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THE POLITICS OF PUBLIC CONFESSION:
EXPRESSIVISM AND AMERICAN DEMOCRACY

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by
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ABSTRACT

THE POLITICS OF PUBLIC CONFESSION: EXPRESSIVISM AND AMERICAN DEMOCRACY

As a sustained study of the rhetorical assumptions and political consequences of public confession, *The Politics of Public Confession: Expressivism and American Democracy* engages histories of public confession in order to illuminate the political and rhetorical consequences of our contemporary confessional culture. Part One engages the work of Augustine, Rousseau, and Foucault in order to provide a theoretical calculus with which to evaluate the political consequences of public confession. I argue that the gradual and relatively recent subsumption of public confession into a logic of expressivism has had deleterious political consequences. In particular, I argue that expressivism is a pernicious rhetorical practice because it naturalizes political actions and thereby allows confessants to elide the claims of justice. Part Two moves from theory to criticism and engages three widely disseminated public confessions. I examine first the 1956 confession in the pages of *Look* magazine to the murder of Emmett Till. In this chapter I chart the consequences of expressivism on American race relations. Second, I engage the nationally televised 1988 confession of Jimmy Swaggart and argue that Swaggart’s expressivist confession functioned to shut down public debate and helped him evade accountability. Finally, I focus on the widely reported 2004 confessions of former New Jersey Governor James McGreevey and argue that, for McGreevey, expressivism naturalized and depoliticized citizenship. In each case study, I suggest that both rhetoric and democracy are impoverished to the degree that confession is subsumed within a rhetoric of expressivism.
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Introduction

The Politics of Public Confession: Expressivism and American Democracy

“In the center of moral considerations of human conduct stands the self; in the center of political considerations of conduct stands the world.”

--Hannah Arendt

“[O]ne willingly gives up language for the sake of the pure exclamatory sound that is the substratum of language. This reaching beyond verbal means can be a liberation in sexual or aesthetic matters. But in the ethical life it is an imprisonment.”

--Andrew Delbanco

Perhaps the most overlooked fact in the history of public confession is that its two most important practitioners, Augustine and Rousseau, both understood confession to be an integral rhetorical and political practice. Both thinkers had deep reservations about the sustainability of both speech and politics and believed that public confession was important for the preservation of both. Regarding speech, both Augustine and Rousseau feared that the rhetorical practices of their contemporaries compromised the communicative capacities of speech. Perhaps because of these fears, both were prone to make exaggerated, but indicative, doomsday pronouncements about the triumph of silence over the faculty of speech. Regarding politics, both men believed that the political events of their lifetimes brought to the fore the fundamental needs of the body politic. As Augustine observed the fall of the Roman Empire in the closing decades of the fifth century C.E. and Rousseau reflected on the corruption of Geneva in the eighteenth, both concluded that political prosperity—indicated by peace for Augustine and freedom for Rousseau—was a function of rhetorical prosperity. Both explicitly argued that the
political calamities which they believed themselves to be witnessing were a product of
the diminished capacities of speech. They were, in other words, convinced that
“eloquence and liberty either flourish together,” as Stephen Browne has put it, “or ‘dying
together, are buried in the same grave.”’ 3 That Augustine and Rousseau would share
concerns about speech and politics is not, of course, extraordinary; beginning in ancient
Athens we could add many others to their ranks who attributed political atrophy to
rhetorical atrophy. 4 What is extraordinary is this: both Augustine and Rousseau offered
public confession as a remedy for both the ills of rhetoric and the ills of politics.
Throughout the history of rhetoric, these are, to my knowledge, the only instances in
which a specific genre of speech has been given the political distinction classically
reserved for the faculty of speech itself. Augustine and Rousseau, in other words,
believed that public confession was not simply one genre of speech among many, it was,
rather, for these two influential thinkers, the epitome of speech itself: a rhetorical practice
whose decisive characteristic was its ability to preserve speech against silence and
thereby prevent the degeneration of politics. It must remain one of the great coincidences
of rhetorical history that, although they were separated by hundreds of miles and
thousands of years, both Augustine and Rousseau would stake the future of both speech
and politics to, of all things, public confession.

