a sign of true penance by the holy Theologians, for as the grill stands between the thing being cooked and the fire, so penance is midway between the sinner's pains and the love of God which causes those pains." The allegory, the "soul
of the Baroque,” represents penance as an exhausted woman carrying a grill. The ascetic symbolization of the grill here is one of bodily mortification, but it is a grill that punishes by signifying. It is not simply a tool for maceration but rather an instrument that separates the sinner from God and transforms her suffering into a sign of God's love.
Penance is painful/pleasurable separation from God by means of a "sign."

Borromeo's grill institutes the "ghostly" conversation; it is characteristic of a spirituality that increasingly insists on the disposition of the soul and on language as the true means of mortification. Borromeo's grill puts a barrier between the Imaginary, face-to-face encounter between priest and penitent and reduces the encounter to the Symbolic.¹

Spiritual authors from this time often insist on the soul as the real object of mortification and not the body. The Jesuit Bourdaloue calls for a more refined sort of "severity" for the will and the passions, not just for the body, like the older sort of mortification represented by Ripa's illustration. Bourdaloue is much more impressed with a mortification of the passions than with exterior asceticism:

Voilà où la sévérité devroit être appliquée: à se comporter avec plus de ménagement, avec plus de condescendance, avec plus de retenue et plus de douceur, à prendre un empire absolu sur soi même, pour agir toujours selon la religion, selon la raison, et jamais selon la passion. Voilà où la sévérité aurait à remporter de plus grandes victoires: Une passion à combattre lui donneroit mille fois plus de peine que toute autre mortification à pratiquer.

(2:39, emphasis added)

For the medieval regime of "la chair," we find substituted the world of "les passions," an intermediate realm, between the senses and the intellect, beneath the surface of the flesh, operating invisibly, expressed alternatively in physical and spiritual metaphors. Instead of Dante's system of differing punishments for groups of sinners, we have a new vision of Hell where a single punishment seeks out each individual sinner according to his passions. From a Lazarist sermon comes this passage: "Le feu infernal... saura distinguer la malice de chaque péché pour punir rigoureusement la partie du corps et la faculté de l'âme qui auront concouru à un plus grand péché, et leur fera ressentir une plus vive douleur qu'à celles qui n'ont pas été si criminelles.... Il distinguerà un parricide d'avec un meurtre, un inceste d'avec un adulte" (Delumeau, Péché 424).

Descartes will propose a purely somatic description of the passions, but in literature they remain poetically imprecise. Sometimes they are clothed in classical allegories—Venus's spells or Cupid's arrows—sometimes they are represented physiologically as humors or
elements. However represented, the Council of Trent had declared them "good in themselves." How to manage them is the constant concern of all moralists writing at this period.

The confessional, by its occultation of the physical body, sets up the interior combat against the unruly passions, and spiritual direction furnishes the verbal arms for gaining mastery over these forces and turning them toward their proper goal, as human eros is transformed into spiritual ecstasy: "Nous devons jouir des choses spirituelles et seulement user des corporelles" (243, emphasis added). St. François has employed a key word in the Lacanian vocabulary, and we are again invited to pursue analogies between spiritual direction and analysis.

BAROQUE SPIRITUALITY AND PSYCHOANALYSIS

This time the encounter is even easier to produce. Lacan himself has enthusiastically recognized his own image in baroque spirituality: "Mon discours participe du baroque" (Encore 102). Studying the spiritual ecstasies of St. Teresa and other female mystics, he comes to the conclusion that their behavior is not to be explained simply as frustrated and displaced sexual gratification. Unlike Charcot and Freud, he doesn't think mystics, or hysterics for that matter, are women who could be "cured" and restored to psychological unity by recognition of their symptoms and a return to genital sexuality. One must not "ramener la mystique à des affaires de foutre. Si vous y regardez de près, ce n'est pas ça du tout" (Encore 71). Lacan is not a physiological positivist. According to Lacanian theory, human sexuality is based on symbolic exchange; there is no such thing as a purely harmonious sexual act: "Il n'y a pas de rapport sexuel" (Encore 14). The mystics are not examples of an aberrant sexuality; they are the female and, ultimately, the human condition of desire.

