

Allegories of Reading

Figural Language
in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust

Paul de Man

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Excuses
(Confessions)

POLITICAL AND AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL TEXTS HAVE IN COMMON that they share a referential reading-moment explicitly built in within the spectrum of their significations, no matter how deluded this moment may be in its mode as well as in its thematic content: the deadly “horn of the bull” referred to by Michel Leiris in a text that is indeed as political as it is autobiographical.¹ But whereas the relationship between cognition and performance is relatively easy to grasp in the case of a temporal speech act such as *promise*—which, in Rousseau’s work, is the model for the *Social Contract*—it is more complex in the confessional mode of his autobiographies. By reading a central passage from the *Confessions*, I attempt to clarify the relationship between critical procedures that start out from the dis-course of the subject and procedures that start out from political statements.

Among the various more or less shameful and embarrassing scenes from childhood and adolescence related in the first three books of the *Confessions*, Rousseau singled out the episode of Marion and the ribbon as of particular affective significance, a truly primal scene of lie and deception strategically placed in the narrative and told with special *panache*. We are invited to believe that the episode was never revealed to anyone prior to the privileged reader of the *Confessions* “and . . . that the desire to free myself, so to speak, from this weight has greatly contributed to my resolve to write my confessions” (86).² When Rousseau returns to the *Confessions* in the later *Fourth Rêverie*, he again singles out this same episode as a paradig-

1. “De la littérature considérée comme une tauromachie,” in Michel Leiris, *L’âge d’homme* (Paris: Gallimard, 1946). The essay dates from 1945, immediately after the war.

2. Page numbers are from J. J. Rousseau, *Oeuvres complètes, Les confessions, autres textes autobiographiques*, ed. Bernard Gagnebin and Marcel Raymond (Paris: Gallimard [Bibliothèque de la Pléiade], 1959), vol. 1. The passage concludes Book II of the *Confessions* and appears on pp. 85–87.

matic event, the core of his autobiographical narrative. The selection is, in itself, as arbitrary as it is suspicious, but it provides us with a textual event of undeniable exegetic interest: the juxtaposition of two confessional texts linked together by an explicit repetition, the confession, as it were, of a confession.

The episode itself is one in a series of stories of petty larceny, but with an added twist. While employed as a servant in an aristocratic Turin household, Rousseau has stolen a “pink and silver colored ribbon.” When the theft is discovered, he accuses a young maidservant of having given him the ribbon, the implication being that she was trying to seduce him. In public confrontation, he obstinately clings to his story, thus casting irreparable doubt on the honesty and the morality of an innocent girl who has never done him the slightest bit of harm and whose sublime good nature does not even flinch in the face of dastardly accusation: “Ah Rousseau! I took you to be a man of good character. You are making me very unhappy but I would hate to change places with you” (85). The story ends badly, with both characters being dismissed, thus allowing Rousseau to speculate at length, and with some relish, on the dreadful things that are bound to have happened in the subsequent career of the hapless girl.

The first thing established by this edifying narrative is that the *Confessions* are not primarily a confessional text. To confess is to overcome guilt and shame in the name of truth: it is an epistemological use of language in which ethical values of good and evil are superseded by values of truth and falsehood, one of the implications being that vices such as concupiscence, envy, greed, and the like are vices primarily because they compel one to lie. By stating things as they are, the economy of ethical balance is restored and redemption can start in the clarified atmosphere of a truth that does not hesitate to reveal the crime in all its horror. In this case, Rousseau even adds to the horror by conjuring up, in the narrative of the *Confessions* as well as that of the *Promenade*, the dire consequences that his action may have had for the victim. Confessions occur in the name of an absolute truth which is said to exist “for itself” (“pour elle seule,” [1028]) and of which particular truths are only derivative and secondary aspects.

But even within the first narrative, in Book II of the *Confessions*, Rousseau cannot limit himself to the mere statement of what “really” happened, although he is proud to draw attention

to the fullness of a self-accusation whose candor we are never supposed to suspect: "I have been very thorough in the confession I have made, and it could certainly never be said that I tried to conceal the blackness of my crime" (86). But it does not suffice to tell all. It is not enough to *confess*, one also has to *excuse*: "But I would not fulfill the purpose of this book if I did not reveal my inner sentiments as well, and if I did not fear to *excuse* myself by means of what conforms to the truth" ("que je [ne] craignisse de m'*excuser* en ce qui est conforme à la vérité" [86, my italics]). This also happens, it should be noted, in the name of truth and, at first sight, there should be no conflict between confession and excuse. Yet the language reveals the tension in the expression: *craindre* de m'*excuser*. The only thing one has to fear from the excuse is that it will indeed exculpate the confessor, thus making the confession (and the confessional text) redundant as it originates. *Qui s'accuse s'excuse*; this sounds convincing and convenient enough, but, in terms of absolute truth, it ruins the seriousness of any confessional discourse by making it self-destructive. Since confession is not a reparation in the realm of practical justice but exists only as a verbal utterance, how then are we to know that we are indeed dealing with a *true* confession, since the recognition of guilt implies its exoneration in the name of the same transcendental principle of truth that allowed for the certitude of guilt in the first place?

In fact, a far-reaching modification of the organizing principle of truth occurs between the two sections of the narrative. The truth in whose name the excuse *has to be* stated, even at Rousseau's assumed "corps défendant," is not structured like the truth principle that governs the confession. It does not unveil a state of being but states a suspicion, a possible discrepancy that might lead to an impossibility to know. The discrepancy, of course, is between the "sentiment intérieur" that accompanied (or prompted?) the act and the act itself. But the spatial inside/outside metaphor is misleading, for it articulates a differentiation that is not spatial at all. The distinction between the confession stated in the mode of revealed truth and the confession stated in the mode of excuse is that the evidence for the former is referential (the ribbon), whereas the evidence for the latter can only be verbal. Rousseau can convey his "inner feeling" to us only if we take, as we say, his *word* for it, whereas the evidence for his theft is, at least in theory, literally available.³ Whether we believe him

