In this study we have followed the vicissitudes of a discourse that, according to Michel Foucault, runs through Western civilization "de Tertullien à Freud." I have sought to substantiate this claim for a certain historical period. My success or failure depends on the plausibility of my rapprochements between the language of psychoanalysis and that of Christian confession. If Freud, Lacan, Tertullian, and St. François de Sales practice the same discourse or, to use Freud's metaphor for psychoanalysis, are on the same historical telephone line, then we should be able to make the connection, exchange signals among the different confessional discourses. The reader must feel that the same message has been transcoded from the past up to the present.

My other objective, however, has been to respect the historical specificity of the cultures under investigation. History is the study of identities between present and past, but also of differences. It is the same discourse that runs from Tertullian to Freud, but it is always different. At each moment it combines in a unique way with other historical givens to form a confessional dispositif. We have studied four such dispositifs: (1) early Christian exomologesis, (2) monastic exagoreusis, (3) Dante's medieval confession, and (4) the court society confessional. In each case, the same obligation to represent the self has produced a unique confessional literature and community.

In the De penitentia, Tertullian orders his followers in the primitive Christian community to undergo exomologesis or publicatio sui to expiate three grave sins: murder, adultery, or idolatry. It is a public penance in which the sinner "exchanges the sins which he has committed for
severe treatment” (qtd. in Watkins 1:115, emphasis added). Transgressions are undone by representation; the body of the sinner is the expressive signifier that he uses to “publish” his spiritual death and thereby earn a chance to be reborn spiritually. After a period of “doing penance,” the bodily mortification is lifted and the sinner is welcomed back into the Church. This confessional dispositif produced a collective, public sense of the self and a binding together of the members of the community. It is the ancestor to all forms of group therapy which use inclusion and exclusion to produce a prise de conscience by the individual.

Tertullian’s explanation of penance as symbolic substitution for sin is almost identical to Freud’s definition of the symptom: “A symptom is a sign of, and a substitute for, an instinctual satisfaction which has remained in abeyance” (20:91). For Tertullian, the “instinctual satisfaction” is sin, which can be eradicated, undone by its symbolic exchange for “severe treatment.” Freud would doubtless categorize exomologesis as a specific kind of symptom: undoing (ungeschehenmachen), typical of obsessional neurosis.¹ But I hope to have learned something about psychoanalysis by reversing this reductive comparison and asking: Is psychoanalysis like exomologesis?

Following Foucault’s “de Tertullien à Freud,” I have sought to show that psychoanalysis manipulates and controls bodies just as assuredly as did Tertullian’s exomologesis, that although neurosis has been exchanged for sin and words for acts, psychoanalysis is just as ritualistic and coercive as was early Christian confession. To submit to analysis, and to think that it is a scientifically objective and liberating discovery of the “truth,” is to be blind historically to the fact that throughout the history of the Christian West, men and women have been forced to live their bodies in certain ways. From its origins, Christianity taught its adherents to live the body as a theater of sin, and it is this body that Freud encountered in his patients—they were involuntary ascetics, whose symptoms he would relieve through avowal.

The creative turn of psychoanalysis was to claim to be a liberation from the ascetic system, a freeing of the body from its repressive expiations and symptoms. But in instituting his practice, Freud placed his patients under the same Christian obligation to tell the truth with the body, and he founded a clinical procedure that invokes the same quasi-magical power of representation to heal and cure which was the basis of confession. Patient and doctor, like priest and penitent, communicate with an unconscious or spiritual agency without ever completely
understanding its operation. The ego comes over into the id but does not explicate or eradicate it.

The next group whose social organization was influenced by confession were the monastic communities of fourth-century Egypt and Syria. They were a spiritual elite, and their confessional practices were aimed at eradicating sin in its most subtle, mental origins, as opposed to the grave sins treated by exomologesis. The exagoreusis of these Desert Fathers is much closer to Freud’s technique.

