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Giving an Account of Oneself

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*Cressida*: Stop my mouth. . . .

I know not what I speak.

—Shakespeare, *The History of Troilus and Cressida*

How do these concerns relate to the question of whether one can give an account of oneself? Let us remember that one gives an account of oneself to another, and that every accounting takes place within a scene of address. I give an account of myself to *you*. Furthermore, the scene of address, what we might call the rhetorical condition for responsibility, means that while I am engaging in a reflexive activity, thinking about and reconstructing myself, I am also speaking to you and thus elaborating a relation to an other in language as I go. The ethical valence of the situation is thus not restricted to the question of whether or not my account of myself is adequate, but rather concerns whether, in giving the account, I establish a relationship to the one to whom my account is addressed and whether both parties to the interlocution are sustained and altered by the scene of address.

Within the context of the psychoanalytic transference, the “you” is often a default structure of address, the elaboration of a “you” in an imaginary domain, and an address through which prior, and more archaic, forms of address are conveyed.<sup>7</sup> In the transference, speech sometimes works to convey information (including information about my life), but it also functions as both the conduit for a desire and a rhetorical instrument that seeks to alter or act upon the interlocutory scene itself.<sup>8</sup> Psychoanalysis has always understood this dual dimension of the self-disclosing speech act. On the one hand, it is an effort to communicate information about oneself; yet, on the other hand, it recreates and constitutes anew the tacit presumptions about communication and relationality that structure the mode of address. Transference is thus the recreation of a primary relationality within the analytic space, one that potentially yields a new or altered

relationship (and capacity for relationality) on the basis of analytic work.

Narrative functions within the context of the transference not only a means by which information is conveyed but as a rhetorical deployment of language that seeks to *act upon* the other, motivated by a desire or wish that assumes an allegorical form in the interlocutory scene of the analysis. The “I” is narrated but also posited and articulated within the context of the scene of address. What is produced in discourse often confounds the intentional aims of speaking. The “you” is variable and imaginary at the same time as it is bounded, recalcitrant, and stubbornly there. The “you” constitutes an object in relation to which an aim of desire becomes articulable, but what recurs in this relation to the other, this scene for the articulation of desire, is an opacity that is not fully “illuminated” through speech. So “I” tell a story to “you,” and we might together consider the details of the story that I tell. But if I tell them to you in the context of a transference (and can there be telling without transference?), I am doing something with this telling, acting on you in some way. And this telling is also doing something to me, acting on me, in ways that I may well not understand as I go.

Within some psychoanalytic circles, doctrines, and practices, one of the stated aims of psychoanalysis is to offer the client the chance to put together a story about herself, to recollect the past, to interweave the events or, rather, the wishes of childhood with later events, to try to make sense through narrative means of what this life has been, the impasses it encounters time and again, and what it might yet become. Indeed, some have argued that the normative goal of psychoanalysis is to permit the client to tell a single and coherent story about herself that will satisfy the wish to know herself, moreover, to know herself in part through a narrative reconstruction in which the interventions by the analyst or therapist contribute in many ways to the remaking and reweaving of the story. Roy Schafer has argued this position, and we see it in several versions of psycho-

analytic practice described by clinicians in scholarly and popular venues.<sup>9</sup>

But what if the narrative reconstruction of a life *cannot* be the goal of psychoanalysis, and that the reason for this has to do with the very formation of the subject? If the other is always there, from the start, in the place of where the ego will be, then a life is constituted through a fundamental interruption, is even *interrupted prior to the possibility of any continuity*. Accordingly, if narrative reconstruction is to approximate the life it means to convey, it must also be subject to interruption. Of course, learning to construct a narrative is a crucial practice, especially when discontinuous bits of experience remain dissociated from one another by virtue of traumatic conditions. And I do not mean to undervalue the importance of narrative work in the reconstruction of a life that otherwise suffers from fragmentation and discontinuity. The suffering that belongs to conditions of dissociation should not be underestimated. Conditions of hyper-mastery, however, are no more salutary than conditions of radical fragmentation. It seems true that we might well need a narrative to connect parts of the psyche and experience that cannot be assimilated to one another. But too much connection can lead to extreme forms of paranoid isolation. In any event, it does not follow that, if a life needs some narrative structure, then all of life must be rendered in narrative form. That conclusion would transform a minimum requirement of psychic stability into the principle aim of analytic work.

What is left out if we assume, as some do, that narrative gives us the life that is ours, or that life takes place in narrative form? The “mineness” of a life is not necessarily its story form. The “I” who begins to tell its story can tell it only according to recognizable norms of life narration. We might then say: to the extent that the “I” agrees, from the start, to narrate itself through those norms, it agrees to circuit its narration through an externality, and so to disorient itself in the telling through modes of speech that have an impersonal nature.<sup>10</sup> Of course, Lacan has made clear that whatever

account is given about the primary inaugural moments of a subject is belated and phantasmatic, affected irreversibly by a *nachträglichkeit*. Developmental narratives tend to err by assuming that the narrator of such a narrative can be present to the origins of the story. The origin is made available only retroactively, and through the screen of fantasy. The mental health norm that tells us that giving a coherent account of oneself is part of the ethical labor of psychoanalysis misconstrues what psychoanalysis can and must do. In fact, it subscribes to an account of the subject that belies part of the very ethical significance of that subject’s formation.

If I give an account, and give it to you, then my narrative depends upon a structure of address. But if I can address you, I must first have been addressed, brought into the structure of address as a possibility of language before I was able to find my own way to make use of it. This follows, not only from the fact that language first belongs to the other and I acquire it through a complicated form of mimesis, but also because the very possibility of linguistic agency is derived from the situation in which one finds oneself addressed by a language one never chose. If I am first addressed by another, and if this address comes to me prior to my individuation, in what forms then does it come to me? It would seem that one is always addressed in one way or another, even if one is abandoned or abused, since the void and the injury hail one in specific ways.

This view has disparate philosophical and psychoanalytic formulations. Levinas has claimed that the address of the other constitutes me and that this seizure by the other precedes any formation of the self (*le Moi*). Jean Laplanche, in a psychoanalytic vein, argues something similar when he claims that the address of the other, conceived as a demand, implants or insinuates itself into what will later come to be called, in a theoretical vein, “my unconscious.”<sup>11</sup> In a sense, this nomenclature will always be giving the lie to itself. It will be impossible to speak without error of “my unconscious” because it is not a possession, but rather that which I cannot own. And yet the

grammar by which we seek to give an account of this psychic domain, which I do not, and cannot, own, paradoxically attributes this unconscious to me, as that which belongs to me as a predicate of the subject, just as any number of other features might be said to belong to me, the grammatical and ontological subject. To understand the unconscious, however, is to understand what *cannot* belong, properly speaking, to me, precisely because it defies the rhetoric of belonging, is a way of being dispossessed through the address of the other from the start. For Laplanche, I am animated by this call or demand, and I am at first overwhelmed by it. The other is, from the start, too much for me, enigmatic, inscrutable. This “too-much-ness” must be handled and contained for something called an “I” to emerge in its separateness. The unconscious is not a topos into which this “too much-ness” is deposited. It is rather formed as a psychic requirement of survival and individuation, as a way of managing—and failing to manage—that excess and thus as the persistent and opaque life of that excess itself.

The transference is precisely the emotionally laden scene of address, recalling the other and its overwhelmingness, rerouting the unconscious through an externality from whom it is returned in some way. So the point of the transference and the counter-transference is not only to build or rebuild the story of one’s life but also to enact what cannot be narrated, and to enact the unconscious as it is relived in the scene of address itself. If the transference recapitulates the unconscious, then I undergo a dispossession of myself in the scene of address. This does not mean that I am possessed by the other, since the other is also dispossessed, called upon, and calling, in a relation that is not, for that reason, reciprocal. Nevertheless, just because the analyst (hopefully) handles this dispossession better than I do, there is a dislocation that both interlocutors undergo for access to the unconscious to take place. I am caught up in that address, even as the analyst contracts not to overwhelm me with her need. Nevertheless, I am overwhelmed by something, and I think I am

overwhelmed by her; she is the name I have for this “too-much-ness.” But what does she name?