3. This is so even within the immediate situation, when no actual text is

or not is not the point; it is the verbal or nonverbal nature of the evidence that makes the difference, not the sincerity of the speaker or the gullibility of the listener. The distinction is that the latter process necessarily includes a moment of understanding that cannot be equated with a perception, and that the logic that governs this moment is not the same as that which governs a referential verification. What Rousseau is saying then, when he insists on "sentiment intérieur," is that confessional language can be considered under a double epistemological perspective: it functions as a verifiable referential cognition, but it also functions as a statement whose reliability cannot be verified by empirical means. The convergence of the two modes is not a priori given, and it is because of the possibility of a discrepancy between them that the possibility of excuse arises. The excuse articulates the discrepancy and, in so doing, it actually asserts it as fact (whereas it is only a suspicion). It believes, or pretends to believe, that the act of stealing the ribbon is both this act as a physical fact (he removed it from the place where it was and put it in his pocket, or wherever he kept it), as well as a certain "inner feeling" that was somehow (and this "how" remains open) connected with it. Moreover, it believes that the fact and the feeling are not the same. Thus to complicate a fact certainly is: to act. The difference between the verbal excuse and the referential crime is not a simple opposition between an action and a mere utterance about an action. To steal is to act and includes no necessary verbal elements. To confess is discursive, but the discourse is governed by a principle of referential verification that includes an extraverbal moment: even if we confess that we *said* something (as opposed to *did*), the verification of this verbal event, the decision about the truth or falsehood of its occurrence, is not verbal but factual, the knowledge that the utterance actually took place. No such possibility of verification exists for the excuse, which is verbal in its utterance, in its effect and in its authority: its purpose is not to state but to convince, itself an "inner" process to which only words can bear witness. As is well known at least since Austin,⁴ excuses are a complex instance of what he termed perform-

present. Someone's sentiments are accessible only through the medium of mimicry, of gestures that require deciphering and function as a language. That this deciphering is not necessarily reliable is clear from the fact that the facial expression of, say, a thief at the moment he is caught red-handed is not likely to weigh heavily as evidence in a court of law. Our own sentiments are available to us only in the same manner.

4. See, for example, J. L. Austin, "Performative Utterances" and "A Plea for

ative utterances, a variety of speech act. The interest of Rousseau's text is that it explicitly functions performatively as well as cognitively, and thus gives indications about the structure of performative rhetoric; this is already established in this text when the confession fails to close off a discourse which feels compelled to modulate from the confessional into the apologetic mode.⁵

Neither does the performance of the excuse allow for a closing off of the apologetic text, despite Rousseau's plea at the end of Book II: "This is what I had to say on this matter. May I be allowed never to mention it again" (87). Yet, some ten years later, in the *Fourth Rêverie*, he tells the entire story all over again, in the context of a meditation that has to do with the possible "excusability" of lies. Clearly, the apology has not succeeded in becalming his own guilt to the point where he would be allowed to forget it. It doesn't matter much, for our purpose, whether the guilt truly relates to this particular act or if the act is merely made to substitute for another, worse crime or humiliation. It may stand for a whole series of crimes, a general mood of guilt, yet the repetition is significant by itself: what-

Excuses," in *Philosophical Papers*, ed. J. O. Urmson and G. J. Warnock (Oxford, 1961).

5. The usual way of dealing with this recurrent pattern in Rousseau's writings is by stressing the bad faith of his commitment to a *morale de l'intention*, the ethical stance for which he was taken severely to task by Sartre. In his commentary on the passage, Marcel Raymond, though less severe, takes the same approach: "By revealing his 'inner feelings' [*dispositions intérieures*] which were good . . . it appears that after having stigmatized his misdeed he gradually begins to justify it. The same gliding and swerving motion can be observed more than once in the *Confessions*, especially when Rousseau accounts for the abandonment of his children. He is always led to distinguish the intent from the act" (1273-74). It can, however, be shown that Rousseau's ethics is much rather a *morale de pratique* than a *morale de l'intention*, and that this analysis therefore does not account for the genuinely pre-Kantian interest of his ethical language and theory. The extensive possibilities of bad faith engendered by the distinction between the actual event and the inner feeling are abundantly present throughout Rousseau, but they don't govern the more puzzling and interesting movements and coinages of the text. Whether the link between "inner" feeling and "outer" action can be called intentional is precisely the burden of the interpretation and cannot be asserted without further evidence. If we are right in saying that "*qui s'accuse s'excuse*," then the relationship between confession and excuse is rhetorical prior to being intentional. The same assumption of intentional apologetics, controlled by the narrative voice, underlies the recent readings of the *Confessions* by Phillippe Lejeune in *Le pacte autobiographique* (Paris, 1976) and "Le peigne cassé," *Poétique* 25 (1976): 1-30.

ever the content of the criminal act may have been, the excuse presented in the *Confessions* was unable to satisfy Rousseau as a judge of Jean-Jacques. This failure was already partly inscribed within the excuse itself and it governs its further expansion and repetition.

Rousseau excuses himself from his gratuitous viciousness by identifying his inner feeling as *shame* about himself rather than any hostility towards his victim: ". . . the presence of so many people was stronger than my repentance. I hardly feared punishment, my only fear was shame; but I feared shame more than death, more than the crime, more than anything in the world. I wished I could have sunk and stifled myself in the center of the earth: unconquerable shame was stronger than anything else, shame alone caused my impudence and the more guilty I became, the more the terror of admitting my guilt made me fearless" (86).

It is easy enough to describe how "shame" functions in a context that seems to offer a convincing answer to the question: what is shame or, rather, what is one ashamed of? Since the entire scene stands under the aegis of theft, it has to do with possession, and desire must therefore be understood as functioning, at least at times, as a desire to possess, in all the connotations of the term. Once it is removed from its legitimate owner, the ribbon, being in itself devoid of meaning and function, can circulate symbolically as a pure signifier and become the articulating hinge in a chain of exchanges and possessions. As the ribbon changes hands it traces a circuit leading to the exposure of a hidden, censored desire. Rousseau identifies the desire as his desire for Marion: "it was my intention to give her the ribbon" (86), i.e., to "possess" her. At this point in the reading suggested by Rousseau, the proper meaning of the trope is clear enough: the ribbon "stands for" Rousseau's desire for Marion or, what amounts to the same thing, for Marion herself.