Rather than reduce the mystical experience to the physical, Lacan explores the tortured love of the mystics in search of a fuller understanding of human desire. Their mystical marriage to God, which is never consummated physically, is an image of what remains unsatisfied, "en plus," in human sexuality. Beyond the specific love object, which Lacan designates as "l'autre," there is another, unattainable Autre. This Other is the mark inscribed on all objects by the work of the unconscious, and for Lacan that work is essentially linguistic: the unconscious is structured like a language. Thus all human sexuality is "underwritten" by the impersonal, linguistic activity of the uncon-
scious; there is no such thing as a purely somatic encounter between two lovers. Their union is mediated by a cultural code, and the true “object” they seek is a mosaic of unconscious images and socially pre-ordained figures. Human sexuality is a form of communication for Lacan, and as such it exchanges absences as much as presences, signifiers and never signifieds.

In the baroque mystics and artists Lacan sees a kind of eroticism that illustrates the physical constrained by the semiotic. Like many others, he sees “jouissance” on the face of Bernini’s St. Teresa, but she is not just a case of hysterical sexual gratification. Lacan remarks that all baroque art is “obsène,” meaning that it blatantly exhibits the sexual body, but also that actual intercourse is never represented, it remains out of the picture, ob-scène. For Lacan, this illustrates the idea that sexuality is sustained by a relation to an Other, in abstraction to the other, and that this absence or “hole” is inscribed in sexuality by language: “Il y a là un trou, et ce trou s’appelle l’Autre en tant que lieu où la parole . . . fonde la vérité, et avec elle le pacte qui supplée à l’inexistence du rapport sexuel” (Encore 103). St. Teresa does “jouit des choses spirituelles” (François de Sales, Oeuvres 243), not because her body is hysterically somatizing a sexual act, but because her soul is meditating on the words of the beloved yet impersonal and unconscious Other.

Human love is essentially communicative, founded on a linguistic exchange that ceaselessly attempts to supplement the fundamental lack of rapport between the sexes. This is represented in the material we have examined so far by the cloistered separation of the sexes and especially by the lovers’ rendezvous in the confessional in Vigny’s novel. As Lancelot and Guinevere were separated by the sword in the forest, Cinq-Mars and Marie de Gonzague are separated by the confessional grill, which represents language as barrier and bond between the couple.

Lacan feels an affinity for the baroque mystics because they had discovered this truth about human love. But the extent of Lacan’s belief in religion is that it insists on the truth of desire: “Vous allez être tous convaincus que je crois en Dieu. Je crois à la jouissance de la femme en tant qu’elle est en plus” (Encore 71). For Lacan, religion is a version of the truth about human desire; it even facilitates human sexuality by insisting on the presence of the Other. Lacan also reveals here the idea that this dimension of sexuality is historically associated with female desire. “La jouissance de la femme” is never satisfied; her sexuality is determined primarily as a lack of the Phallus. But the discourse of
female desire reveals the scandal that the male doesn’t “have” the Phal­lus either. It is a symbol, not an organ; it belongs to the Other. To paraphrase de Sales, “On ne peut jouir que spirituellement.”

Reading the spiritual directors of the seventeenth century does confirm Lacan’s view that mystical discourse is cast in the metaphor of female desire. The soul of both man and woman aspires to be the “épouse du Fils de Dieu” (François de Sales, Oeuvres 244). The spiritual journey is a gender crossing that transcends the earthly phallic dichotomy. Man or woman adopts the “en plus,” and the “obscene” of feminine desire as a means of intuiting the highest form of spiritual love, the love to come at the end of history when the world is remade and human relations are made perfect.

Lacan’s reading of the baroque makes more evident the historical link between Christian confession and psychoanalysis, but what is missing from his recognition scene with the baroque is some commentary about the most preanalytic phenomenon from this period: spiritual direction. Lacan recognizes among the mystics his own theory of desire, but the applicability of his ideas to the baroque is upheld by a similar production of desire within both cultures. Both are marked by a theory of civilization as repression and a practice of confession. In each case, one observes the same principles at work: the coexistence of representations of civilization as repression (Arnauld’s “mortification de l’esprit” and “mortification de la chair,” for example; Lacan’s “non du Père”) with the injunction to confess or obedience to the “fundamental rule.”

In both cultures, desire is an error and a disappointment, but an illusion that must be verbalized to produce a higher truth. In Christianity this is the truth that human desire is but a weak allegory of divine love; in psychoanalysis it is, ultimately, knowledge of the Symbolic, insight into the signifying veil that covers the object of desire. In both cases the frustrating story of the impossible relation with the other leads to a vision of the Other.

Both practices involve the intervention of an analyst whose hermeneutics will deliver the unconscious truth back to the subject. The form of that intervention took a decisive turn toward the Symbolic and the linguistic with the invention of the confessional and has remained there since. Consider, for instance, the similarities between St. François de Sales’s description of spiritual discourse and that of Freud’s account of analysis:
Il faut que nos paroles soient enflammées non pas par des cris et actions démesurées, mais par l’affection intérieure; il faut qu’elles sortent du coeur plus que de la bouche. On a beau dire, mais le coeur parle au coeur, la langue ne parle qu’aux oreilles.