In this context the question of the “who” reemerges: “By whom am I overwhelmed?” “Who is she?” “Who are you?” are all, in a sense, the question the infant poses to demands of the adult: “Who are you, and what do you want of me?” In this respect, Laplanche’s perspective offers us a way of revising Cavarero’s claim that the question that inaugurates ethics is “Who are you?” When the analyst is the other, I cannot know who the other is, but the pursuit of this unsatisfiable question elaborates the ways in which an enigmatic other, understood as the variegated demands of the adult world, inaugurates and structures me. It also means that she occupies a position for me as both more and less than what she is, and this incommensurability between the analyst as, say, person, and the analyst as, say, occasion for my psychic material lays the groundwork for the contribution that the client makes to the transference scene. The analyst is, in her own way, dispossessed in the moment of acting as its site of transfer for me, and for reasons that I cannot know. What am I calling on her to be? And how does she take up that call? What my call recalls for her will be the site of the counter-transference, but about this I can have only the most refracted knowledge. Vainly I ask, “Who are you?” and then, more soberly, “What have I become here?” And she asks those questions of me as well, from her own distance, and in ways I cannot precisely know or hear. This not-knowing draws upon a prior not-knowing, the one by which the subject is inaugurated, although that “not-knowing” is repeated and elaborated in the transference without ever becoming a literal site to which I might return.

Through the transference, psychoanalysis nevertheless charts primary relational dispositions and scenes, articulating the scenes of address in which selves variably emerge. Although Laplanche’s perspective is not fully compatible with object-relations theorists such as Christopher Bollas, we can see in both approaches a certain atten-

tiveness to what Bollas has called the “unthought known.”<sup>12</sup> Bollas was instrumental in introducing the concept of the analyst as a “transformational object”; he suggested that clinicians should return to Freud’s self-analysis and consider more attentively the uses of the counter-transference within psychoanalytic work. In *The Shadow of the Object: Psychoanalysis of the Unthought Known*, Bollas describes being “recruited” into the environment of the analysand, tacitly positioned and “used” by the analysand as an “object” who belongs to an earlier scene. The counter-transference responds to what is not fully known by the analysand:

The analyst is invited to fulfill differing and changing object representations in the environment, but such observations on our part are the rare moments of clarity in the countertransference. For a very long period of time, and perhaps it never ends, we are being taken into the patient’s environmental idiom, and for considerable stretches of time we do not know who we are, what function we are meant to fulfill, or our fate as his object. (202)

Following Winnicott, Bollas makes the case that the analyst must not only allow himself to become used but even “be prepared on occasion to become situationally ill” (204). The analyst allows himself to be deployed in the environmental idiom of the analysand at the same time as he develops a reflective and deliberate capacity for analysis within that difficult situation. Bollas discusses several clinical examples, in which he shows the “expressive uses” of the counter-transference within analytic work. One patient speaks and then falls silent, leaving Bollas with a sense of aloneness and disorientation. When he finally gives voice to this sense within the session, it is to suggest that for and with him the patient has effectively recreated the environment in which she had felt suddenly isolated and lost as a young child. He asks whether she has asked him to inhabit this experience through her long pauses so that he can know what it was she then felt. What she offers, then, is less a narrative than a recreated

scene of suddenly abandoned communication and a disorienting loss of contact. There is a narrative dimension to his subsequent intervention since he asks whether this experience belongs to her past. The point, however, is less to reconstruct the precise details of the story than to establish another possibility for communication within the transference. When he suggests that she has given him the position of re-experiencing her own experience of loss and absence, he communicates to her in a way that has not been done before, and the conversation that follows, explicitly thematizing this broken form of communication, constitutes a more connected mode of communication, working to alter the default scene of address.

The model of psychoanalytic intervention that Bollas affirms constitutes a significant departure from the classical notion of the cold and distant analyst who keeps every counter-transferential issue to himself. For Bollas, “the analyst will need to become lost in the patient’s world, lost in the sense of not knowing what his feelings and states of mind are in any one moment” (253). Later he remarks that only when the analyst presents himself to be used by the patient is there any hope that the counter-transference can facilitate a new set of object relations: “Only by making a good object (the analyst) go somewhat mad can such a patient believe in his analysis and *know that the analyst has been where he has been and has survived and emerged intact*” (254).

Bollas clearly suggests that the analyst must allow him- or herself to be impinged upon by the client, even undergo a kind of dispossession of self, as well as to maintain a reflective psychoanalytic distance and attitude. In describing Winnicott’s way of introducing his own thoughts into the analytic session, Bollas writes:

they were for him subjective objects, and he put them to the patient as objects between patient and analyst rather than as official psychoanalytic decodings of the person’s unconscious life. The effect of his attitude is crucial, as his interpretations were meant to be played with—kicked around, mulled over, torn to pieces—rather than regarded as the official version of the truth. (206)

The aim here appears to be to facilitate what Bollas describes as the “articulation of heretofore inarticulate elements of psychic life, or what I term the unthought known.” “Articulation” is a broad category for describing various modes of expression and communication, some of them narrative and some not. Although here Bollas does not consider the limits of articulability, that is, the unthought that can never quite be “known,” such a consideration would seem to constitute a necessary counterpart to his explorations. Indeed, primary forms of impingement that cannot be fully or clearly articulated within the analytic process are doubtless at work in the scene of address. Full articulability should not be deemed the final goal of psychoanalytic work in any event, for that goal would imply a linguistic and egoic mastery over unconscious material that would seek to transform the unconscious itself into reflective, conscious articulation—an impossible ideal, and one that undercuts one of the most important tenets of psychoanalysis. The “I” cannot knowingly fully recover what impels it, since its formation remains prior to its elaboration as reflexive self-knowing. This reminds us that conscious experience is only one dimension of psychic life, and that we cannot achieve by consciousness or language a full mastery over those primary relations of dependency and impressionability that form and constitute us in persistent and obscure ways.

The ways that an infant has been handled or addressed can be gleaned only indirectly from the social environment that the analysand later orchestrates. Although there is always a specificity to that environment, one can make the general claim that primary impressions are not just *received* by an ego, but are formative of it. The ego does not come into being without a prior encounter, a primary relation, a set of inaugural impressions from elsewhere. When Winnicott describes the ego as a relational process, he is disputing the view that the ego is constituted and there from the outset of life. He is also positing the primacy of relationality to any bounded sense of self. If the ego, as Bollas and Lacan would agree, “long precedes the arrival

of the subject,”<sup>13</sup> that means only that the relational process that seeks to negotiate a differentiation from the unconscious and from the other is not yet articulated in speech, not yet capable of reflective self-deliberation. In any case, the ego is not an entity or a substance, but an array of relations and processes, implicated in the world of primary caregivers in ways that constitute its very definition.

Moreover, if in the inaugural moments of the “I” I am implicated by the other’s address and demand, then there is some convergence between the ethical scene in which my life is, from the start, bound up with others and the psychoanalytic scene that establishes the intersubjective conditions of my own emergence, individuation, and survivability. Insofar as it recapitulates and reenacts in refracted form the primary scenes of address, the transference operates in the service of narrating a life, assisting in the building of a life story. Working in tandem with the counter-transference, the transference interrupts the suspect coherence that narrative forms sometimes construct, a coherence that can displace from consideration the rhetorical features of the scene of address, which both draw me back to the scene of not knowing, of being overwhelmed, and also, in the present, sustain me.