Given the grandness—even outlandishness—of Augustine and Rousseau’s shared
convictions regarding the absolute centrality of public confession for both speech and
politics, it is not surprising that these convictions would be challenged. It is surprising,
however, that Augustine and Rousseau’s shared ideas were not simply challenged, they
were precisely reversed. In what must count as one of the great reversals in the history of
ideas, Michel Foucault stands Augustine and Rousseau on their heads and advances, in *The History of Sexuality*, almost precisely the opposite thesis. Foucault argues that confession is complicit in the production of silence and an important mechanism through which disciplinary power normalizes society. Far from being the epitome of speech, confession is, for Foucault, a disguised form of silence. Far from being an integral part of a well-ordered polity, Foucault argues that confession is a technique of oppressive social control. Although they disagree on particulars, then, the three most prominent theorists of confession as a rhetorical practice—Augustine, Rousseau, and Foucault—agree on this: practices of confession have much to teach us about the relationship between rhetoric and politics.

Contemporary examples of public confession suggest the same. My case studies are public confessions drawn from twentieth- and twenty-first-century America, and each exhibits, in its own way, a preoccupation with the political consequences of speech. The 1956 confession to the murder of Emmett Till frames the murder as an attempt to silence the talkative Emmett Till; Jimmy Swaggart’s 1988 confession calls into question the powers of speech and thereby helps Swaggart evade political judgment; and, in his 2004 confessions, former New Jersey Governor James McGreevey suggests that it is precisely the practice of public confession that prevents speech and deliberation from degenerating into violence. It is as if the mere activity of public confession calls into question the faculty of speech and its relationship to politics.

Although each of the aforementioned case studies confirms the only assumption common to Augustine, Rousseau, and Foucault—that practices of confession have much to teach us about the relationship of speech and politics—they confirm neither Augustine
and Rousseau’s insistence that public confession preserves both speech and politics nor
Foucault’s insistence that confession is invested in the production of silence and
functions as a mechanism of social control. This should not be surprising, for the sheer
reversibility of Augustine and Rousseau’s shared convictions about confession, speech,
and politics suggests that a more discriminating analysis is needed. Hannah Arendt
argues that academic thought has, since its inception, been plagued by a series of
reversals which indicate a certain inattentiveness to historical events and actual
practices. Foucault’s reversal of Augustine and Rousseau, then, is misleading: it
suggests that the decisive rift in the history of public confession occurs between
Augustine and Rousseau on one hand and Foucault on the other. While there can be no
doubting that Foucault’s reversal does indicate a rift, I argue that the far more decisive
shift occurs between Augustine on one hand, and Rousseau and Foucault on the other.
While Augustine understood public confession as a speaking-of-transgressions grounded
in the recognition that transgressions are too politically disruptive to be overcome
individually and silently, Rousseau—and Foucault after him—understood confession to
be an expression of the self. In other words, while Augustine understood confession as a
disclosure of actions or deeds, Rousseau understood confession as a disclosure of the self.
It is with Rousseau that confession begins to assume is contemporary meaning as a
synonym of self-expression.

I shall be arguing throughout this dissertation that this difference is decisive. For
Augustine, public confession provides for political flourishing precisely because it is not
concerned with self-expression; it is oriented toward the world rather than the self and
thus it is, as Arendt reminds us in the first epigraph to this chapter, a fundamentally
political mode of speech. As I argue in Chapter One, the decisive characteristic of public confession, for Augustine, is its power to render transgression in speech and thus bring transgression into the realm of politics proper—the realm of human affairs in which it can be discussed, debated, and thereby disarmed. This is the political promise of public confession: it refuses to allow transgressions the protections of silence which, in the Manichean thought to which Augustine was responding, had always been their prerogative. By way of contrast, I argue that Rousseau’s redefinition of confession robs it of rhetorical and political promise by suggesting that the preservation of both speech and politics demands, above all, the expression of the inner self. Following Charles Taylor, I label this glorification of self-expression expressivism. I argue that the subsumption of confession into a logic of expressivism undermines the communicative power of speech and with it the possibilities of democracy. More specifically, I argue that the Rousseauian ideal of confession-as-self-expression is diametrically opposed to the classical ideals of speech and deliberation on which democracy depends. It is, then, the rhetorical and political ideals of expressivism that originate with Rousseau and remain profoundly influential that every page of this dissertation argues against. I demonstrate that expressivism is not only theoretically opposed to the classical ideal of a democracy grounded in speech and deliberation, it also has concrete and deleterious effects on contemporary American democracy.