("Lettre" 321, emphasis added)

[The analyst] must bend his own unconscious like a receptive organ towards the emerging unconscious of the patient, be as the receiver of the telephone to the disc. As the receiver transmutes the electric vibrations induced by the sound-waves back again into sound-waves, so is the physician’s unconscious mind able to reconstruct the patient’s unconscious, which has directed his associations, from the communications derived from it. (12:115)

In both instances, direction and analysis, the interpersonal encounter is reduced to its purely verbal dimensions. Language itself is then solicited for a hidden meaning that appears almost intuitively and poetically to the analyst. In the chatter of “la langue,” a deeper message emerges.

In the seventeenth century, the confessional itself was emblematic of this reduction to the Symbolic. For Freud, the telephone was the proper metaphor. The analyst’s unconscious acts as receiver; it decodes the patient’s unintelligible signals into sound waves. With all Lacanian puns intended, analysis is a kind of “obscene” telephone call to the Other: two people, their faces hidden from one another, conduct a strange conversation whereby one vents his desires to the other, who, by his office, tries to identify the incognito caller at the other end of the line. From Borromeo’s confessional, through Freud’s telephone booth, to Lacan’s commentary on St. Theresa runs a similar practice of discourse and desire. Both are tour à tour coercive and erotic.

Behind the confessional looms the inquisitorial listener, but also an opportunistic jouisseur. Parallel to the emphasis on confession, there was also an erotic and comic exploitation of avowal. Mme de Longueville, returning from confession, meets her lover, the author of the Lettres portugaises. She says that “elle s’y serait bien ennuyée, si elle n’avait trouvé moyen d’y parler de lui” (Guilleragues 5). The lover, Guilleragues, is inspired by the incident to write “La Chanson du confiteur,” a parody of confession in which a betrayed mistress complacently makes “l’aveu d’une passion qui fut toujours tendre et sincère,
The same Mme de Longueville had the poet Sarasin compose for her "Le Directeur," a mock letter of spiritual direction at the end of which "le faux directeur cède au véritable amant" (Sarasin 390). The story behind Vérard’s illustration (fig. 8) concerns an adulterous wife confessing to her husband disguised as a priest. Later illustrations of the tale make use of the confessional to enhance the disguise. Sade puts Justine in the confessional to stage his complex transgressions: "Ainsi il entend la confession de sa fille et il voit son cul tout à la fois" (qtd. in Barthes, Sade 149).

Judging from contemporary events, our pleasures and pains are still in the age of the confessional and its electronic equivalent. In our culture people pay to receive obscene phone calls and to confess to answering machines.

THE VOCABULARY OF CONFESSIONAL DISCOURSE

The secularization of confessional discourse led to the development of a new term to cover all the various kinds of sacred and profane confessing that went on. The new term, which bore all of these meanings during the seventeenth century, was the word "aveu." One can get a sense of the semantic evolution of the word by comparing its feudal meaning, which Perrot describes in his *Institutions publiques et privées de France*, with the meanings from Furetière’s seventeenth-century *Dictionnaire universel*.

L’INVESTITURE. De suite après le port de foi et d’hommage, le seigneur “relevait” l’homme agenouillé devant lui, l’avouait pour son vassal, lui donnait sur la bouche le baiser de paix et lui remettait le fièf. (Perrot 214, emphasis added)

ADVOUER. Reconnaître la vérité. Il faut advouer que la Providence divine est merveilleuse.

———Signifie encore en matière de dettes et de crimes, confesser, reconnaître sa faute. Ce criminel a tout advoué à la question.

SE CONFESSER. Signifie, déclarer à un Prestre ses pechez, à dessin d’en recevoir l’absolution. On dit en ce sens qu’un péché confessé est à demi pardonné. (Furetière)

The oldest meaning of "avouer" refers to the feudal ceremony in which the vassal pledged faith to his lord and took possession of his
fief. During the seventeenth century the word came to mean "reconnaître la vérité." So the word itself shifted in meaning from an objective verification process whereby someone was vouched for by a superior, to a subjective process in which one established the truth about oneself. This evolution is suggestive of the change from a feudal society, in which identity was conferred by another, to the classical age, in which the individual mind became the custodian of truth.