At its best, the transference provides what Winnicott terms a holding environment and offers a bodily presence in a temporal present that provides the conditions for a sustaining address.<sup>14</sup> This is not to say that transference does not contribute to the narrating of a life: one may be able to tell one’s story better when being “held” in the Winnicottian sense. But there are expressive dimensions of that “holding” that cannot be described through narrative means. There is no reason to call into question the importance of narrating a life, in its partiality and provisionality. I am sure that transference can facilitate narration and that narrating a life has a crucial function, especially for those whose involuntary experience of discontinuity afflicts them in profound ways. No one can live in a radically non-narratable world or survive a radically non-narratable life. But it is

still necessary to remember that what qualifies as an “articulation” and “expression” of psychic material exceeds narration, and that articulations of all kinds have their necessary limits, given the structuring effects of what remains persistently inarticulable.

Sometimes a narrative voice can remain, for instance, shorn of its narrative powers. In Kafka’s story, after Georg appears to throw himself off the bridge and end his life, there is still a narrative voice that uncannily remains, reporting on the noises that populate that event’s aftermath. The final line of the text, “at this moment an unending stream of traffic was just going over the bridge,” is spoken by some voice that claims to be present to the moment described, and the third-person perspective is disjoined from the character of Georg, who has already let himself drop below. It is as if character is vanquished, but voice remains. Although Georg is gone, some narrative voice survives to remark upon the scene. It may be the voice of the imaginary friend to whom both Georg and his father were said to have written, and it may be that this friend turns out to have been writing the two of them, transitively, all along. The final line, referring to the “traffic” going over the bridge, makes use of the German word *Verkehr*, a term used for sexual intercourse, as well. The ambiguity suggests that this death is also a pleasure, perhaps an ecstatic relinquishing of discrete bodily boundary.<sup>15</sup> The voice that emerges to report this fact, a voice that belongs to no one and whose proximity to the event is logically impossible, is purely fictive, perhaps the sublimity of fiction itself. Although the story narrates a death, it also preserves a voice in the final narrative line, suggesting that a human something survives, that narration has some propitious relation to survival. What remains peculiar, however, is that this is a written voice with no body and no name, a voice extracted from the scene of address itself, one whose extraction, paradoxically, forms the basis of its survival. The voice is ghostly, impossible, disembodied, and yet it persists, living on.

In a well-known letter written to Benjamin on December 17, 1934, Adorno reviews Benjamin’s essay on Kafka and considers the condi-

tions for survival that Kafka’s texts provide. He begins by noting that he is not “in the slightest position to pass ‘judgment’ upon [Benjamin’s] essay,” knowingly referencing the potentially fatal problems associated with judgment of this kind. Adorno’s remarks to Benjamin are the usual ones: Benjamin gives an account of an “archaic” and primal history that is irrecoverable, whereas Adorno insists that the loss of a concept of our “historical age” is a dialectical loss, one that has to be understood as a loss *for us*, under these specific historical conditions.

Adorno moves to a consideration of guilt and fatality via the figure of Odradek, a thinglike creature, fundamentally nonconceptualizable, described in Kafka’s parable “Cares of a Family Man.”<sup>16</sup> Odradek, whose name admits of no clear etymology, is another son-like figure who vacates his human form in the face of parental judgment. Odradek appears to be at once a spool of thread and an odd star who is able to balance himself on one of his points. His laughter is the kind “that has no lungs behind it. It sounds rather like the rustling of fallen leaves” (428). Barely anything of the human form survives in his survival, and the narrator of the story, a paternal voice, seriously doubts whether Odradek is even a remnant of a creature with “intelligible shape.” Neither Adorno nor Benjamin takes the psychoanalytic route in explaining this de-humanized form. But Adorno understands that vacating the human form in some ways promises the overcoming of a fatal guilt. He writes:

If [Odradek’s] origin lies with the father of the house, does he not then precisely represent the anxious *concern* and danger for the latter, does he not anticipate precisely the overcoming of the creaturely state of guilt, and is not this concern—truly a case of Heidegger put right side up—the secret key, indeed, the most indubitable promise of *hope*, precisely through the overcoming of the house itself? Certainly, as the other face of the world of things, Odradek is a sign of distortion—but precisely as such he is also a

motif of transcendence, namely, of the ultimate limit and of the reconciliation of the organic and inorganic, or of the overcoming of death: Odradek “lives on.” (69)

Odradek “lives on” in much the same way the formless final voice “lives on” at the end of “The Judgment.”<sup>17</sup> In this sense, for Adorno the movement by which human form is vacated is the means by which something like hope arrives, as if suspending the social parameters of the subject—“overcoming the house”—were what is required for survival. Since Adorno refuses to see this survival as an eternal or archaic transcendence, he must argue that certain conditions establish distortion or disfiguration as the sign of hope or survival. In his “Notes on Kafka” Adorno writes, “the social origin of the individual ultimately reveals itself as the power to annihilate him. Kafka’s work is an attempt to absorb this.”<sup>18</sup> This seems to be a truth about modernity or, indeed, a truth that marks modernity as such. As a corollary to this claim, the attempt to vacate the social (in its current form) seems to promise the hope of survival.

The narrative voice reports on his direct address to Odradek: “Well, what’s your name?” “Odradek,” he says. “And where do you live?” “No fixed abode.” There is a question, “Who are you?” and then, as a reply, a voice again, but no human form. The narrator indirectly humanizes Odradek through the third-person pronoun as well as through direct address. The paternal voice does not exactly despise him; since the parable ends with the line: “He does no harm to anyone that I can see; but the idea that he is likely to survive me I find almost painful.” It is almost painful, but not quite. And in that “not quite” we can see some hope for Odradek’s survival that outlives a near total dehumanization.

The social origins of the individual, even within modernity, constitute one way for survival to be threatened. Annihilation threatens from the other side as well when the very transcendence of the social threatens to undermine the social conditions of life itself. After all,

no one survives without being addressed; no one survives to tell his or her story without first being inaugurated into language by being called upon, offered some stories, brought into the discursive world of the story. Only later can one then find one’s way in language, only after it has been imposed, only after it has produced a web of relations in which affectivity achieves articulation in some form. One enters into a communicative environment as an infant and child who is addressed and who learns certain ways of addressing in return. The default patterns of this relationality emerge as the opacity within any account of oneself.

I would suggest that the structure of address is not a feature of narrative, one of its many and variable attributes, but an interruption of narrative. The moment the story is addressed to someone, it assumes a rhetorical dimension that is not reducible to a narrative function. It presumes that someone, and it seeks to recruit and act upon that someone. Something is being done with language when the account that I give begins: it is invariably interlocutory, ghosted, laden, persuasive, and tactical. It may well seek to communicate a truth, but it can do this, if it can, only by exercising a relational dimension of language.

This view has implications for the making of moral judgments as well: namely, that the structure of address conditions the making of judgments about someone or his or her actions; that it is not reducible to the judgment; and that the judgment, un beholden to the ethics implied by the structure of address, tends toward violence.

But here, for the time being, I am concerned with a suspect coherence that sometimes attaches to narrative, specifically, with the way in which narrative coherence may foreclose an ethical resource—namely, an acceptance of the limits of knowability in oneself and others. To hold a person accountable for his or her life in narrative form may even be to require a falsification of that life in order to satisfy the criterion of a certain kind of ethics, one that tends to break with relationality. One could perhaps satisfy the burden of



proof that another imposes upon an account, but what sort of interlocutory scene would be produced in consequence? The relation between the interlocutors is established as one between a judge who reviews evidence and a suppliant trying to measure up to an indecipherable burden of proof. We are then not that far from Kafka. Indeed, if we require that someone be able to tell in story form the reasons why his or her life has taken the path it has, that is, to be a coherent autobiographer, we may be preferring the seamlessness of the story to something we might tentatively call the truth of the person, a truth that, to a certain degree, for reasons we have already suggested, might well become more clear in moments of interruption, stoppage, open-endedness—in enigmatic articulations that cannot easily be translated into narrative form.