It uses speech as both diagnosis and cure. By the “agon” of confession the monk gains insight into his unconscious spiritual life and defeats the demon. Almost every aspect of the psychoanalytic unconscious is foreshadowed in the monastic model of the psyche. Conscious life is governed by somatic drives and unconscious forces. Thoughts and dreams must be analyzed to reveal their true hidden meaning. A subtle poetics of thought interpretation pays close attention to the formal aspects of the signifier and the contradictory logic of the unconscious. The gifted spiritual father decides whether thoughts are from the self, God, or the devil, and he heals the confessant with his divinely inspired words. “Speak a word for my salvation” is the oft-repeated demand of the disciple in the apothegms of the Desert Fathers.

The monks believed that the unconscious was moved by demons and angels. For Freud, repressed biographical and familial events were the catalysts of the unconscious thought process. Apart from this distinction the two psychic models are remarkably similar. Sociologically, what is instructive about the monks’ discourse is that it was meant to indicate total obedience and humility, a surrender of the mind to the authority of a superior. A “perfect union” was formed between the spiritual father and the spiritual child by means of confession. The monks were thus aware that the knowledge exchanged in confession gave rise to a relation of dominance and submission.

There are several paradoxical aspects of this system which should be food for thought in any discussion of confession and society: (1) The most efficacious and domineering paternal order ever invented was founded, not on repression, but on expression of desire. (2) The power to interpret thoughts and to forgive is a potent collectivizing force. To bind or to loose is always to bind. One is reminded of Bérenger’s struggle against the slightest admission of guilt in resisting group hysteria in Ionesco’s Rhinocéros: “Il ne faut pas avoir de remords. Le sentiment de la culpabilité est dangereux!” (198). Also, what seems
the most individualizing of rituals, since it makes the monk recognize himself as a solitary subject of desire, leads to a state of total group solidarity. Thus confession ends up being the most social of discourses. The individual and society are projections of a single social reality. Society cannot be conceived except as a collection of voices, and the individual has no existence except as a subject of enunciation. The individual must recognize himself in "les mots de la tribu," and the tribe exists only as a network of communicating individuals.

A quite different confessional dispositif was in place by the thirteenth century. What the Church lost in intensity and intimate communal spirit it gained in extension and scale. The Lateran decree imposed auricular confession, in theory at least, on every living soul in Europe. From persecuted counterculture, the Church had become an empire, the universal agent in sacred History. Confession was now a ritual that helped define a global community. For this reason, Dante illustrates most clearly the implications of the Lateran decree. In his poem, all of humanity is subjected to the obligation to confess, as they enter either Hell or Purgatory. His vision is universal. Accompanied by Virgil, the poet of the Roman "imperium sine fine," he imagines a new world order at the heart of which is confession.

The Scholastic theory of the sacrament of penance has a key role to play in Dante's vision of the afterlife. As the souls enter Hell, they must confess to Minos, who bases their eternal punishment on their avowals. As Dante visits each circle in the Inferno, it is also clear that the punishments themselves are ironic interpretations of the lost souls' confessions. It is a perverse illustration of the Scholastic doctrine that the voice was the determinata materia ad significandam of confession. The constant association between speech and punishment in Hell is probably also related to Dante's own theoretical statements in the De vulgari eloquentia that speech is the distinguishing characteristic of man. In Hell, salutary confession becomes "bestial segno."

As the dramatis personae of the Comedy are compelled to confess, they are organized and hierarchized into groups of sinners. They are subjected to a feudal chain of command. Only those in Heaven have a direct rapport with the Divine King; the rest are dealt with by intermediary angels or devils. Their lives are characterized by the public sociability of the Middle Ages. Whether in Hell or in Purgatory, their daily lives are essentially public and collective. Only the poet's own confession is a relatively private moment. The moral code that underlies Dante's afterlife reserves its worst punishments for those who have
violated the personal bonds of feudalism. The "peccator carnali" are confined to the first circle of Hell proper, whereas those who have betrayed sacred oaths of loyalty are confined to the bottom of the pit.