Or, rather, it stands for the free circulation of the desire between Rousseau and Marion, for the reciprocity which, as we know from *Julie*, is for Rousseau the very condition of love; it stands for the substitutability of Rousseau for Marion and vice versa. Rousseau desires Marion as Marion desires Rousseau. But since, within the atmosphere of intrigue and suspicion that prevails in the household of the Comtesse de Vercellis, the phantasy of this symmetrical reciprocity is experienced as an interdict, its figure, the ribbon, has to be stolen, and the agent of this transgression has to be susceptible of being substituted: if Rousseau has to be willing to steal the ribbon,

then Marion has to be willing to substitute for Rousseau in performing this act.⁶ We have at least two levels of substitution (or displacement) taking place: the ribbon substituting for a desire which is itself a desire for substitution. Both are governed by the same desire for specular symmetry which gives to the symbolic object a detectable, univocal proper meaning. The system works: "I accused Marion of having done what I wanted to do and of having given me the ribbon because it was my intention to give it to her" (86). The substitutions have taken place without destroying the cohesion of the system, reflected in the balanced syntax of the sentence and now understandable exactly as we comprehend the ribbon to signify desire. Specular figures of this kind are metaphors and it should be noted that on this still elementary level of understanding, the introduction of the figural dimension in the text occurs first by ways of metaphor.

The allegory of this metaphor, revealed in the "confession" of Rousseau's desire for Marion, functions as an excuse if we are willing to take the desire at face value. If it is granted that Marion is desirable, or Rousseau ardent to such an extent, then the motivation for the theft becomes understandable and easy to forgive. He did it all out of love for her, and who would be a dour enough literalist to let a little property stand in the way of young love? We would then be willing to grant Rousseau that "viciousness was never further from me than at this cruel moment, and when I accused the hapless girl, it is bizarre but it is true that my friendship for her was the cause of my accusation" (86). Substitution is indeed bizarre (it is odd to take a ribbon for a person) but since it reveals motives, causes, and desires, the oddity is quickly reduced back to sense. The story may be a rebus or a riddle in which a ribbon is made to signify a desire, but the riddle can be solved. The delivery of meaning is delayed but by no means impossible.

This is not the only way, however, in which the text functions. Desire conceived as possession allows for the all-important introduction of figural displacement: things are not merely what they seem to be, a ribbon is not just a ribbon, to steal can be an act of love, an act performed by Rousseau can be said to be performed by Marion and, in the process, it becomes more rather than less comprehensible, etc. Yet the text does not stay confined within this pattern of desire. For

6. It is therefore consistent that, when the scheme ends in disaster, Marion would say: "Je ne voudrais pas être à votre place" (85).

one thing, to excuse the crime of theft does not suffice to excuse the worse crime of slander which, as both common sense and Rousseau tell us, is much harder to accept.⁷ Neither can the shame be accounted for by the hidden nature of the desire, as would be the case in an oedipal situation.⁸ The interdict does not weigh very heavily and the revelation of Rousseau's desire, in a public situation that does not allow for more intimate self-examination, hardly warrants such an outburst of shame. More important than any of these referential considerations, the text is not set up in such a way as to court sympathy in the name of Marion's erotic charm, a strategy which Rousseau uses with some skill in many other instances including the first part of *Julie*. Another form of desire than the desire of possession is operative in the latter part of the story, which also bears the main performative burden of the excuse and in which the crime is no longer that of theft.

The obvious satisfaction in the tone and the eloquence of the passage quoted above, the easy flow of hyperboles ("... je la craignois [la honte] plus que la mort, plus que le crime, plus que tout au monde. J'aurois voulu m'enforcer, m'étouffer dans le centre de la terre . . ." [86]), the obvious delight with which the desire to hide is being revealed, all point to another structure of desire than mere possession and independent of the particular target of the desire. One is more ashamed of the exposure of the desire to expose oneself than of the desire to possess; like Freud's dreams of nakedness, shame is primarily exhibitionistic. What Rousseau *really* wanted is neither the ribbon nor Marion, but the public scene of exposure which he actually gets. The fact that he made no attempt to conceal the evidence confirms this. The more crime there is, the more theft, lie, slander, and stubborn persistence in each of them, the better. The more there is to expose, the more there is to be ashamed of; the more resistance to exposure, the more satisfying the scene, and, especially, the more satisfying and eloquent the belated revelation, in the later narrative, of the inability to reveal. This desire

7. "To lie for one's own advantage is deceit, to lie for the benefit of another is fraudulent, to lie in order to harm is slander; it is the worst kind of lie" (*Fourth Rêverie*, 1029).

8. The embarrassing story of Rousseau's rejection by Mme. de Vercellis, who is dying of a cancer of the breast, immediately precedes the story of Marion, but nothing in the text suggests a concatenation that would allow one to substitute Marion for Mme. de Vercellis in a scene of rejection.

is truly shameful, for it suggests that Marion was destroyed, not for the sake of Rousseau's saving face, nor for the sake of his desire for her, but merely in order to provide him with a stage on which to parade his disgrace or, what amounts to the same thing, to furnish him with a good ending for Book II of his *Confessions*. The structure is self-perpetuating, *en abîme*, as is implied in its description as exposure of the desire to expose, for each new stage in the unveiling suggests a deeper shame, a greater impossibility to reveal, and a greater satisfaction in outwitting this impossibility.

The structure of desire as exposure rather than as possession explains why shame functions indeed, as it does in this text, as the most effective excuse, much more effectively than greed, or lust, or love. Promise is proleptic, but excuse is belated and always occurs after the crime; since the crime is exposure, the excuse consists in recapitulating the exposure in the guise of concealment. The excuse is a ruse which permits exposure in the name of hiding, not unlike Being, in the later Heidegger, reveals itself by hiding. Or, put differently, shame used as excuse permits repression to function as revelation and thus to make pleasure and guilt interchangeable. Guilt is forgiven because it allows for the pleasure of revealing its repression. It follows that repression is in fact an excuse, one speech act among others.

But the text offers further possibilities. The analysis of shame as excuse makes evident the strong link between the performance of excuses and the act of understanding. It has led to the problematics of hiding and revealing, which are clearly problematics of cognition. Excuse occurs within an epistemological twilight zone between knowing and not-knowing; this is also why it has to be centered on the crime of lying and why Rousseau can excuse himself for everything provided he can be excused for lying. When this turns out not to have been the case, when his claim to have lived for the sake of truth (*vitam impendere vero*) is being contested from the outside, the closure of excuse ("qu'il me soit permis de n'en reparler jamais") becomes a delusion and the *Fourth Rêverie* has to be written.