This brings us closer to an understanding of transference as a practice of ethics. Indeed, if, in the name of ethics, we (violently) require that another do a certain violence to herself, and do it in front of us by offering a narrative account or issuing a confession, then, conversely, if we permit, sustain, and accommodate the interruption, a certain practice of nonviolence may follow. If violence is the act by which a subject seeks to reinstall its mastery and unity, then nonviolence may well follow from living the persistent challenge to egoic mastery that our obligations to others induce and require.

This failure to narrate fully may well indicate the way in which we are, from the start, ethically implicated in the lives of others. Although some would say that to be a split subject, or a subject whose access to itself is forever opaque, incapable of self-grounding, is precisely *not* to have the grounds for agency and the conditions for accountability, the way in which we are, from the start, interrupted by alterity may render us incapable of offering narrative closure for our lives. The purpose here is not to celebrate a certain notion of incoherence, but only to point out that our “incoherence” establishes the way in which we are constituted in relationality: implicated, beholden, derived, sustained by a social world that is beyond us and before us.

To say, as some do, that the self *must* be narrated, that only the narrated self can be intelligible and survive, is to say that we cannot survive with an unconscious. It is to say, in effect, that the unconscious threatens us with an insupportable unintelligibility, and for that reason we must oppose it. The “I” who makes such an utterance will surely, in one form or another, be besieged by what it disavows. An “I” who takes this stand—and it is *a stand*, it must be a stand, an upright, wakeful, knowing stand—believes that it survives without the unconscious. Or, if it accepts an unconscious, this “I” accepts it as something that is thoroughly recuperable by the knowing “I,” perhaps as a possession, in the belief that the unconscious can be fully and exhaustively translated into what is conscious. It is easy to see that this is a defended stance, but it remains to be seen in what this particular defense consists. It is, after all, the stand that many make against psychoanalysis itself. In the language that articulates opposition to a non-narrativizable beginning resides the fear that the absence of narrative will spell a certain threat, a threat to life, and will pose the risk, if not the certainty, of a certain kind of death, the death of a subject who cannot, who can never, fully recuperate the conditions of its own emergence.

But this death, if it is a death, is only the death of a certain kind of subject, one that was never possible to begin with, the death of a fantasy of impossible mastery, and so a loss of what one never had. In other words, it is a necessary grief.

### *The “I” and the “You”*

I am you,  
If I am

—Paul Celan

So, I try to begin a story about myself, and I begin somewhere, marking a time, trying to begin a sequence, offering, perhaps, causal links or at least narrative structure. I narrate, and I bind myself as I

narrate, give an account of myself, offer an account to an other in the form of a story that might well work to summarize how and why I am.

But my effort at self-summarization fails, and fails necessarily, when the "I" who is introduced in the opening line as a narrative voice cannot give an account of how it became an "I" who might narrate itself or this story in particular. And as I make a sequence and link one event with another, offering motivations to illuminate the bridge, making patterns clear, identifying certain events or moments of recognition as pivotal, even marking certain recurring patterns as fundamental, I do not merely communicate something about my past, though that is doubtless part of what I do. I also enact the self I am trying to describe; the narrative "I" is reconstituted at every moment it is invoked in the narrative itself. That invocation is, paradoxically, a performative and non-narrative act, even as it functions as the fulcrum for narrative itself. I am, in other words, doing something with that "I"—elaborating and positioning it in relation to a real or imagined audience—which is something other than telling a story about it, even though "telling" remains part of what I do. Which part of "telling" is an acting upon the other, a production of the "I" anew?

Just as there is a performative and allocutory action that this "I" performs, there is a limit to what the "I" can actually recount. This "I" is spoken and articulated, and though it seems to ground the narrative I tell, it is the most ungrounded moment in the narrative. The one story that the "I" cannot tell is the story of its own emergence as an "I" who not only speaks but comes to give an account of itself. In this sense, a story is being told, but the "I" who tells the story, who may well appear within the story as the first-person narrator, constitutes a point of opacity and interrupts a sequence, induces a break or eruption of the non-narrativizable in the midst of the story. So the story of myself that I tell, foregrounding the "I" who I am and inserting it into the relevant sequences of something called

my life, fails to give an account of myself at the moment that I am introduced. Indeed, I am introduced as one for whom no account can or will be given. I am giving an account of myself, but there is no account to be given when it comes to the formation of this speaking "I" who would narrate its life. The more I narrate, the less accountable I prove to be. The "I" ruins its own story, contrary to its best intentions.

The "I" cannot give a final or adequate account of itself because it cannot return to the scene of address by which it is inaugurated and it cannot narrate all of the rhetorical dimensions of the structure of address in which the account itself takes place. These rhetorical dimensions of the scene of address cannot be reduced to narrative. This becomes clear in the context of a transference or, rather, in the model of communication that transference provides, for there one is spoken to, on occasion, and one also speaks, and always, indirectly or directly, in the form of an address.

If I am trying to give an account of myself, it is always *to* someone, to one whom I presume to receive my words in some way, although I do not and cannot know always in what way. In fact, the one who is positioned as the receiver may not be receiving at all, may be engaged in something that cannot under any circumstances be called "receiving," doing nothing more for me than establishing a certain site, a position, a structural place where the relation to a possible reception is articulated. So whether or not there is an other who actually receives is beside the point, since the point will be that there is a site where the relation to a possible reception takes form. The forms this relation to a possible reception can take are many: no one can hear this; this one will surely understand this; I will be refused here, misunderstood there, judged, dismissed, accepted, or embraced. Here as elsewhere, the transference brings forth a scenario from the past, enacting precisely what cannot be given in another expressive form, at the same time that a new and possibly altered relation is wrought from this more archaic resource. To be more precise, the

transference is living proof that the past is not past, since the form that the past now takes is in the present orchestration of the relation to the other that is the transference itself. In this sense, for the past to be lived in the present, narration is not the only route, and not necessarily the most affectively engaging: the past is there and now, structuring and animating the very contours of a default relationality, animating the transference, the recruitment and use of the analyst, orchestrating the scene of address.

One goes to analysis, I presume, to have someone receive one's words. This produces a quandary, since the one who might receive the words is unknown in large part; one who receives becomes, in a certain way, an allegory for reception itself, for the phantasmatic relation to receiving that is articulated to, or at least in the presence of, an other. But if this is an allegory, it is not reducible to a structure of reception that would apply equally well to everyone, although it might give us the general structures within which a particular life could be understood. Subjects who narrate ourselves in the first person encounter a common predicament. There are clearly times when I cannot tell the story in a straight line, and I lose my thread, and I start again, and I forgot something crucial, and it is too hard to think about how to weave it in. I start thinking, thinking, there must be some conceptual thread that will provide a narrative here, some lost link, some possibility for chronology, and the "I" becomes increasingly conceptual, increasingly awake, focused, determined. At this point, when I near the prospect of intellectual self-sufficiency in the presence of the other, nearly excluding him or her from my horizon, the thread of my story unravels. If I achieve that self-sufficiency, my relation to the other is lost. I then relive an abandonment and dependency that is overwhelming. Something other than a purely conceptual elaboration of experience emerges at such a juncture. The "I" who narrates finds that it cannot direct its narration, finds that it can give an account neither of its inability to narrate nor of why narration breaks down. It comes to experience itself or, rather, re-

experience itself as radically, if not irretrievably, unknowing about who it is. Then the "I" is no longer imparting a narrative to a receiving analyst or other; the "I" is staging a scene, recruiting the other into the scene of its own opacity to itself. The "I" is breaking down in certain very specific ways in front of the other or, to anticipate Levinas, in the face of the Other (originally I wrote, "the in face of the Other," indicating that my syntax was already breaking down) or, indeed, by virtue of the Other's face, voice, or silent presence. The "I" finds that, in the presence of an other, it is breaking down. It does not know itself; perhaps it never will. But is that the task, to know oneself? Is the final aim to achieve an adequate narrative account of a life? And should it be? Is the task to cover over through a narrative means the breakage, the rupture, that is constitutive of the "I," which quite forcefully binds the elements together as if it were perfectly possible, as if the break could be mended and defensive mastery restored?