The community that emerges from the confessional discourse of court society is marked by a more pronounced division between public and private life. The truths of their desire can no longer be read on the surface of their bodies. They inhabit a different regime of speech and signification. Words reveal not by resemblance but rather by representation; they lead beyond appearance to a dissimilar realm of ideas where mind, which has no extension or mass, comprehends a material world reconstructed in geometric forms. In the moral domain, the intentions of a hidden self become more important than acts themselves. Jesuits exploit the elusiveness of consent and volition in their casuistry; Jansenists are obliged to "paint the portrait of the self," defeated in advance by their own theory of representation, according to which the portrait is the absence of the object.

The confessional is emblematic of the shift from resemblance to representation. Sinner and priest no longer see each other face-to-face; instead, they conduct a ghostly conversation aimed at producing the baroque spiritual encounter, the *cor ad cor* conversation described by St. François de Sales or the imperative of self-portraiture indicated by Nicole. This new confessional discourse first spread among the elite of court society. It was also secularized and absorbed by the divine right monarchy. In the plays of Corneille and Racine, we see an ambiguous sacred/profane confessional dispositif at work. The neoclassic stage, which, like the confessional, creates the position of the "obscene" spectator, is witness to the psychological drama of the courtiers. In this new interiorizing theater, an aristocratic elite employs confessional techniques to gain mastery over its passions. They are like the monks except that they are engaged in political instead of spiritual combat. Conspiracies and networks of influence are being formed instead of the "perfect spiritual sonship" of monastic direction.

Corneille works out a fragile synthesis between this spiritual analysis and the monarchy. In *Cinna*, at least, *raison d'État* and pastoral power, the two forms of modern political rationality, are reconciled in the figure of Auguste, who is the "roi des coeurs." Racine, under the influence of the tortuous Jansenist theology of confession, creates a tragic world in the grip of Minos. Agrippine, Roxane, Mithridate, and Thésée are cruel inquisitors; for Eriphile and Phèdre, the *mise en discours* of desire and the discovery of the self are modern versions of the
tragic destiny. The inexorable fate of Greek tragedy is exacted by the obligation to confess. In *Phèdre*, Minos represents this combination of ancient fatality and Christian confession. Every time *Phèdre* confesses, she advances toward her destruction. It is Minos “à sa proie attaché.”

In the current historical debate about court society, I have attempted a reinterpretation of Elias’s repressive model of the civilizing process. For me, the legacy of the courtiers is the development of a public language for the analysis of the passions. Like the bourgeois who succeeded them, their consciousness as an elite was marked by a discursive overproduction of sexuality. Herein also lies the erotic appeal of their literature. It is not about “bienséances” and “autocontrainte”; rather, it is a new erotic based on the baroque/psychoanalytic idea that “il n’y a pas de rapport sexuel.” There is only language, which “supplée à l’inexistence du rapport sexuel.”

The eighteenth century understood this ambiguity. Sade and Restif de la Bretonne recount scenes of sex in the confessional. Our own age still finds pleasure in the grip of Minos; the telephone has been eroticized just as the confessional was.

For modern society, confession is still the proof of hell or the promise of heaven. Burning pitch and the Styx speak only to our literary memory, but facing up to the self through confession is still programmatic in our social and psychological schemes. When Sartre’s Joseph Garcin arrives in hell, he asks where the stakes and grills are. They have all disappeared, but Minos still haunts the “salon bourgeois,” stripped of all furniture except the Freudian dispositif, the “canapé.” Garcin himself initiates confession: “Tant que chacun de nous n’aura pas avoué pourquoi ils l’ont condamné, nous ne saurons rien. Toi la blonde, commence ...” (47). Avowal is still a valid tool for proving the truth of Sartre’s existentialist lesson that life is the sum of free acts, not good intentions. We are still in the grip of Minos. Society wouldn’t exist without his knowledge and his power. Garcin the inquisitor or Inès the seductress: “Je suis le miroir aux alouettes; ma petite alouette, je te tiens!” (43). Hell is not so much “les autres” as it is “l’aveu.”