These definitions also make it clear that the word "avouer" can mean either sacred or profane discourse, whereas "se confesser" has a narrow religious meaning. "Aveu" is the more neutral term appropriate for legal, philosophical, medical, and amorous confessions.

Legally, avowal replaced proof by ordeal and oath toward the end of the thirteenth century. The new legal procedure (inquisitio) was directed toward confession as the ultimate form of proof: "Tous les efforts de l'instruction tendirent à obtenir de l'inculpé un aveu qui simplifiait tout" (Perrot 515). These techniques were borrowed by secular courts from the courts of the Inquisition and the Dominican order, which had pioneered them in the struggle against heresy. In the secular and ecclesiastical courts, avowal and submission to "la question" continued to be the cornerstone of justice. The burden of proof rested upon the accused, who could either prove the charges by confessing or effectively dissemble himself by surviving the torture and refusing to confess. If he was convicted, his punishment involved a final public confession.

Before the Inquisition, this involved the notorious auto-da-fé, where the convicted heretic, freethinker, or sexual deviant was given one last chance to confess and recant and thus be spared or, if a recidivist, at least strangled before being burned. In the secular courts, a capital offense was punished by a public "supplice" and the "amende honorable" in which the condemned man confessed and proclaimed his crime. The three aspects of a trial—preliminary "question," "amende honorable," and "supplice"—complemented each other. They all raised the subject to a position of absolute verifier of the accusation, and they compelled him to verbalize this truth, first in private while undergoing "la question," next in public both verbally and physically. As Michel Foucault explains, the significance of this spectacle is that it "publie la vérité du crime dans le corps même du supplicié" (Surveiller 59). All of this was considered an edifying spectacle for the general public and, more important, for the king and his court. As the illustration shows (fig. 11), the auto-da-fé was an important display of royal
power. The same could be said of the "supplice," where the king was always present, at least symbolically, as a witness to the criminal's avowal and punishment.

It is important to bear in mind these juridical scenes of avowal and torture when we encounter the words "aveu" and "supplice" in literature. As we saw in Vigny's passage, the lover's avowal has meaning on several levels; it is spiritual, sexual, and political. The importance of avowal was derived from confession, but the practice soon invaded almost every important intersubjective relationship—hence Michelet's irritation that he can hardly distinguish between the language of love and that of spiritual direction: "Si vous écoutiez, témoin invisible, la conversation des belles ruelles, vous ne sauriez pas toujours distinguer qui parle, de l'amant ou du directeur" (Du Prêtre 69). Whether in the whispered discourse of lovers and spiritual directors or in the terrible
sentences of inquisitors, one finds the same vocabulary of confession, and the same paradigm of the confessing subject announcing his truth: "L'aveu est un rituel de discours où le sujet qui parle coïncide avec le sujet de l'énoncé" (Foucault, *Surveiller* 51). As we have seen, the confessional is the model for a phenomenological reduction of the self to a "sujet qui parle."

It is characteristic of a century that made some of its strongest statements in the first person. From Descartes's "cogito" to Louis XIV's putative "L'Etat, c'est moi," the classical age invested heavily in the ideal of an introspective subject capable of reaching indubitable truths and speaking them in the first person. The paradox of this total wager on the subject's ability to perceive the truth and represent the state was that, ironically, it creates a fragile subject at once omnipotent but endangered. Descartes's subject is threatened by the possibility of total delusion if the "malin génie" exists, and the monarchical self is maintained only by the machinery of Versailles, which enslaves Louis as much as it assures his power. Perhaps this explains the modernist interest in the classical self: it is a distant parable of the blindness and insight, the force and the impotence, of the ego.

The power and the veracity of confession were also enhanced by the fact that, as Foucault says, it was a "rituel de discours." In law, in religion, and in the code of love, it was a solemn speech act. I will now make some observations about how and why this ritual was woven into the fabric of society in seventeenth-century France.

**CONFESSION AND COURT SOCIETY**

The use of confessional discourse did not spread uniformly throughout society in the seventeenth century. As a religious practice, frequent confession and spiritual direction were more widespread among the privileged. The masses were reluctantly led to make summary annual confessions to the parish priest. The bourgeois, and especially their wives, preferred more frequent appointments with mendicant confessors; princes and kings had their own private directors for confession at will. The mystical renewal in France, with its emphasis on spiritual direction, took place chiefly in aristocratic circles in Paris. The literature of avowal we will be studying was also written for aristocrats and reflected their consciousness. So far, I have stressed the importance of the Counter-Reformation and the monastic model in the spread of
confession to all aspects of human life. What needs to be examined now is how confession became an integral part of elite culture during the classical age.