The passage also stakes out the limits of how this understanding of understanding then is to be understood. For the distinction between desire as possession and desire as exposure, although it undeniably is at work within the text, does not structure its main movement. It could not be said, for instance, that the latter deconstructs the former. Both converge towards a unified signification, and the shame experienced at the desire to possess dovetails with the deeper

shame felt at self-exposure, just as the excuse for the one conspired with the excuse for the other in mutual reinforcement. This implies that the mode of cognition as hiding/revealing is fundamentally akin to the mode of cognition as possession and that, at least up till this point, to know and to own are structured in the same way. Truth is a *property* of entities, and to lie is to steal, like Prometheus, this truth away from its owner. In the deviousness of the excuse pattern, the lie is made legitimate, but this occurs within a system of truth and falsehood that may be ambiguous in its valorization but not in its structure. It also implies that the terminology of repression and exposure encountered in the passage on shame is entirely compatible with the system of symbolic substitutions (based on encoded significations arbitrarily attributed to a free signifier, the ribbon) that govern the passage on possessive desire ("Je l'accusai d'avoir fait ce que je voulois faire . . ." [86]). The figural rhetoric of the passage, whose underlying metaphor, encompassing both possession and exposure, is that of unveiling, combines with a generalized pattern of tropological substitution to reach a convincing meaning. What seemed at first like irrational behavior bordering on insanity has, by the end of the passage, become comprehensible enough to be incorporated within a general economy of human affectivity, in a theory of desire, repression, and self-analyzing discourse in which excuse and knowledge converge. Desire, now expanded far enough to include the hiding/revealing movement of the unconscious as well as possession, functions as the *cause* of the entire scene (" . . . it is bizarre but true that my friendship for her was the *cause* of my accusations" [86]), and once this desire has been made to appear in all its complexity, the action is understood and, consequently, excused—for it was primarily its incongruity that was unforgivable. Knowledge, morality, possession, exposure, affectivity (shame as the synthesis of pleasure and pain), and the performative excuse are all ultimately part of one system that is epistemologically as well as ethically grounded and therefore available as meaning, in the mode of understanding. Just as in a somewhat earlier passage of the *Confessions* the particular injustice of which Rousseau had been a victim becomes, by metaphorical synecdoche, the paradigm for the universal experience of injustice,⁹ the episode ends up in a generalized economy of rewards and punishments. The injury done to Marion is

9. See the episode of Mlle Lambercier's broken comb in Book I of the *Confessions*, especially p. 20.

compensated for by the subsequent suffering inflicted on Rousseau by nameless avengers acting in her stead.¹⁰ The restoration of justice naturally follows the disclosure of meaning. Why then does the excuse fail and why does Rousseau have to return to an enigma that has been so well resolved?

We have, of course, omitted from the reading the other sentence in which the verb "excuser" is explicitly being used, again in a somewhat unusual construction; the oddity of "que je craignisse de m'excuser" is repeated in the even more unusual locution: "Je m'excusai sur le premier objet qui s'offrit" ("I excused myself upon the first thing that offered itself" [86]), as one would say "je me vengeai" or "je m'acharnai sur le premier objet qui s'offrit."¹¹ The sentence is inserted, it is true, within a context that may seem to confirm the coherence of the causal chain: ". . . it is bizarre but it is true that my friendship for her was the cause of my accusation. She was present to my mind, I excused myself on the first thing that offered itself. I accused her of having done what I wanted to do and of having given me the ribbon because it was my intention to give it to her . . ." (86). Because Rousseau desires Marion, she haunts his mind and her name is pronounced almost unconsciously, as if it were a slip, a segment of the discourse of the other. But the use of a vocabulary of contingency ("le premier objet qui s'offrit") within an argument of causality is arresting and disruptive, for the sentence is phrased in such a way as to allow for a complete disjunction between Rousseau's desires and interests and the selection of this particular name. Marion just happened to be the first thing that came to mind; any other name, any other word, any other sound or noise could have done just as well and Marion's entry into the discourse is a mere effect of chance. She is a free signifier, metonymically related to the

10. "If this crime can be redeemed, as I hope it may, it must be by the many misfortunes that have darkened the later part of my life, by forty years of upright and honorable behavior under difficult circumstances. Poor Marion finds so many avengers in this world that, no matter how considerably I have offended her, I have little fear that I will carry this guilt with me. This is all I had to say on this matter. May I be allowed never to mention it again" (87).

11. The editor of the *Pléiade* Rousseau, Marcel Raymond, comments on the passage and quotes Ramon Fernandez (*De la personnalité*, p. 77): "He accuses her as if he leaned on a piece of furniture to avoid falling." Raymond speaks of "an almost dreamlike movement dictated by an unconscious which suddenly feels itself accused and by which he transfers the 'misdeed' upon the other, on his nearby partner" (1273).

part she is made to play in the subsequent system of exchanges and substitutions. She is, however, in an entirely different situation than the other free signifier, the ribbon, which also just happened to be ready-to-hand, but which is not in any way itself the object of a desire. Whereas, in the development that follows and that introduces the entire chain leading from desire to shame to (dis)possession to concealment to revelation to excuse and to distributive justice, Marion can be the organizing principle because she is considered to be the hidden center of an urge to reveal. Her bondage as target liberates in turn the free play of her symbolical substitutes. Unlike the ribbon, Marion is not herself divested of positive signification, since no revelation or no excuse would be possible if her presence within the chain were not motivated as the target of the entire action. But if her nominal presence is a mere coincidence, then we are entering an entirely different system in which such terms as desire, shame, guilt, exposure, and repression no longer have any place.

In the spirit of the text, one should resist all temptation to give any significance whatever to the sound "Marion." For it is only if the act that initiated the entire chain, the utterance of the sound "Marion," is truly without any conceivable motive that the total arbitrariness of the action becomes the most effective, the most efficaciously performative excuse of all. The estrangement between subject and utterance is then so radical that it escapes any mode of comprehension. When everything else fails, one can always plead insanity. "Marion" is meaningless and powerless to generate by itself the chain of causal substitutions and figures that structures the surrounding text, which is a text of desire as well as a desire for text. It stands entirely out of the system of truth, virtue, and understanding (or of deceit, evil, and error) that gives meaning to the passage, and to the *Confessions* as a whole. The sentence: "je m'excusai sur le premier objet qui s'offrit" is therefore an anacoluthon,¹² a foreign element that disrupts

12. Classical rhetoric mentions anacoluthon especially with regard to the structure of periodical sentences, when a shift, syntactical or other, occurs between the first part of the period (protasis) and the second part (apodosis). Heinrich Lausberg in *Handbuch der Literarischen Rhetorik* (Munich, 1960), 1:459, §924, gives an example from Vergil: "quamquam animus meminisse horret luctuque refugit, incipiam" (*Aeneid* 2, 12). The following example from Racine is frequently quoted: "Vous voulez que ce Dieu vous comble de bienfaits / Et ne l'aimer jamais." Anacoluthon is not restricted to uninflected parts of speech but can involve nouns or inflected shifters such as pronouns. It designates any grammatical or syntactical discontinuity in which a construction interrupts another before it is completed. A

the meaning, the readability of the apologetic discourse, and reopens what the excuse seemed to have closed off. How are we to understand the implications of this sentence and what does it do to the very idea of understanding which we found to be so intimately bound up with and dependent upon the performative function itself?