Before the other one cannot give an account of the "I" who has been trying all along to give an account of itself. A certain humility must emerge in this process, perhaps also a certain knowingness about the limits of what there is to know. Perhaps every analysis becomes, in this sense, a lay Kantian. But there is something more: a point about language and its historicity. *The means by which subject constitution occurs is not the same as the narrative form the reconstruction of that constitution attempts to provide.* So what is the role of language in constituting the subject? And what different role does it assume when it seeks to recuperate or reconstitute the conditions of its own constitution? First, there is the question "How is it that my constitution became 'my own'?" Where and when does this presumption of property and belonging take place? We cannot tell a story about this, but perhaps there is some other way in which it is available to us, even available to us through language. In the moment in which I say "I," I am not only citing the pronominal place of the "I" in language, but at once attesting to and taking distance from a primary impingement,

a primary way in which I am, prior to acquiring an "I," a being who has been touched, moved, fed, changed, put to sleep, established as the subject and object of speech. My infantile body has not only been touched, moved, and arranged, but those impingements operated as "tactile signs" that registered in my formation. These signs communicate to me in ways that are not reducible to vocalization. They are signs of an other, but they are also the traces from which an "I" will eventually emerge, an "I" who will never be able, fully, to recover or read these signs, for whom these signs will remain in part overwhelming and unreadable, enigmatic and formative.

Earlier we considered the difference between a concept such as "articulation" in Bollas's work and that of narration, suggesting that what is "expressive" and "articulated" may not always take narrative form in order to constitute a psychic transformation of some kind or to provide a positive alteration in a transference relation. At that time, I proposed, not only that a term like *articulation* suggests the limits to narrative accountability as a desired model for expression, but that articulation itself has its necessary limits and that full articulation would be as problematic an aspiration for psychoanalysis as narrative closure and mastery. Jean Laplanche contends that the limit to full articulation arrives, not because of a Lacanian "bar" that forecloses the return to a primary *jouissance*, but because of the overwhelming and enigmatic impressions made by the adult world in its specificity on the child. For Laplanche, there is no Other in some symbolic sense, just the various others who constitute the caregiving adults in a child's world. Indeed, for Laplanche there is no reason to assume that these caregivers must be oedipally organized as "father" and "mother."<sup>19</sup>

Whereas for Bollas the environment into which the analyst is recruited through the transference and counter-transference is one in which the analysand engages in an unknowing yet active orchestration of the scene and "use" of the analyst, for Laplanche it would seem that the primary experience for the infant is invariably that of

being overwhelmed, not only "helpless" by virtue of undeveloped motor capacities, but profoundly clueless about the impingements of the adult world. What emerges as enigmatic within the transference, then, is a residue of a primary situation of being overwhelmed that precedes the formation of the unconscious and of the drives.

Laplanche writes of the "perceptive and motor opening to the world" that characterizes the primary condition of infantile life, working in the service of self-preservation. The infant must be open to the environment to adapt to its terms and secure the satisfaction of its most basic needs. This openness also constitutes a precocious exposure to the adult world of unconscious sexuality, though he is clear that sexuality is not derived from self-preservation. It emerges as a consequence of a social world, of messages or signifiers that are imposed upon the child from this environment and produce overwhelming and unmasterable primary impressions for which no ready adaptation is possible. Indeed, these primary impressions constitute a primary trauma that is unsustainable, what he calls "absolute primary process." Consequently, a primary repression takes place (no agency effects this repression, there is only the agency of repression itself) that institutes the unconscious and establishes the "first object-sources, that is, the sources of the drives."<sup>20</sup> What is repressed is a "thing-representation" of these primary impressions: as a consequence of trauma, an originally external object becomes installed as a source or cause of sexual drives. Drives (life drives and death drives) are not considered primary—they follow from an interiorization of the enigmatic desires of others and carry the residue of those originally external desires. As a result, every drive is beset by a foreignness (*étrangeté*), and the "I" finds itself to be foreign to itself in its most elemental impulses.

Laplanche is aware that this account disputes both the primacy of drives and the attribution of their source in a pure biology: "as for the relation of the drive to the body and to erogenous zones, this relation should not be conceived with the body as starting-point, but

rather as the action of repressed object-sources on the body" (191). In effect, the infant cannot handle what Laplanche calls the "messages" from the adult world. It represses them in the form of "thing-representations" (a concept that Freud offers in his theorizations of the unconscious), which later emerge in enigmatic form for the partially knowing subject of desire. This irrecoverable and nonthematic origin of affect cannot be recovered through proper articulation, whether in narrative form or in any other medium of expression. We can, meta-theoretically, reconstruct the scenario of primary repression, but no subject can narrate the story of a primary repression that constitutes the irrecoverable basis of his or her own formation.

For Laplanche, primary repression reconstitutes overwhelming affect as "thing-representations" in an unconscious, and these emerge in turn as "enigmatic signifiers." This process is the consequence of the adult world, understood as "entirely infiltrated with unconscious and sexual significations," imposing itself upon the infant, who "possesses neither the emotional nor physiological responses which correspond to the sexualized messages that are proposed to it" (188). Similarly, Laplanche remarks that the infant's question is not whether he or she may have the breast (a question that presupposes a prior exposure to an incestuous prohibition), but "What does the breast want of me?" (188). Desire emerges first from the outside and in overwhelming form, and it retains this exterior and foreign quality once it becomes the subject's own desire. Thus, if there is a question that emerges within the transference that one might derive from a Laplanchean approach to infantile sexuality and the primary conditions for the formation of the subject, it would not be "Who are you?" but "Who is this 'you' who demands something of me I cannot give?" He remarks in an interview with Cathy Caruth that

It's a very big error on the part of psychoanalysts to try to make a theory of knowledge starting from so-called psychoanalysis—for instance, starting from the breast and the reality of the breast. Or

even Winnicott's starting from the first not-me possession, and building the external world beginning with what he called the transitional object, and so on. The problem, on our human level, is that the other does not have to be reconstructed. The other is prior to the subject. The other on the sexual level is intruding the biological world. So you don't have to construct it, it first comes to you, as an enigma.<sup>21</sup>

Laplanche claims that at first the infant passively registers these enigmatic signifiers. Repression constitutes a first occurrence of an action, but it is a deed, we might say, that precedes any doer. These enigmatic signifiers, once repressed, proceed to "attack" from the inside, and there is something of this enigmatic attack that survives in the adult experience of sexuality as well. There is something at work in and on one's desire that is not recoverable through thematization or narrative. The aim of one's own impulses not only becomes enigmatic and inscrutable to the child, but remains to a certain extent that way throughout life. This situation gives rise to the child's theorization, the attempt to link these attacks, to give some coherence to them.

Indeed, Laplanche suggests that theory itself emerges from this predicament as a way to establish patterns and meanings for an enigma that constitutes our fundamental opacity to ourselves. In a psychoanalytic transference, one can neither recover nor eliminate this enigma (that would be to recover and eliminate primary process itself).<sup>22</sup> For Laplanche, the transference reproduces and renews the primal seduction scene. The question is thus not who the analyst represents but only "What does the analyst want of me?" Thus Laplanche, in the interview with Caruth, makes his difference from Winnicott clear: "instead of saying the first not-me possession, the problem for the human sexual being is to have a first-me possession. That is, to build an ego starting from too much otherness." We do not move from an ego that must reconstruct an object world, but we

find ourselves besieged from the start by an enigmatic alterity that makes the elaboration of an “I” a persistently difficult achievement. The task is not to move from an established ego to a world of others, to move beyond narcissism to the possibility of attachment. Rather, attachment is already overdetermined from the start, since the other besieges and engulfs the infant, and the emergence from this primary impingement is a struggle that can have only limited success.