The myths and pageantry of divine right monarchy were profoundly Catholic—the anointing of the king, the idea that the nation was embodied in the king's mystical body, the sacrificial ideal, all of those rituals which were founded on the notion of "le roi-prêtre." But the reality of political relations hardly conformed to these images. Norbert Elias tells us that the strategy of the absolutist ruler is to divide, not to unify, his subjects: "The observation of tensions and discord between his subjects is especially important to a conserving king in the situation of Louis XIV. The unification of his subjects threatened the king's existence." Elias then cites a passage from Louis's advice to his son that shows that the king was perfectly aware of the need to disunify his subjects: "You must divide your confidence among several. The jealousy of one holds the ambition of the others in check" (Court Society 129).

In addition to this deliberately maintained division, the court aristocracy was subject to an erosion of their financial and military power. They had contempt for money matters and did not understand the dynamics of the new bourgeois order. Their fortunes were based on land rent and agricultural production, both of which were poor investments in a mercantilist economy. Advances in technology and mercenary armies made their military services less and less important. From Richelieu onward, it was royal policy to disarm the nobles and destroy their fortifications. More and more the aristocrat was cut off from the base of his "natural" sense of superiority over other men. Far from his ancestral land, no longer a soldier by trade, his whole sense of worth would be won or lost at court.

According to Elias, the Frankfurt school historian of "court society" (höfische Gesellschaft), this political system is based on personal relations. The courtier must endlessly cultivate personal contacts at court to further his career. All aspects of his public and private life are caught up in his personal intrigues. There is no absolute division between his professional and private life in the modern sense of the word. He lives in the king's household at Versailles; his position or rank at court is dramatized by his part in the complicated etiquette revolving around the king's daily activities. The highest ranking courtiers are admitted to the royal "lever"; others have ceremonial titles associated with the king's hunting, his eating, his "garde-robe, etc." The meaning of this
elaborate etiquette is not the personal vanity of the king; rather, it is a way to enslave the powerful aristocrats by making them completely beholden to the king. The nobility are carefully arranged according to a subtle hierarchy controlled by the king. The system is an attempt to organize rationally a potentially dangerous opposition into carefully balanced factions.

The mentality this structure fosters is that of the reserved social actor capable at all times of concealing his true motives and mastering his impulses. Elias has studied in detail how court society gave rise to a whole array of restraints associated with "civilized" behavior. It was at the princely courts of late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century Europe that table manners, toilet etiquette, modesty regarding sexual conduct, and the notions of the "bienséances" were developed. In an apparent paradox, the dominant class of society imposed the strictest norms of "autoconstraint" on itself instead of enforcing this repressive model on the masses. Restraint is thus an elite conduct, a tactic the upper class uses to manage its own sexuality, not repress the proletariat.

In some sense, for Elias, the courtiers are pre-Victorians, passing on their repressive model of civilization to the bourgeoisie, who developed an even stricter regime of public restraint and private emotional life. Elias sees present-day society as one where "hommes et femmes sont assurés que de fortes autocontraintes et des règles strictes de savoir-vivre limitent l'initiative des individus" (272). We have inherited the courtly heritage of restraint. But as we shall see, and in keeping with a major theme of this study, the courtly ethic is heavily influenced by confession; repression is only half of the picture. The courtiers are our ancestors, but they were confessed, not repressed.

Despite his theme of "autocontrainte," Elias does mention confession and confidentiality in his study of court society. On one level, confession is a dangerous practice: to reveal one's secrets or weaknesses to another is potentially suicidal. The accomplished courtier is a master of dissimulation, as evinced by La Bruyère's description of the man at court: "Un homme qui sait la cour est maître de son geste, de ses yeux et de son visage; il est profound, impénétrable; il dissimule les mauvais offices, sourit à ses ennemis, contraint son humeur, déguise ses passions, dément son coeur, parle, agit contre ses sentiments" (221).

But, paradoxically, the best training for dissimulation was to practice a form of self-observation. "Just as he [the courtier] is forced to
seek the true motives of others behind their controlled outward behavior, just as he is lost if he is unable to unmask the affects and interests of his rivals behind their dispassionate facade, he must know his own passions if he is to conceal them effectively" (Elias, Court Society 105). The difficulty was to find a reliable "confident" with whom one could be frank and trust one's secrets.