The question takes us to the *Fourth Rêverie* and its implicit shift from reported guilt to the guilt of reporting, since here the lie is no longer connected with some former misdeed but specifically with the act of writing the *Confessions* and, by extension, with all writing. Of course, we always were in the realm of writing, in the narrative of the *Confessions* as well as in the *Rêverie*, but the thematization of this fact is now explicit: what can be said about the interference of the cognitive with the performative function of excuses in the *Fourth Rêverie* will disseminate what existed as a localized disruption in the *Confessions*.

With the complicity of the casual, ambling, and free-associating mode of the *Rêverie*, the text allows itself a puzzling lack of conclusiveness. Cast in the tone of a pietistic self-examination, it sounds severe and rigorous enough in its self-accusation to give weight to the exoneration it pronounces upon its author—until Rousseau takes it all back in the penultimate paragraph which decrees him to be “inexcusable” (1038). There is also a strange unbalance between the drift of the argument, which proceeds by fine distinctions and ratiocinations, and the drift of the examples, which do not quite fit their declared intent. The claim is made, for example, that, in the *Confessions*, Rousseau left out several episodes because they showed him in too favorable a light; when some of these incidents are then being told in order to make the disfigured portrait more accurate, they turn out to be curiously irrelevant. They do not show Rousseau in all that favorable a light (since all he does is *not* to denounce playing companions who harmed him by accident and from whose denunciation he would, at the time, have stood to gain very little) and they are, moreover, most unpleasant stories of physical assault, bloody mutilation, and crushed fingers, told in such a way that one remembers the pain and the cruelty much better than the virtue they are supposed to illustrate. All this adds to the somewhat uncanny

striking instance of the structural and epistemological implications of anacoluthon occurs in Proust in the description of the lies used by Albertine (“La prisonnière,” *A la recherche du temps perdu* [Paris: Pléiade, 1954], 3:153). For Rousseau’s own description of an anacoluthon-like situation, see note 16.

obliqueness of a slightly delirious text which is far from mastering the effects it pretends to produce.

The implications of the random lie in the Marion episode (“je m’excusai sur le premier objet qui s’offrit”) are distributed, in the *Fourth Rêverie*, over the entire text. The performative power of the lie as excuse is more strongly marked here, and tied specifically to the absence of referential signification; it also carries, in this literary context, a more familiar and reputable name since it is now called *fiction*: “To lie without intent and without harm to oneself or to others is not to lie: it is not a lie but a fiction” (1029). The notion of fiction is introduced in the same way that the excuse of randomness functions in the *Confessions*. Within the airtight system of absolute truth it produces the almost imperceptible crack of the purely gratuitous, what Rousseau calls “un fait oiseux, indifférent à tous égards et sans conséquence pour personne . . .” (“a fact that is totally useless, indifferent in all respects and inconsequential for anyone” [1027]). There is some hesitation as to whether such “perfectly sterile truths” are at all conceivable, or if we possess the necessary judgment to decide authoritatively whether certain statements can be to that extent devoid of any significance. But although the text vacillates on this point, it nevertheless functions predominantly as if the matter had been settled positively: even if such truths are said to be “rares et difficiles,” it is asserted that the “truth” of such “useless facts” can be withheld without lying: “Truth deprived of any conceivable kind of usefulness can therefore not be something due [*une chose due*], and consequently the one who keeps it silent or disguises it does not lie” (1027). Moreover, “I have found there to be actual instances in which truth can be withheld without injustice and disguised without lying” (1028). Some speech acts (although they might better be called silence acts) therefore escape from the closed system in which truth is property and lie theft: “. . . how could truths entirely devoid of use, didactic or practical, be a commodity that is due [*un bien dû*], since they are not even a commodity? And since ownership is only based on use, there can be no property where there can be no use” (“où il n’y a point d’utilité possible il ne peut y avoir de propriété” [1026]). Once this possibility is granted, these free-floating “truths” or “facts,” utterly devoid of value (“*Rien* ne peut être dû de ce qui n’est bon à *rien*” [1027]) are then susceptible of being “used” as an excuse for the embellishments and exaggerations that were innocently added to the *Confessions*. They are mere “détails oiseux”

and to call them lies would be, in Rousseau's words, "to have a conscience that is more delicate than mine" (1030). The same paragraph calls these weightless, airy non-substances fictions: "whatever, albeit contrary to truth, fails to concern justice in any way, is mere fiction, and I confess that someone who reproaches himself for a pure fiction as if it were a lie has a conscience that is more delicate than mine" (1030). What makes a fiction a fiction is not some polarity of fact and representation. Fiction has nothing to do with representation but is the absence of any link between utterance and a referent, regardless of whether this link be causal, encoded, or governed by any other conceivable relationship that could lend itself to systematization. In fiction thus conceived the "necessary link" of the metaphor has been metonymized beyond the point of catachresis, and the fiction becomes the disruption of the narrative's referential illusion. This is precisely how the name of Marion came to be uttered in the key sentence in the *Confessions*: "je m'excusai sur le premier objet qui s'offrit," a sentence in which any anthropomorphic connotation of seduction implied by the verb "s'offrir" has to be resisted if the effectiveness of the excuse is not to be undone and replaced by the banality of mere bad faith and suspicion. Rousseau was making whatever noise happened to come into his head; he was saying nothing at all, least of all someone's name. Because this is the case the statement can function as excuse, just as fiction functions as an excuse for the disfigurements of the *Confessions*.