Laplanche thus posits a foreign desire as a precondition of “one’s own” desire. Who desires when “I” desire? There seems to be another at work in my desire, and this *étrangeté* disrupts any effort to make sense of myself as a bounded and separate being. I may try to tell the story of myself, but another story is already at work in me, and there is no way to distinguish between the “I” who has emerged from this infantile condition and the “you”—the set of “you’s”—who inhabits and dispossesses my desire from the outset. We might consider, then, that the failure of Georg to fully extricate himself from his parents, the “too much” attachment that leads to his suicidal conclusion, can be read in a Laplanchean vein. Was the death sentence his father’s act or his own, and was there any way to disjoin the two actions from one another? Why does the father collapse on the bed after he has sentenced his son to death? And is that son forced from the room by the strength of the condemnation, or is he moved down the steps and toward the water through an agency of his own? *Es triebt ihn*—what is this “it,” this foreignness, that motivates the son toward his acrobatic death? If the parents cannot be extricated from the son’s desire, then it would appear that the “agency” of desire is less grounded in the separate self of the son than in a foreign object lodged there, animating him in nontransparent ways. Perhaps some separation might have saved him, or perhaps death itself was the longing for an ultimate separation from his parents fatally twinned with his undying love for them.

The priority of the other for Laplanche leads him to certain ethical conclusions. He remarks in his interview with Caruth that our

first questions about death are not about our own but, rather, about the death of others: “Why must the other die?” “Why did the other die?” The other, we might say, comes first, and this means that there is no reference to one’s own death that is not at once a reference to the death of the other. In the introduction to *Life and Death in Psychoanalysis*, he writes (and Caruth quotes): “If a certain ethic in relation to death might be evolved from the Freudian attitude, it would be in the sense of a distrust concerning every form of enthusiasm, and of a lucidity that does not hide the irreducible meshing of my death with that of the other.”<sup>23</sup>

This last remark suggests that the psychoanalytic approach to the primacy of the Other implies an ethical caution against enthusiasms that might make one impervious to the precariousness of life. It also counsels that one cannot preserve one’s own death at the expense of the other without the other’s death implicating me in my own. There is, as it were, a sociality at the basis of the “I” and its finitude from which one cannot—and ought not to—escape.

In “Responsibility and Response,” Laplanche considers Freud’s reflections on the relation between responsibility and psychoanalysis, focusing on the curious question of whether one must take responsibility for one’s dreams.<sup>24</sup> Do dreams reflect only one’s own mind or do they register the thoughts and desires of others? If the thoughts and desires of others have entered my dream, then I am, even at an unconscious level, beset by the other. This leads Laplanche, following Freud, to focus on the “humiliation” that psychoanalysis entails for the conception of the human being, one that Laplanche associates with a Copernican revolution within the sphere of psychology. He writes that “man is not at home with himself in himself [*chez lui en lui*], which means that in himself, he is not the master and that finally (here, these are my terms), he is decentered” (156). This decentering follows from the way in which others, from the outset, transmit certain messages to us, instilling their thoughts in our own, producing an indistinguishability between the other and myself at the heart of who I am.

This consideration of a Copernican revolution in the conception of the human being leads Laplanche to a brief discussion of Levinas. There he writes that Levinas's early work on Husserl interested him, but that what follows could not be said to have influenced him (162). He states his major difference with Levinas: "the Copernican decentering holds not only for the autocentric perceptive subject and for the cogito, but also for the subject who is considered autocentric in time; centered in his adult being" (163). He believes that Levinas, like Heidegger, failed to decenter adult experience or, rather, failed to see that adult experience is decentered by infantile experience all along: "If one seeks to take this seriously, according to Freud, the primacy of infancy decenters us as irremediably—and as without reflexivity—as the unconscious or the id" (163). The primary question toward the other that emerges from the perspective of infancy is: "Who is this person who speaks to me? [*Quelle est la personne qui me parle?*]" (163). The other who speaks to me is not in a "reciprocal" exchange or balanced communication. The situation is, from the start, asymmetrical, and the "I" finds itself disarmed and passive in its relation to the message from the other. Under these conditions, the infant can make only an inadequate translation and response.

What, then, is the relation between the first response as Laplanche describes it and responsibility? He turns to the story of Job and makes use of a Levinasian language to describe the travail of response under a situation of absolute dissymmetry. The infant responds as Job responds to a seemingly cruel God, that is, to an "unnameable persecution" (166). This persecutory impression becomes a sexualized capacity for sadism, one to which our dreams testify, Laplanche claims, and which is made manifest in cruelty and war. Levinas would surely not follow Laplanche on this last turn. Laplanche, however, points out that the response of the child to the overwhelming adult can be to recenter himself, or to seek recentering as a way of life. This (Ptolemaic) task would seek to deny the unconscious, recenter the subject, and so make the adult in question more vulnerable to

acting out sadistic impulses that it refuses to understand as its own constitutive potential. The transference can be the place where this scene can be re-elaborated. But there is no getting rid of this unconscious, no full substitution of the ego for the id, and surely no recentering of the subject without unleashing unacceptable sadism and cruelty. To remain decentered, interestingly, means to remain implicated in the death of the other and so at a distance from the unbridled cruelty (the limit case of uncritical enthusiasm) in which the self seeks to separate from its constitutive sociality and annihilate the other.

The infant enters the world given over from the start to a language and to a series of signs, broadly construed, that begin to structure an already operative mode of receptivity and demand. From this primary experience of *having been given over from the start*, an "I" subsequently emerges. And the "I," regardless of its claims to mastery, will never get over having been given over from the start in this way. Levinas might be said to indicate something similar. He speaks of a passivity prior to passivity, and there he means to indicate the difference between a subject who undergoes passivity, who relates to that passivity through a certain act of reflexivity, and a passivity that is prior to the subject, the condition of its own subjectivation, its primary impressionability.

Here the other is, as it were, the condition of possibility of my affective life, installed within me as an object-source that gives rise to the drives and desires that are mine. From within the object-relations perspective, the primary impressions constitute objects, exterior but proximate, to which an emergent self might attach itself to satisfy basic needs. It follows from this view that the infant will be disposed to love any and every thing which emerges as an "object" (rather than not love at all, fail to attach, and jeopardize its survival). This is a scandal, of course, since it shows us that love, from the outset, is without judgment, and that, to a certain extent, it remains without judgment or, at least, without good judgment for the rest of its career.

What I am trying to describe is the condition of the subject, but it is not *mine*: I do not own it. It is prior to what constitutes the sphere of what might be owned or claimed by me. It persistently undoes the claim of "mineness," mocks it, sometimes gently, sometimes violently. It is a way of being constituted by an Other that precedes the formation of the sphere of the *mine* itself. Primary impressionability is not a feature or predicate of an established self so that I might say, by way of a warning, "I am impressionable." I could say that, but it would be a paradoxical form of speaking, and I would not be referencing impressionability in its primary form. I come up with such statements as an attempt to come to terms with what remains enigmatic, and so my statements and theories are prompted by the very impressions and drives that they seek to explain. At this level, we are not yet referring to boundaries in the process of formation, we are not yet seeking recourse to a capacity for reflexivity, for self-reference, the linguistic support for self-possession. This is a domain in which the grammar of the subject cannot hold, for dispossession in and through another is prior to becoming an "I" who might claim, on occasion, and always with some irony, to possess itself.

You may think that I am in fact telling a story about the prehistory of the subject, one that I have been arguing cannot be told. There are two responses to this objection. (1) That there is no final or adequate narrative reconstruction of the prehistory of the speaking "I" does not mean we cannot narrate it; it only means that at the moment when we narrate we become speculative philosophers or fiction writers. (2) This prehistory has never stopped happening and, as such, is not a prehistory in any chronological sense. It is not done with, over, relegated to a past, which then becomes part of a causal or narrative reconstruction of the self. On the contrary, that prehistory interrupts the story I have to give of myself, makes every account of myself partial and failed, and constitutes, in a way, my failure to be fully accountable for my actions, my final "irresponsibility," one for

which I may be forgiven only because I could not do otherwise. This not being able to do otherwise is our common predicament.