This argument constitutes a significant break with the current literature on confession because it suggests, pace nearly everyone else, that Foucault’s work is not decisive for understanding the politics of confession. Indeed, if my reading is correct, then Rousseau’s Confessions are far more important than Foucault’s work. In fact,
Rousseau’s *Confessions* constitute the conditions under which Foucault’s critique of confession as a technology of social control makes sense. To be sure, Foucault grounds his work on confession in ecclesiastical practices stretching back to the twelfth century, *but he views these practices through a Rousseauian lens*, or so I shall argue. If I am right, Foucault’s withering critique of confession is possible only because Rousseau first transformed confession from a speaking-of-transgression to a speaking-of-the-self. Given the severity of Foucault’s conclusions—that confession is a “central component in the expanding technologies for the discipline and control of bodies, populations, and society itself”¹⁰—it is particularly important to insist that his critique makes sense only in the context of a particular understanding of confession. Without this insistence, it would be difficult not to agree with Peter Brooks’ conclusion that American culture would be better off without public confession. After reading Foucault, Brooks proposes that confession should be excised from the American legal system and confined “in the closed and protected space of the confessional.”¹¹ In my view, Brooks’ conclusions are unwarranted not because Foucault is wrong about confession, but rather because he is right only about one relatively recent vintage of confession.

In sum, in *The Politics of Public Confession: Expressivism and American Democracy*, I argue that the political promise of public confession is undermined by the logic of expressivism that dominates Rousseau’s work and has come to inhabit what Brooks calls the “American confessional imagination.”¹² I pursue this thesis in two ways. In Part One, I engage the work of Augustine, Rousseau, and Foucault in order to provide a theoretical calculus with which to evaluate the political consequences of public confession. In particular, I argue that the gradual and relatively recent subsumption of
public confession into a logic of expressivism has rendered public confession a rhetorical and political liability within democratic societies. Part Two moves from theory to criticism and engages three widely disseminated public confessions. I examine first the 1956 confession in the pages of Look magazine to the murder of Emmett Till. In this chapter I argue that expressivism is, in this instance, complicit with racism because it naturalizes race relations and suggests that racial violence is both natural and inevitable. Second, I engage the nationally televised 1988 confession of Jimmy Swaggart and argue that expressivism allowed Jimmy Swaggart to remain completely silent about his sexual trysts and nevertheless be perceived as authentic and plainspoken. I demonstrate how expressivism helped Swaggart shut down public debate and evade public accountability. Finally, I focus on the widely reported 2004 confessions of former New Jersey Governor James McGreevey and argue that, for McGreevey, expressivism naturalizes and depoliticizes citizenship. In each case study, I suggest that democracy is impoverished to the degree that confession is understood within a logic of expressivism.

In the remainder of this introduction, I first explain further the relationships among confession, speech, and politics for Augustine and Rousseau. I then introduce my basic arguments against expressivism; I define my terms and my methodology; and I provide a summary of each chapter.

**Augustine and Rousseau on Speech, Politics, and Confession**

It should by this point be clear that I am arguing for an Augustinian notion of confession-as-a-speaking-of-transgression and against the Rousseauian notion of
confession-as-self-expression. It should also be clear that Augustine and Rousseau both believed that their respective understandings of confession were of the utmost political importance. In this section I explain why, precisely, Augustine and Rousseau believed confession to be politically important. Given the political disparities between Augustine and Rousseau, it should not be surprising that they offer two competing and, in some senses, mutually exclusive rationales for the political importance of public confession. What I wish to focus on here, however, is that the competing political rationales are bundled with competing rhetorical assumptions about public confession. Augustine’s insistence that political flourishing is not natural led him to fashion confession according the classical ideals of speech, while Rousseau’s insistence that political freedom is natural led him to dismiss the classical ideals of speech in favor of expressivism. In this section I hope to make all these connections clear.