It will be objected that fiction in the *Rêverie* and the denunciation of Marion are miles apart in that the former is without consequence whereas the latter results in considerable damage to others. Rousseau himself stresses this: "whatever is contrary to truth and hurts justice in any conceivable way is a lie" (1030), and also "the absence of a purposefully harmful intent does not suffice to make a lie innocent; one must also be assured that the error one inflicts upon one's interlocutor can in no conceivable way harm him or anyone else" (1029). But the fiction, in the *Confessions*, becomes harmful only because it is not understood for what it is, because the fictional statement, as it generates the system of shame, desire, and repression we described earlier, is at once caught and enmeshed in a web of causes, significations, and substitutions. If the essential non-signification of the statement had been properly interpreted, if Rousseau's accusers had realized that Marion's name was "le premier objet qui s'offrit," they would have understood his lack of guilt as well as Marion's innocence. And the excuse would have extended

from the slander back to the theft itself, which was equally unmotivated: he took the ribbon out of an unstated and anarchic fact of proximity, without awareness of any law of ownership. Not the fiction itself is to blame for the consequences but its falsely referential reading. As a fiction, the statement is innocuous and the error harmless; it is the misguided reading of the error as theft or slander, the refusal to admit that fiction is fiction, the stubborn resistance to the "fact," obvious by itself, that language is entirely free with regard to referential meaning and can posit whatever its grammar allows it to say, which leads to the transformation of random error into injustice. The radical irresponsibility of fiction is, in a way, so obvious, that it seems hardly necessary to caution against its misreading. Yet its assertion, within the story of the *Confessions*, appears paradoxical and far-fetched to the point of absurdity, so much so that Rousseau's own text, against its author's interests, prefers being suspected of lie and slander rather than of innocently lacking sense. It seems to be impossible to isolate the moment in which the fiction stands free of any signification; in the very moment at which it is posited, as well as in the context that it generates, it gets at once misinterpreted into a determination which is, *ipso facto*, overdetermined. Yet without this moment, never allowed to exist as such, no such thing as a text is conceivable. We know this to be the case from empirical experience as well: it is always possible to face up to any experience (to excuse any guilt), because the experience always exists simultaneously as fictional discourse and as empirical event and it is never possible to decide which one of the two possibilities is the right one. The indecision makes it possible to excuse the bleakest of crimes because, as a fiction, it escapes from the constraints of guilt and innocence. On the other hand, it makes it equally possible to accuse fiction-making which, in Hölderlin's words, is "the most innocent of all activities," of being the most cruel. The knowledge of radical innocence also performs the harshest mutilations. Excuses not only accuse but they carry out the verdict implicit in their accusation.

This other aspect of radical excuse is also conveyed by the text of the *Rêverie*, though necessarily in a more oblique manner. In telling another instance of a situation in which he lied out of shame—a less interesting example than the ribbon, because there is nothing enigmatic about a lie which, in this case, is *only* a defense¹³—Rousseau

13. In this case he is being provoked into lying by the half-teasing, half-malicious questions of a woman inquiring whether he ever had children.

writes: "It is certain that neither my judgment, nor my will dictated my reply, but that it was the automatic result [*l'effet machinal*] of my embarrassment" (1034). The machinelike quality of the text of the lie is more remarkable still when, as in the Marion episode, the disproportion between the crime that is to be confessed and the crime performed by the lie adds a delirious element to the situation. By saying that the excuse is not only a fiction but also a machine one adds to the connotation of referential detachment, of gratuitous improvisation, that of the implacable repetition of a preordained pattern. Like Kleist's marionettes, the machine is both "anti-grav," the anamorphosis of a form detached from meaning and capable of taking on any structure whatever, yet entirely ruthless in its inability to modify its own structural design for nonstructural reasons. The machine is like the grammar of the text when it is isolated from its rhetoric, the merely formal element without which no text can be generated. There can be no use of language which is not, within a certain perspective thus radically formal, i.e. mechanical, no matter how deeply this aspect may be concealed by aesthetic, formalistic delusions.

The machine not only generates, but also suppresses, and not always in an innocent or balanced way. The economy of the *Fourth Rêverie* is curiously inconsistent, although it is strongly thematized in a text that has much to do with additions and curtailments, with "filling holes" ("remplir les lacunes" [1035]) and creating them. The parts of the text which are destined to be mere additions and exemplifications acquire autonomous power of signification to the point where they can be said to reduce the main argument to impotence. The addition of examples leads to the subversion of the cognitive affirmation of innocence which the examples were supposed to illustrate. At the end of the text, Rousseau knows that he cannot be excused, yet the text shelters itself from accusation by the performance of its radical fictionality.

The literal censorship and curtailment of texts appears prominently in several places. A quotation from Tasso provides a first example: Rousseau compares his own resolve not to denounce his playing companion to Sophronie's sacrificial lie when, in order to save the life of the Christians, she confessed to a crime (the theft of a religious icon) that did not take place. The comparison borders on the ludicrous, since Rousseau's discretion is in no way equivalent to a sacrifice. But the quotation which Rousseau now inserts into the text

serves a different function. It is a passage which he had omitted, without apparent reason, from the translation he made of the Second Canto of Tasso's epic¹⁴ at an earlier date. Any mention of Tasso, in Rousseau, always carries a high affective charge and generates stories clustering around dubious translations, literary falsifications, textual distortions, fallacious prefaces as well as obsessions of identification involving erotic fantasies and anxieties of insanity.¹⁵ Limiting oneself, in this context, to the obvious, the insertion of the quotation must be an attempt to restore the integrity of a text written by someone of whom Rousseau himself had said "that one could not suppress from his work a single stanza, from a stanza a single line, and from a line a single word, without the entire poem collapsing. . . ."¹⁶ But the restoration occurs as an entirely private and secretive gesture, not unlike the citizen stealing "en secret" the word "chacun" and thinking of himself when he votes for all.¹⁷ Such a secretive reparation enforces the shamefulness of the crime as well as destroying any hope that it could be repaired. The mutilation seems

14. The translation is available in several of the early Rousseau editions, for example in *Oeuvres complètes de J. J. Rousseau* (Aux deux ponts: chez Sanson et Compagnie, 1792), 4:215-47. It is printed in bilingual version and even the early editors had observed and indicated the absence of the passage which was later to be quoted in the *Fourth Rêverie* (ibid., 229).