But beyond this strategic use of confession as a means of training in dissimulation, court society produced a longing for moments of true sincerity. Religious confession presented itself as a haven from the continual falsehood of secular life and as a reprieve from the dire consequences of confession in the world. Bourdaloue makes this distinction between the jeopardy of worldly confession and the benefit of religious confession: "Dans la justice des hommes, la procédure est bien différente: ils ne punissent que ce que l'on découvre; mais dans la justice divine, il n'y a de châtiment et de punition que pour ce que l'on cache" (2:125).

The confessional should be added to the list of "refuges de l'intimité" which Orest Ranum discusses in the Histoire de la vie privée as the obverse of the oppressive publicity of court life (211–65). Like the alcove, the ruelle, and the garden, the confessional was a private space where one could put down the social mask and reveal the "true" self. These private spaces are thus paradoxical by-products of court society, and they receive their potential truth value from the prevailing standard of false appearances. In a society whose "professional" ethic was emotional masking and the suppression of spontaneity, the passions retreat to these private domains.

In addition to confession in the strictly religious sense, court society engendered a practice of guidance that closely resembles spiritual direction. La Rochefoucauld, whose links with Augustinian spirituality have been documented by Lafond, constantly denounces dissimulation in his Maximes and describes an ideal relation based on sincerity and confidentiality and founded on the same sort of truth obligations as confession: "La sincérité est une ouverture du coeur, qui nous montre tels que nous sommes; c'est un amour de la vérité, une répugnance à se déguiser, un désir de se dédommager de ses défauts, et de les diminuer même par le mérite de les avouer" (116). This is the same verbal rapport, expressed in the same terms, which de Sales recommends that Philotée strive for when she speaks to her spiritual director: "Traitez avec lui à coeur ouvert. . . . Le grand remède contre toutes tentations grandes ou petites, c'est de déployer son coeur et de com-
muniquer les suggestions, ressentiments et affections que nous avons à notre directeur” (39, 266). The remedy for the constraints and falsehoods of social life is a behind-the-scenes, heart-to-heart conversation, a private verbalization of one’s faults. La Rochefoucauld says that by this sort of lay confession, “nous nous assujettissons volontairement,” and that one who hears such secrets is bound by a law of secrecy, much like a priest.

Thus confessional discourse, in either its religious or secular form, had a particular meaning in court society. It was the offstage voice, the private confidence of the player in the court drama. It was one-half of a duplicitous, double-talking self, the “tout-dire” side of the repressed “rien-dire” public self. St. François de Sales expresses both halves of this double injunction. Public discourse consists of “paroles nettes, civiles et pudiques. Quant aux choses indécentes et folles, l’Apôtre ne veut pas seulement qu’on les nomme” (Oeuvres 206); but to the confessor, as we have already seen, one must “déployer son coeur.”

The overall picture of court society that emerges with this double injunction is thus difficult to reconcile with a purely repressive model of civilization. For Elias, confession can be viewed as part of the civilizing tendency toward “autoconstraint,” but I prefer Foucault’s insistence on the difference between confession and repression. Society does not proceed simply by exclusion and censuring; that defines only the negative, juridical aspect of morality. The other half of socialization is the command to verbalize one’s feelings. If we sought a succinct word to summarize this aspect of the civilizing process, perhaps the technical term for the confessional secret, sigillum, would offer some possibilities. It literally means “seal”; the secrets of confession are covered by a seal of secrecy. But a seal is a sign as well, a paradoxical sign that signifies silence. Society proceeds against the passions by repression, but also by sigillum—obliged verbalization followed by a sign of silence.

This new perspective allows one to evaluate all the positive, solicitous aspects of a civilization which bind men to particular power structures. Any discursive system like psychoanalysis or confession in some sense spreads the disease it promises to cure. Practices of avowal are apprenticeships in a language of the passions; they teach the subject to reconstruct his or her experiences according to a certain vocabulary, and they bind one to those expert in that vocabulary. The very idea of the “passions” had to be invented and inculcated by moralists in order for it to be lived, transgressed, and avowed. “La passion” was a disease
that could only be caught and enunciated in aristocratic circles. We have only to think of scenes from Molière in which uninitiated women like Charlotte (Dom Juan) or Agnès (L’Ecole des femmes) encounter aristocratic seducers and have trouble comprehending the language and strange rituals of "Messieus-là les courtisans." Charlotte wavers between too literal and too suspicious a reading of Dom Juan’s flowery declarations, and Agnès must be taught the language of passion before she can relate to men—and as if to illustrate the continuity of religious discourse and secular gallantry, Molière makes Arnolphe’s religious examination of Agnès’s conscience the occasion of her avowal of love for Horace.