Beyond Augustine and Rousseau’s deep agreement that public confession is, in many respects, the political form of speech *par excellence*, they share very few other commitments. They do not simply disagree on politics, they operate from such radically different convictions about the goals and aims of politics that it is difficult to see how they could either agree or disagree. Augustine was propelled into political theory by the fall of the Roman Empire in the fifth century C.E., Rousseau by the publication of Hobbes’ *Leviathan* in the seventeenth. In short, Augustine and Rousseau can hardly be said to be participating in a common conversation in which the act of agreement or disagreement would make sense. Moreover, despite the fact that Rousseau was reading Augustine’s *Confessions* immediately prior to the composition of his own, and despite the emerging consensus that Rousseau was self-consciously imitating Augustine, the two
Confessions bear only a superficial resemblance. There are, to be sure, common topoi and similar anecdotes, but, as I demonstrate in Chapters One and Two, Augustine and Rousseau operate from fundamentally divergent assumptions regarding both the form and function of public confession. In sum, although the two thinkers agree that confession is a political mode of speech—and an important one—their specific assumptions about both politics and confession are so different that they resist comparison; they offer radically different forms of confession in the service of radically different political projects.

Accordingly, my project is not a comparative one; I do not force Augustine and Rousseau into conversation with each other. My goals are simpler: I demonstrate the significance of the Augustinian confession for Augustinian politics and the import of the Rousseauian confession for Rousseauian politics. This is not, however, a purely historical enterprise: it gains contemporary relevance precisely because an Augustinian political tradition and a Rousseauian political tradition still inform competing conceptions of democracy in twenty-first-century America. Despite the aforementioned incommensurability of the two traditions, American political theory has been unable to decisively choose its heritage. Indeed, two important works in contemporary democratic theory suggest that American democracy has historically wavered between an Augustinian and a Rousseauian approach to democracy."

The Augustinian confession informs what Patrick Deneen calls a “democratic realism.” In this tradition, democracy is grounded in an embrace of the irreducible insufficiencies, imperfections, and shortcomings of the best possible citizen. Because of a strong belief in the Christian fall and the pervasive effects of original sin, Augustinian political theory rejects the claim common to Aristotelian, Thomistic, and Rousseauian
politics: that the political order should be the *expression* of a natural, cosmic, or theological order.\textsuperscript{16} Without recourse to a divine or natural order, the citizen whom Jeffrey Stout labels the “Augustinian democrat” is thrust back on politics.\textsuperscript{17} This is the fundamental lesson of *The City of God*: the Roman Empire collapsed neither because of its Christianization under Constantine nor the profaning of this Christianization in the coliseum; Rome fell, Augustine argues, because it was politically inept. The Roman Empire, in other words, was for Augustine neither “holy,” as it would be remembered from the twelfth century on, nor profane; it was simply and autonomously political.

The extensive influences of human limitation—for Augustine, sin—demand a fundamental dependence of broken and incomplete human agents on a politically arranged “earthly peace”—a peace that cannot be enforced with recourse to divine or natural truths; a peace that, because of sin, must be constantly renegotiated; a peace that operates via always provisional and piecemeal solutions; but, for all this, a peace that insists on social equality because all humans are equally self-insufficient and dependent on political arrangements. Deneen argues that such an embrace of human limitation “affords powerful grounds for an endorsement of democracy” and promotes “an equality born of our shared *dependency* and mutual *insufficiency*, and therefore a concomitant recognition of our shared obligations to, and concern for, one another.”\textsuperscript{18} With this background, the relevance of the Augustinian confession comes to the fore: public confession affirms Augustine’s “earthly peace” by “reinforcing our sense of imperfections and chastening utopian forms of [politics], by fostering a shared belief in common neediness.”\textsuperscript{19} This is the significance of confession. It is, to Augustine’s mind, not about the expression of a natural self, but about the proclamation of a fundamental
dependence on political community. Indeed, as I argue in Chapter One, it is precisely this
dependence on political community that drives Augustine’s development and deployment
of public confession.