15. On Rousseau and Tasso, one finds general observations, not very informative in this context, in several articles, mostly by Italian authors, mentioned by Bernard Guyon in his notes to the Pléiade edition of the *Nouvelle Héloïse* (2:1339).

16. The statement is not a quotation from Rousseau but is reported by Corancez in *De J. J. Rousseau* (Extrait du Journal de Paris, # 251, 256, 259, 260, 261, An 6, 42-43). The sequel of the statement, in which Rousseau describes the one exception to the organic integrity of Tasso's work, is equally interesting for our purposes and could be read as Rousseau's description of an anacoluthon: ". . . sans que le poème entier ne s'écroule, tant (le Tasse) était précis et ne mettait rien que de nécessaire. Eh bien, ôtez la strophe entière dont je vous parle; rien n'en souffre, l'ouvrage reste parfait. Elle n'a rapport ni à ce qui précède, ni à ce qui suit; c'est une pièce absolument inutile. Il est à présumer que le Tasse l'a faite involontairement et sans la comprendre lui-même; mais elle est claire." Corancez could not remember the stanza Rousseau quoted, but it has been tentatively identified as stanza 77 of Canto XII of *Jerusalem Delivered*. See L. Proal. *La psychologie de J. J. Rousseau* (Paris: F. Alcan, 1923), p. 327 and *Oeuvres complètes*, 1:1386-87, which Rousseau chose to read as the prefiguration of his own persecutions. Corancez tells the story as an instance of Rousseau's growing paranoia and, in the same article, he reports Rousseau's death as suicide. His article is written in defense, however, of Rousseau's memory.

17. *Social Contract* (3:306).

to be incurable and the prothesis only serves to mark this fact more strongly. The accusation that hangs over the entire *Fourth Rêverie* and against which the excuse tries to defend itself seems to have to do with a threat of textual mutilation, itself linked to the organic and totalizing synecdochal language by means of which Rousseau refers to the unity of Tasso's work.

The omission and surreptitious replacement of the Sophronic passage is at most a symptom, all the more so since "Tasso," in Rousseau, implies a threat as well as a victim, a weapon as well as a wound. The mutilation is not just the excision of one specific piece of text. Its wider significance becomes more evident in another literary allusion in the *Fourth Promenade*, the reference to Montesquieu's conventionally deceptive preface to *Le Temple de Gnide*. By pretending that his work is the translation of a Greek manuscript, the author shelters himself from the possible accusation of frivolity or licentiousness, knowing that the reader who is enlightened enough not to hold his levity against him will also be sufficiently informed about literary convention not to be taken in by the phony preface. Rousseau treats Montesquieu's hoax without undue severity ("Could it have occurred to anyone to incriminate the author for this lie and to call him an impostor?" [1030]), yet behind this apparent tolerance stands a much less reassuring question. As we know from the "Préface dialoguée" to the *Nouvelle Héloïse*, the preface is the place in the text where the question of textual mastery and authority is being decided and where, in the instance of *Julie*, it is also found to be undecidable. With this threatening loss of control the possibility arises of the entirely gratuitous and irresponsible text, not just (as was apparently the case for Montesquieu or for naïve readers of *Julie*) as an intentional denial of paternity for the sake of self-protection, but as the radical annihilation of the metaphor of selfhood and of the will. This more than warrants the anxiety with which Rousseau acknowledges the lethal quality of all writing. Writing always includes the moment of dispossession in favor of the arbitrary power play of the signifier and from the point of view of the subject, this can only be experienced as a dismemberment, a beheading or a castration. Behind Montesquieu's harmless lie, denying authorship of *Le Temple de Gnide* by the manipulation of the preface that "heads" the text, stands the much more dangerous ambivalence of the "beheaded" author.¹⁸

18. The same anxiety is apparent in another reference to prefaces in Rousseau,

But precisely because, in all these instances, the metaphor for the text is still the metaphor of text as body (from which a more or less vital part, including the head, is being severed), the threat remains sheltered behind its metaphoricity. The possible loss of authorship is not without consequences, liberating as well as threatening, for the empirical author, yet the mutilation of the text cannot be taken seriously: the clear meaning of the figure also prevents it from carrying out what this meaning implies. The undecidability of authorship is a cognition of considerable epistemological importance but, as a cognition, it remains ensconced within the figural delusion that separates knowing from doing. Only when Rousseau no longer confronts Tasso's or Montesquieu's but his own text, the *Confessions*, does the metaphor of text as body make way for the more directly threatening alternative of the text as machine.

Unlike the other two texts, where the distortion had been a suppression, the *Confessions* is at first guilty of disfiguring by excess, by the addition of superfluous, fictional embellishments, "I have never said less, but I have sometimes said more . . ." (1035), but a few lines later it turns out that this was not the case either, since Rousseau admits having omitted some of his recollections from the narrative merely because they showed him in too favorable a light. There is less contradiction between the two statements when it turns out that what he omitted are precisely stories that narrate mutilations or, in the metaphor of the text as body, suppressions. Both stories have to do with mutilation and beheading; he nearly loses a hand in the first and comes close to having his brains knocked out in the other. Thus to omit suppressions is, in a sense (albeit by syllepsis), to preserve an integrity, "ne jamais dire moins." If the stories that have been omitted threaten the integrity of the text, then it

interestingly enough also in connection with Tasso. To deny authorship in a preface in the name of truth (as Rousseau did in the case of *Julie*) does not only mean that one's authorship of all texts can be put in question but also that all texts can be attributed to one. This is precisely what happens to Rousseau when a malevolent (or commercially enterprising) editor, in what reads like a transparent parody of the "Préface dialoguée," attributes to him a poor translation of Tasso's *Jerusalem Delivered*, (see *Oeuvres complètes*, 1:1740 for the text of the editor's preface, and also *Oeuvres complètes*, 1:1386). Rousseau mentions the incident with some degree of paranoid anxiety in a letter to Mme. de Lessert of August 23, 1774, and among many other instances of false textual attribution, in the *Dialogues* (960). The chain that leads from Tasso to translation, to prefaces, to authorship, to beheading, and to insanity is ready to surface in any context of anxiety about truth and falsehood.

would be even easier to excuse him for not having included them than to excuse him for the superfluous ornaments he added to the recollection of his happier memories.