That prehistory continues to happen every time I enunciate myself. In speaking the "I," I undergo something of what cannot be captured or assimilated by the "I," since I always arrive too late to myself. (Nietzsche's bees in *The Genealogy of Morals* clearly prefigure the psychoanalytic concept of *Nachträglichkeit*.) I can never provide the account of myself that both certain forms of morality and some models of mental health require, namely, that the self deliver itself in coherent narrative form. The "I" is the moment of failure in every narrative effort to give an account of oneself. It remains the unaccounted for and, in that sense, constitutes the failure that the very project of self-narration requires. Every effort to give an account of oneself is bound to encounter this failure, and to founder upon it.

But perhaps there is no necessary reason why this encounter with failure should take place. After all, it is important to remember the stand against the unconscious, the one that claims, after all, that a non-narrativizable self cannot survive and is not viable. For such a stand, it seems, the very livability of the subject resides in its narrativizability. The postulation of the non-narrativizable poses a threat to such a subject, indeed, can pose the threat of death. I don't think it inevitably takes the generalized form: If I cannot tell a story about myself, then I will die. But it can take this form under situations of moral duress: If I am not able to give an account of some of my actions, then I would rather die, because I cannot find myself as the author of these actions, and I cannot explain myself to those my actions may have hurt. Surely, there is a certain desperation there, where I repeat myself and where my repetitions enact again and again the site of my radical unself-knowingness. How am I to live under these circumstances? Perhaps death would be better than to continue to live with this inability to render myself ethical through an account that not only explains what I do but allows me to assume greater agency in deciding what to do.



What is striking about such extremes of self-beratement is the grandiose notion of the transparent “I” that is presupposed as the ethical ideal. This is hardly a belief in which self-acceptance (a humility about one’s constitutive limitations) or generosity (a disposition toward the limits of others) might find room to flourish. Surely there are moments of repetition and opacity and anguish, which usually compel a journey to the analyst, or if not to the analyst, to someone—an addressee—who might receive the story and, in receiving, alter it some. The other represents the prospect that the story might be given back in new form, that fragments might be linked in some way, that some part of opacity might be brought to light. The other witnesses and registers what cannot be narrated, functioning as one who might discern a narrative thread, though mainly as one whose practice of listening enacts a receptive relation to the self that the self, in its dire straits of self-beratement, cannot offer itself. And it seems crucial to recognize, not only that the anguish and opacity of the “I” is witnessed by the other, but that the other can become the name for one’s anguish and opacity: “*You* are my anguish, surely. *You* are opaque: who are you? Who is this you that resides in me, from whom I cannot extricate myself?” The other can also refuse, disrupt, or “surprise” this identification, separating off the phantasm that lodges under the other’s name and offering it as an object for analysis within the interlocutory scene.

Who speaks in this address, the address of the transference? What speaks here? Where is the “here” and when is the “now” of transference time? If that which I am defies narrative capture, compels speculation, insists itself as an opacity that resists all final illumination, then this seems to be a consequence of my fundamental relation to a “you”—an other who is interiorized in ways for which I can give no account. If I am first addressed and then my address emerges as a consequence, animated by a primary address and bearing the enigma of that address, then I speak to you, but you are also what is opaque in the act of my speaking. Whoever you are, you constitute me fun-

damentally and become the name for a primary impressionability, for the uncertain boundary between an impression from outside that I register and some consequent sense of “me” that is the site of that registering. Within this founding scene, the very grammar of the self has not yet taken hold. And so one might say, reflectively, and with a certain sense of humility, that in the beginning *I am my relation to you*, ambiguously addressed and addressing, given over to a “you” without whom I cannot be and upon whom I depend to survive.

There is no difference then between the touch and the sign that receives me and the self that I am, because the boundary is yet to be installed, the boundary between that other and this “I”—and, hence, the condition of their very possibility—is yet to take place. The self that I am yet to be (at the point where grammar does not yet permit an “I”) is at the outset enthralled, even if to a scene of violence, an abandonment, a destitution, a mechanism of life support, since it is, for better or worse, the support without which I cannot be, upon which my very being depends, which my very being, fundamentally and with an irreducible ambiguity, *is*. This is a scene, if we can call it that, to which we return, within which our action takes place, and which gently or perhaps violently mocks the posture of narrative control. One can attempt to cover it over; indeed, the enunciated “I” may well function as that covering. To ward off the emergence of this opacity, it may be that no action is taken: To act is immediately to break the narrative structure and so to risk losing a self over whom I maintain narrative control. Indeed, I maintain narrative control in order to stave off a threat of dissolution, which “acting” might well precipitate or which I am convinced would definitely be precipitated.

And yet, to tell the story of oneself is already to act, since telling is a kind of action, performed with some addressee, generalized or specific, as an implied feature. It is an action in the direction of an other, as well as an action that requires an other, in which an other is presupposed. The other is thus within the action of my telling; it is not simply a question of imparting information to an other who is

over there, beyond me, waiting to know. On the contrary, the telling performs an action that presupposes an Other, posits and elaborates the other, is given to the other, or by virtue of the other, prior to the giving of any information. So if, at the beginning—and we must laugh here, since we cannot narrate that beginning with any kind of authority, indeed, such a narration is the occasion in which we lose whatever narrative authority we might otherwise enjoy—I am only in the address to you, then the “I” that I am is nothing without this “you,” and cannot even begin to refer to itself outside the relation to the other by which its capacity for self-reference emerges. I am mired, given over, and even the word *dependency* cannot do the job here. This means that I am also formed in ways that precede and enable my self-forming; this particular kind of transitivity is difficult, if not impossible, to narrate.

It will be necessary to reconsider the relationship of ethics to social critique, since part of what I find so hard to narrate are the norms—social in character—that bring me into being. They are, as it were, the condition of my speech, but I cannot fully thematize these conditions within the terms of my speech. I am interrupted by my own social origin, and so have to find a way to take stock of who I am in a way that makes clear that I am authored by what precedes and exceeds me, and that this in no way exonerates me from having to give an account of myself. But it does mean that if I posture as if I could reconstruct the norms by which my status as a subject is installed and maintained, then I refuse the very disorientation and interruption of my narrative that the social dimension of those norms imply. This does not mean that I cannot speak of such matters, but only that when I do, I must be careful to understand the limits of what I can do, the limits that condition any and all such doing. In this sense, I must become critical.

## T H R E E

## Responsibility

The corporeality of one's own body signifies, as sensibility itself, a knot or denouement of being . . . a knot that cannot be undone.

—Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*

So, according to the kind of theory I have been pursuing here, what will responsibility look like? Haven't we, by insisting on something non-narrativizable, limited the degree to which we might hold ourselves or others accountable for their actions? I want to suggest that the very meaning of responsibility must be rethought on the basis of this limitation; it cannot be tied to the conceit of a self fully transparent to itself.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, to take responsibility for oneself is to avow the limits of any self-understanding, and to establish these limits not only as a condition for the subject but as the predicament of the human community. I am not altogether out of the loop of the Enlightenment if I say, as I do, that reason's limit is the sign of our humanity. It might even be a legacy of Kant to say so. My account of myself breaks down, and surely for a reason, but that does not mean that I can supply all the reasons that would make my account whole. Reasons course through me that I cannot fully recuperate, that remain enigmatic, that abide with me as my own familiar alter-

which makes Being and which makes action, it is the Good superior to Being, it is the One. Value expresses this authority superior to Being. Therefore, values are the fundamental element of the system of judgment. Therefore, you are always referred to this authority superior to Being for judging. // In an ethics, it is completely different, you do not judge. In a certain manner, you say: whatever you do, you will only ever have what you deserve. Somebody says or does something, you do not relate it to values. You ask yourself how is that possible? How is this possible in an internal way? In other words, you relate the thing or the statement to the mode of existence that it implies, that it envelops in itself. How must it be in order to say that? Which manner of Being does this imply? You seek the enveloped modes of existence, and not the transcendent values. It is the operation of immanence” (Cours Vincennes, 12/21/1980, <http://www.webdeleuze.com/php/texte.php?cle=190&groupe=Spinoza&langue=2>).