The Rousseauian confession, by contrast, informs what Deneen calls a
“transformative democracy.” In the starkest of contrasts, this tradition grounds
democracy in what Rousseau refers to as the “perfectibility” of the citizen.\textsuperscript{20} Democracy,
in other words, requires a perfected and transformed citizen. The work of the politician,
Rousseau writes, is the work of “changing human nature; of transforming every
individual . . . of altering man’s constitution in order to strengthen it.”\textsuperscript{21} If the
Augustinian tradition grounds democracy in the insufficiencies of the citizenry, the
Rousseauian tradition grounds democracy in the possibility of “changing human nature”
and overcoming insufficiencies. For Rousseau, this transformation operates as a recovery;
Rousseau believes that freedom is a natural human capacity that has been buried and
obscured by the conventions of society: “Man is born free, and everywhere he is in
chains.”\textsuperscript{22} Deneen sees in these words
the modest yet radical premise of democracy: democracy is based on a belief in
human decency, even potential for individual and collective goodness, and needs
only to achieve the realization of this inherent decency to bring about democracy
in its most fully manifested, even ideal form.\textsuperscript{23}

Democracy, on this score, entails the progressive realization of an inherent goodness.
Confession, then, is politically essential because it is the expression and recovery of the
freedom that, as Deneen puts it, is “inherent in our deepest origins.”\textsuperscript{24} It should not be
surprising, then, that Rousseau reconfigures the Augustinian confession such that its
primary purpose is self-expression. Indeed, Rousseau’s famous expositor Jean Starobinski explains that confession is successful for Rousseau only if it expresses the “state of nature” latent deep within every individual—the preserve of natural goodness not yet imprisoned by the “chains” of civil society. On this count, public confession is a recovery of a natural goodness obscured by societal conventions.

We have then two competing rationales for the political importance of public confession. The tensions between the two traditions run deep and spring from fundamental disagreements about the source of human freedom and human domination. In the Augustinian tradition, freedom is not natural, and the first truth of political theory is the insufficiency and dependency of the natural self. Even if self-expression were possible (and Augustine does not think it is), it would, on this score, be counter-productive, for the pervasiveness of sin has rendered the self an insufficient grounds for politics. In the Rousseauian tradition, by contrast, freedom is natural and must simply be recovered. On this score, freedom does not require deliberation between insufficient individuals, but rather the expression of a natural freedom that has been lost in the conventions of society. This distinction between the artifice of the Augustinian tradition and the naturalness of the Rousseauian tradition is decisive. Drawing on the classical distinction between physis and nomos, and the classical assumption that both speech and politics are the province of the latter, I argue that it is precisely the claimed naturalness of the Rousseauian tradition that undermines both speech and politics.

For Augustine public confession is deployed against nature. It is designed to counter the human condition of sinfulness and limitation with the techne of speech. In this sense, Augustine’s understanding of confession is deeply classical, for it is a classical
commonplace that the faculty of speech helped humanity *escape* from nature and form cities. Speech and politics stood in conspicuous opposition to the natural. Arendt captures the classical mindset:

> Neither equality nor freedom was understood as a quality inherent in human nature, they were both not *physis*, given by nature and growing out by themselves; they were *nomos*, that is, conventional and artificial, the products of human effort and qualities of the man-made [sic] world.²⁶

Political freedom was, to be more precise, a product of speech. Isocrates writes in his famous “Hymn to Logos”:

> [B]ecause there has been implanted in us the power to persuade each other and to make clear to each other whatever we desire, not only have we escaped the life of wild beasts, but we have come together and founded cities and made laws and invented arts; and, generally speaking, there is no institution devised by man which the power of speech has not established.²⁸

It is speech, for Isocrates, that distinguishes humanity from the rest of nature and thus allows humanity the privilege of political association. Isocrates is not exceptional. The conviction with which classical thinkers linked the capacity of speech to the possibility of politics is perhaps best seen in Aristotle’s definitions of humanity as both *zōon politikon* (political being) and *zōon logon ekhon* (a living being capable of speech). Arendt notes: “In his two most famous definitions, Aristotle only formulated the current opinion of the
polis about man and the political way of life, and according to this opinion, everybody outside the polis—slaves and barbarians—was aneu logou, deprived, of course, not of the faculty of speech, but of a way of life in which speech and only speech made sense and where the central concern of all citizens was to talk with each other."