In similar fashion, La Princesse de Clèves shows how passion and avowal are related to court experience. The disease is first caught at court: “Ainsi il y avait une sorte d’agitation sans désordre dans cette cour, qui la rendait très agréable, mais aussi très dangereuse pour une jeune personne” (Lafayette 45). The only way the princess envisages controlling her adulterous desire is either to follow her mother’s deathbed advice, “retirez-vous de la cour;” or to confess her crime to her own husband. The shock value of the ending comes from the fact that, unlike most courtly lovers, she does not hide her passion and manage it by confiding in an “amie intime” but breaks out of the cycle of courtly love by confessing directly to her husband.

**SIGNS OF CONTRADICTION**

Historically, the seventeenth century has not yet come to the moment when the private self will be set forth as the only authentic self and a new form of social organization, based on a community of such selves, will be demanded—that is the work of Rousseau—but tensions between the two selves are already apparent. The severest moral critics of court society, the Jansenists, reserved the relation with God entirely for the private, hidden self; the Christian “should lead a life like the others in appearance, but as different from theirs in spirit as the Son of God is from his creatures” (St. Cyran, qtd. in Viner 137). The political world is left intact, abandoned to its own wickedness, while the private self leads an unapparent life of grace.

The possibility of strife between the public court sphere and the private confessing self is apparent in the story behind Crespi’s illustration of the sacrament of penance (fig. 12). The painting represents St. John Nepomuc, a recently canonized saint who had been confessor to
Figure 12. Giuseppe Maria Crespi, St. John Nepomuc Confessing, Turin, Pinacoteca, 1743. Reprinted with permission of Art Resource, New York.
the queen of Bohemia. He could be called the martyr of *sigillum* because he was put to death in 1383 for failing to reveal to the king the content of the queen’s confession.\(^9\) He remained an obscure figure until the seventeenth century, when his canonization was advanced by the Jesuits, themselves confessors to half the courts of Europe.

The painting is of course anachronistic, since the confessional did not exist in 1383, but it serves well to illustrate the tensions of confession in court society. We see the separation by the grill. At the focal point of the painting, the disproportionately large ear of the saint is visible. The symbolism is enhanced by the fact that the ear actually hearing the confession is hidden from representation. The painting performs a sort of visual *sigillum*, both revealing and effacing the secret discourse of confession, suggesting a hiatus between the visual domain and the spiritual, verbal order.

**PROSCENIUM AND CONFESSIONAL**

*All use the proscenium arch to serve as a fourth wall behind which the actors are required to behave naturally and unselfconsciously as if no audience were present.*

J. S. Street

... *que chacun de ceux qui y parleraient fût présumé y parler avec le même secret que s’il était dans sa chambre.*

Corneille, *Discours des trois unités*

Roughly contemporaneous with the introduction of the confessional in France, another spatial innovation was being imported from Italy: the perspectivist theatrical setting. The multiple “mansions” of the medieval theater were replaced by a single scene in order to enforce the rule of “unité de lieu,” and trompe l’oeil settings were used to create the illusion that the action of the play was transpiring in a unified, realistic space. The conventional backdrop consisted of the columns, grottoes, and rooms of a temple or palace. The use of a stage curtain to be raised at the beginning of the spectacle and lowered at the end also appeared during the second and third decades of the seventeenth century.

The result of these changes was to raise a barrier between spectator and spectacle. During the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, “there
was no formalized separation between performers and public" (Mitterman 1). The presence of off-duty actors or spectators invading the stage did not compromise medieval and Renaissance theatricality. Medieval religious drama made no attempt to be a realistic portrayal of earthly life; its simultaneous representation of temporal and eternal reality sought to raise spectator and spectacle to a transcendent reality. Renaissance drama promoted the idea that theater and world were one: "all the world’s a stage" as Shakespeare’s melancholy Jacques proclaims. The mark of classical drama is its insistence on the autonomy of the dramatic space; the reality of the real world and the theatricality of the dramatic world are both founded on a strict separation of the two.

Corneille says the spectator views the action as though hidden behind a wall. He or she occupies the same voyeuristic position as that of Vigny’s Père Joseph, able to observe the characters as they move from the “chambre” to the “palais,” as they act both on and off the stage of court society. The new theatrical dispositif is able to represent simultaneously the space of “civilité” and that of “intimité.” These are the two spaces that Roger Chartier identifies in the Histoire de la vie privée as being the twin aspects of daily life at court:

L’espace gouverné par la civilité est celui de l’existence collective, de la sociabilité distinctive de la cour et des salons, ou bien du rituel social en son entier dont les normes obligées doivent contraindre tous les individus, quelle que soit leur condition. A l’inverse, l’intimité exige des lieux retranchés, des espaces séparés ou trouver solitude, secret, silence. Le jardin, la chambre—mais plus encore l’alcove et la ruelle—l’étude et le cabinet offrent de telles retraites qui, tout ensemble, cachent ce qui ne doit ou ne peut plus être montré (les soins du corps, les fonctions naturelles, les gestes de l’amour) et abritent des pratiques associées plus qu’auparavant à l’isolement: ainsi la prière ou la lecture. (165)

In the same volume, J.-M. Goulemot seems to identify the classical stage exclusively with the space and the norms of “civilité.” He sees the “bienséances” and the tendency toward abstract, universal representation as expressions of the same repressive code that governs public court behavior: “C’est d’abord le processus d’occultation du privé et de l’intime qui définit l’âge classique. Qu’il s’agisse de la poésie lyrique ou du théâtre, le mouvement est le même” (380).
I would see this as only half of the picture. In the passage I cited from the *Discours*, Corneille specifically uses the words "secret" and "chambre," a clear indication that by means of the convention of the fourth wall he hoped to analyze his characters in their "intimité." I would grant that the civil ethic of court society is never entirely abandoned; the plays were public spectacles and as such governed by the rules of decorum. Despite the fiction of privacy being invaded, the characters maintain almost the same level of dignity as they show in public. But too much attention is paid to the repressive aspect of the *bienséances*. Their real effect is to legitimize the discourse of desire. They are only a detour, a protocol to be observed in the ever-increasing loquacity of the passions in the West. As part of the civilizing process, their function is not to silence desire but to orchestrate its expression and management.

Failure to understand the *bienséances* in this light leads Goulemot to characterize the classical stage as a "rituel distant et glacé" (383). One is immediately reminded of Phèdre's words: "Je sentis tout mon corps et transir et brûler." Court behavior is marked by distance, verbal restraint, and even coldness, but these are signs of a new, mediated erotic, not the triumph of repression. There is a tension between refined speech and underlying passion which it is impossible to characterize univocally as either moral or erotic.

Formally, the new theatrical device was thus admirably suited to psychological investigation. An increasingly dignified audience raises the level of taste from vulgar farce or baroque showiness to a more serious plane. An aristocratic audience sees its class destiny played out before it in the drama of love and duty to the state. There is an increasing sobriety in both decor and theme, and *words* carry more of the meaning than visual display. There is more subjective probing in the plays of Corneille, Racine, and Molière than in the typical Renaissance drama. Jacques Truchet admirably sums up the interiorizing tendency in the new tragedy of the 1640s:

La nouvelle tragédie s'intéresse aux causes des événements, aux mobiles profonds des actes. D'où l'importance de la délibération dans ce théâtre, et de l'analyse. Au lieu d'exhiber lyriquement ou frénétiquement leur amour, leur espoir, leur haine ou leur colère, ces personnages s'interrogent sur eux-mêmes, cherchant à cerner la vérité de leur être. C'est par exemple Auguste analysant son attitude face à son propre pouvoir, à son devoir, à son projet hé-
roïque, c'est Pauline faisant un admirable effort de lucidité pour voir clair dans son coeur. (135)

As we will see, confessional scenes are a key element in this new theater, and, if it is not stretching analogies too far, I would see equivalences between the confessional and the proscenium. It is well documented, by Bray among others, that Counter-Reformation Italy was the inspiration for many of the precepts of French classicism. I am not proposing anything like a direct influence of religious architectural innovations on literature, but rather a suggestive coincidence, similar discourses and similar spatial dispositions for staging interiority in the seventeenth century.

A final structural parallel between the confessional and the proscenium concerns the unseen, Other destinataire. Both confessional and proscenium create the hidden spectator. The audience, like the confessor or the analyst, is outside the communicational network. To be more precise, the audience occupies the impersonal place suggested by the real analyst; the classical audience is totally beyond the dialogue of the acting subjects. The analyst and the confessor, by hiding their faces, seek to invoke the presence of the Other who overhears their conversation. The hidden priest represents an invisible God, and the invisible analyst dramatizes the presence of the Symbolic order.

The classical stage becomes less and less a visual spectacle as the century advances; it insists more and more on the text of human interactions. It asks the question whether the truths of the heart can be known: "Vous ne savez pas lire au fond de mon coeur," Phèdre complains to Hippolyte. As a subject she remains misunderstood by others and by herself. Can her enigma be resolved from within the play—by Oenone, or Hippolyte, or Thésée—or only from without, by an Other? Can her desire be addressed to anyone except the obscene spectator?