But in what way are these narratives threatening? As instances of Rousseau's generosity they are, as we already pointed out, more inept than convincing. They seem to exist primarily for the sake of the mutilations they describe. But these actual, bodily mutilations seem, in their turn, to be there more for the sake of allowing the evocation of the machine that causes them than for their own shock value; Rousseau lingers complacently over the description of the machine that seduces him into dangerously close contact: "I looked at the metal rolls, my eyes were attracted by their polish. I was tempted to touch them with my fingers and I moved them with pleasure over the polished surface of the cylinder . . ." (1036). In the general economy of the *Rêverie*, the machine displaces all other significations and becomes the *raison d'être* of the text. Its power of suggestion reaches far beyond its illustrative purpose, especially if one bears in mind the previous characterization of unmotivated, fictional language as "machinal." The underlying structural patterns of addition and suppression as well as the figural system of the text all converge towards it. Barely concealed by its peripheral function, the text here stages the textual machine of its own constitution and performance, its own textual allegory. The threatening element in these incidents then becomes more apparent. The text as body, with all its implications of substitutive tropes ultimately always retraceable to metaphor, is displaced by the text as machine and, in the process, it suffers the loss of the illusion of meaning. The deconstruction of the figural dimension is a process that takes place independently of any desire; as such it is not unconscious but mechanical, systematic in its performance but arbitrary in its principle, like a grammar. This threatens the autobiographical subject not as the loss of something that once was present and that it once possessed, but as a radical estrangement between the meaning and the performance of any text.

In order to come into being as text, the referential function had to be radically suspended. Without the scandal of random denunciation of Marion, without the "faits oiseux" of the *Confessions*, there could not have been a text; there would have been nothing to excuse since everything could have been explained away by the cognitive logic of understanding. The cognition would have been the excuse,

and this convergence is precisely what is no longer conceivable as soon as the metaphorical integrity of the text is put in question, as soon as the text is said not to be a figural body but a machine. Far from seeing language as an instrument in the service of a psychic energy, the possibility now arises that the entire construction of drives, substitutions, repressions, and representations is the aberrant, metaphorical correlative of the absolute randomness of language, prior to any figuration or meaning. It is no longer certain that language, as excuse, exists because of a prior guilt but just as possible that since language, as a machine, performs anyway, we have to produce guilt (and all its train of psychic consequences) in order to make the excuse meaningful. Excuses generate the very guilt they exonerate, though always in excess or by default. At the end of the *Rêverie* there is a lot more guilt around than we had at the start: Rousseau's indulgence in what he calls, in another bodily metaphor, "*le plaisir d'écrire*" (1038), leaves him guiltier than ever, but we now have also the two companions of his youth, Pleince and Fazy, guilty of assault, brutality or, at the very best, of carelessness.¹⁹ Additional guilt means additional excuse: Fazy and Pleince now both have to apologize and may, for all we know, have written moving texts about the dreadful things they did to Jean-Jacques who, in his turn, now has to apologize for having possibly accused them arbitrarily, as he accused Marion, simply because their names may have happened to occur to him for the least compelling of reasons.²⁰ No excuse can ever hope to catch up with such a proliferation of guilt. On the other hand, any guilt, including the guilty pleasure of writing the *Fourth Réverie*, can always be dismissed as the gratuitous product of a textual grammar or a radical fiction: there can never be enough guilt around to match the text-machine's infinite power to excuse. Since guilt, in this description, is a cognitive and excuse a performative function of language, we are restating the disjunction of the perfor-

19. The description of the way in which Fazy injured Rousseau is ambiguous, since the narrative is phrased in such a way that he can be suspected of having done it with deliberation: ". . . le jeune Fazy s'étant mis dans la roue lui donna un demiquart de tour si adroitement qu'il n'y prit que le bout de mes deux plus longs doigts; mais c'en fut assez pour qu'ils fussent écrasés . . ." (1036).

20. For example, the fact that their names may have come to mind because of their phonic resemblance to the place names where the incidents are said to have taken place: the one involving Fazy occurs at Pâquis, the one involving Pleince at Plain-Palais.

mative from the cognitive: any speech act produces an excess of cognition, but it can never hope to know the process of its own production (the only thing worth knowing). Just as the text can never stop apologizing for the suppression of guilt that it performs, there is never enough knowledge available to account for the delusion of knowing.

The main point of the reading has been to show that the resulting predicament is linguistic rather than ontological or hermeneutic. As was clear from the Marion episode in the *Confessions*, the deconstruction of tropological patterns of substitution (binary or ternary) can be included within discourses that leave the assumption of intelligibility not only unquestioned but that reinforce this assumption by making the mastering of the tropological displacement the very burden of understanding. This project engenders its own narrative which can be called an allegory of figure. This narrative begins to vacillate only when it appears that these (negative) cognitions fail to make the performative function of the discourse predictable and that, consequently, the linguistic model cannot be reduced to a mere system of tropes. Performative rhetoric and cognitive rhetoric, the rhetoric of tropes, fail to converge. The chain of substitutions functions next to another, differently structure system that exists independently of referential determination, in a system that is both entirely arbitrary and entirely repeatable, like a grammar. The intersection of the two systems can be located in a text as the disruption of the figural chain which we identified, in the passage from the *Confessions*, as anacoluthon; in the language of representational rhetoric, one could also call it parabasis,²¹ a sudden revelation of the discontinuity between two rhetorical codes. This isolated textual event, as the reading of the *Fourth Rêverie* shows, is disseminated throughout the entire text and the anacoluthon is extended over all the points of the figural line or allegory; in a slight extension of

21. The similarity between anacoluthon and parabasis stems from the fact that both figures interrupt the expectations of a given grammatical or rhetorical movement. As digression, aside, "*intervention d'auteur*," or "*aus der Rolle fallen*," parabasis clearly involves the interruption of a discourse. The quotation from Friedrich Schlegel appears among the formerly unavailable notes contemporary with the Lyceum and Atheneum Fragmenten. Friedrich Schlegel, *Kritische Friedrich-Schlegel-Ausgabe*, ed. Ernst Behler (Munich, 1963), 18:85, §668. The use of the term parabasis (or parekbasis) by Schlegel echoes the use of the device especially in the plays of Tieck.

Friedrich Schlegel's formulation, it becomes the permanent parabasis of an allegory (of figure), that is to say, irony. Irony is no longer a trope but the undoing of the deconstructive allegory of all tropological cognitions, the systematic undoing, in other words, of understanding. As such, far from closing off the tropological system, irony enforces the repetition of its aberration.