5. See my “Beauvoir on Sade: Making Sexuality into an Ethic,” in *Cambridge Companion to Simone de Beauvoir*, ed. Claudia Card (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 168–88.

6. Franz Kafka, *The Metamorphosis, The Penal Colony, and Other Stories*, trans. Willa and Edwin Muir (New York: Schocken, 1975), 49–63; Franz Kafka, *Die Erzählungen* (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer, 1998), 47–60.

7. I am grateful here to Barbara Johnson, who formulates the default structure of address in writing of Baudelaire, “the mother functions as a default setting for the I-you relationship in general” (*Mother Tongues: Sexuality, Trials, Motherhood, Translation* [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003], 71).

8. See Shoshana Felman, *The Scandal of the Speaking Body: Don Juan with J. L. Austin, or Seduction in Two Languages*, trans. Catherine Porter (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003).

9. For an account of psychoanalysis and language that in general refuses passive constitution and privileges the “I” and its actions as the building blocks of a life story, see Roy Schafer, *A New Language for Psychoanalysis* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), 22–56. For a concept of the relation to narrative structure in psychoanalysis that incorporates a notion of transference, see Peter Brooks, *Psychoanalysis and Story-telling* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1994).

10. See Denise Riley, *Impersonal Passion: Language as Affect* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2005). See also Thomas Keenan, *Fables of Responsibility: Aberrations and Predicaments in Ethics and Politics* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 175–92. For an excellent discussion of feminist autobiographical narrative and its contestation of truth-telling standards, see Leigh Gilmore, *The Limits of Autobiography: Trauma and Testimony* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2001).

11. Jean Laplanche, *Essays on Otherness*, ed. John Fletcher (London: Routledge, 1999).

12. Christopher Bollas, *The Shadow of the Object: Psychoanalysis of the Unthought Known* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987).

13. *Ibid.*, 285.

14. See D. W. Winnicott, *Holding and Interpretation: Fragment of an Analysis* (London: Hogarth Press, 1986).

15. See Cathy Caruth, “Interview with Jean Laplanche” (2001), at <http://www.iath.virginia.edu/pmc/text-only/issue.101/11.2caruth.txt>, para. 921, for a way of understanding that might situate this ejaculatory suicide in relation to masochism: “I’m very critical about the term ‘death drive,’ and . . . I have called it a sexual death drive, with the emphasis more on ‘sexual’ than on ‘death.’ For me, the sexual death drive is just sexuality, unbound sexuality, the extreme of sexuality. And more than death, I would point to primary masochism. I see more of a sense of the sexual death drive in masochism or in sado-masochism than in death. And it was not on the side of sadism, but on the side of masochism, that Freud placed the core of his death drive.”

16. Franz Kafka, “Cares of a Family Man” in *The Complete Stories*, trans. Willa and Edwin Muir (New York: Schocken, 1976), 427–28; “Die Sorge des Hausvaters,” in *Die Erzählungen* (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer, 1998), 343–44.

17. It would be interesting to consider the two forms of “living on” in terms of the distinction between *fortleben* and *überleben* that Benjamin develops in “The Task of the Translator” (*Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn [New York: Schocken, 1968], 69–82). Clearly, both the final voice in “The Judgment” and the perpetuity of Odradek evoke the sense of *nachleben*, or living on. Significantly, Jacques Derrida references this difference between an afterlife (*überleben*) and a kind of survival or living

on (*fortleben*) that takes place in language to the presumption of human finitude. This operation of language is at once ghostly and animated. See his final interview, *Le Monde*, August 18, 2004.

18. Theodor W. Adorno, *Prisms*, trans. Samuel and Shierry Weber (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1981), 253; “Prismen” in Adorno, *Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft I, Gesammelte Schriften* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1997): 10.1:9–287, here 264–65.

19. See John Fletcher, “The Letter in the Unconscious: The Enigmatic Signifier in Jean Laplanche,” in *Jean Laplanche: Seduction, Translation, and the Drives*, ed. John Fletcher and Martin Stanton (London: ICA, 1992). Fletcher makes clear that Laplanche’s recourse to the “adult world” as the source of sexual messages is a significant departure from psychoanalytic accounts that assume that an Oedipal scene with Mother and Father structures desire at a primary level. Fletcher recapitulates Laplanche’s debt to and departure from the work of Jacques Lacan along these lines. At the end of his essay, Fletcher notes that Laplanche’s theory of the “enigmatic signifier” emerges as a clear alternative to the Lacanian symbolic.

This counters the paternal law, linked to the structuralist account of the exchange of women and the universalist premises of “culture,” with a conception of the enigmatic signifier, which assumes not only that primary unconscious and sexual messages are impressed upon the child (constituting the meaning and efficacy of “primary seduction”) but that the primary others who make those impressions are themselves in the grip of similar messages, which can never be fully decoded or recovered. Indeed, as Fletcher puts it, “The Oedipus is no longer primal in the sense of the first, but topographically located as secondary, even though it may involve the re-elaboration of earlier inscriptions and translations, and it is no longer primal in the sense of universal but culturally contingent” (118).

Fletcher closes his essay on two notes. First, he asserts that Laplanche has clearly inaugurated a psychoanalytic possibility for explaining “those psychic trajectories that swerve from or attempt to rework the normalizing function of the paternal Law and its Oedipal polarities (e.g., various female and male homosexualities).” Although Fletcher does not show us precisely how this might work, he holds out this possibility as following from the displacement of the paternal law by the enigmatic signifier. Second, he

points to a future project, namely, how to account for gender in the wake of the Oedipus’s displacement from primacy: “What Laplanche’s reworking of the drives in the context of primary seduction now leaves unclear or untheorised, is how the psychic constitution and inscription of a sexually and genitally differentiated body image (the repression and symbolization of what enigmatic signifiers?), the ground or at least terrain for the formation of gendered identities, is now to be rethought” (119).

20. Jean Laplanche, “The Drive and the Object-Source: Its Fate in the Transference,” in *Jean Laplanche: Seduction, Translation, and the Drives*, ed. Fletcher and Stanton, p. 191; “La Pulsion et son objet-source: Son destin dans le transfert,” in Laplanche, *Le Primat de l’autre en psychanalyse* (Paris: Flammarion, 1997), 227–242. As a textual source for this position, see Sigmund Freud, “The Unconscious,” *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth, 1953–74), 14:201–4, for the distinction between a word- and a thing-presentation in the unconscious.

21. Cathy Caruth, “Interview with Jean Laplanche” (2001), para. 124.

22. Laplanche, “The Drive and the Object-Source,” 193.

23. Cathy Caruth, “Interview with Jean Laplanche” (2001), para. 89.

24. Jean Laplanche, “Responsabilité et réponse,” *Entre séduction et inspiration: L’Homme* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1999), 147–72. All English translations in the text are mine.

### CHAPTER 3. RESPONSIBILITY

1. Thomas Keenan conducts a lucid and provocative reading of both Levinas and Blanchot on the responsibility that arises from the situation of being held hostage. In the course of his exposition, he explains that the self who would respond to the address of the other is precisely not a personal self, but an “anyone,” thus situating responsibility as a prerogative of anonymity. See Thomas Keenan, *Fables of Responsibility: Aberrations and Predicaments in Ethics and Politics* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 19–23.

2. See the 1968 version of “Substitution” in Emmanuel Levinas, *Basic Philosophical Writings*, ed. Adriaan T. Peperzak, Simon Critchley, and Robert Bernasconi (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 93–94; hereafter