Although Augustine by no means accepted uncritically the rhetorical and political assumptions of ancient Athens, he shared with Aristotle and Isocrates the conviction that the capacity for speech is what allows humanity to escape from nature into politics. Writing in The City of God, Augustine argues that

if two men meet, and are forced to by some compelling reason not to pass on but to stay in company, then if neither knows the other’s language, it is easier for dumb animals, even of different kinds, to associate together than these men, although both are human beings. For when men cannot communicate their thoughts to each other simply because of difference of language, all the similarity of the common human nature is of no avail to unite them in fellowship. So true is this that a man would be more cheerful with his dog for company than with a foreigner.  

Augustine is insistent: common human nature is an insufficient foundation for association. Politics requires speech because speech, in its opposition to nature, in its very artificiality and arbitrariness, allows humanity to escape the state of nature in which no human fellowship is possible. And this, at least for Augustine, is the significance of confession; for in conspicuous opposition to both Augustine’s “profession” which is the natural expression of humanities natural inclination towards self-love and his prayer
language which is the natural expression of “man’s instinct to praise [God],” \(^{31}\)
confession is not natural. It is, I will argue, driven by and deployed against the limitations of the human condition.

In the *Essay on the Origin of Languages* Rousseau argues that language should not distinguish humanity from nature. \(^{32}\) To the contrary, Rousseau argues that language must be an expression of nature rather than a separation from it. He takes this quite seriously. So seriously that he argues that the communicative power of language is located, not in speech (which his classical education taught him distinguishes humanity from nature), but in inarticulate grunts, noises, and sounds that are drawn unwittingly from people as they confront suffering. For Rousseau, inarticulate noises have more power to communicate the natural because they are unreflective; they are not the product of calculative reason but of instinctual response. It is this instinctualness that renders noises and inarticulate sounds more expressive—and thus more confessive—than the articulateness of speech. In Chapter Five I suggest that the Rousseauian ideal of inarticulate noises is still profoundly influential. Although it is influential, it is also politically devastating. As Delbanco’s epigraph at the beginning of this chapter suggests, this sacrifice of speech for the sheer sounding of noises may be at times liberating, but it is, ethically as well as politically, imprisoning. As Arendt writes, “There may be truths beyond speech, and they may be of great relevance to man in the singular, that is, to man in so far as he is not a political being, whatever else he may be.” Politically speaking, however, Arendt insists that humanity “can experience meaningfulness only because they can talk.”\(^{33}\) Because Rousseau’s expressivism is defined precisely against the artifice of
speech it is bound to be fundamentally anti-political; it has, by definition, no capacity to allow humanity to “escape the life of wild beasts.”

In sum, Augustine’s and Rousseau’s divergent understandings of confession spring from divergent understandings of the relationship between speech and politics. The Augustinian confession is grounded in the conviction that political flourishing is not natural and that it requires, above all, speech. The Rousseauian confession is grounded in the conviction that freedom is natural and must simply be expressed. It is the argument of this dissertation that the naturalization of freedom and its manifestation in expressivism have concrete and deleterious effects on both speech and politics. While each of my case studies is dedicated to adumbrating the political consequences of expressivism, I provide, by way of introduction, a broad overview of my arguments against expressivism in the following section,

**Public Confession and the Public Sphere**

To reiterate: For Augustine, confession is a speaking-of-transgression in order to underscore the dependency and insufficiency of the self; it is the recognition that transgressions are too disruptive to be overcome individually; and it reflects Augustine’s conviction that the common neediness of humanity demands a rhetorical practice in which transgressions can be put into speech. For Rousseau, confession is not about the speaking-of-transgressions; it is about the expression of the natural—and naturally free—self. The important point is this: confession is here subsumed under what Charles Taylor calls expressivism—the moral and epistemic obligation to express one’s inner self
grounded in the conviction that one’s inner self is the source of nature and knowledge. Throughout my dissertation I will argue that expressivism undermines democracy, but I want to outline here my central argument against expressivism that I will reference in the coming chapters. Approached from the perspective of public sphere theory, expressivism can be seen to undermine democracy because it functions to shut down public deliberation and naturalize politics.

Jurgen Habermas’ *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* has generated entire sub-disciplines dedicated to some variation on the thesis that the quality of a given democracy depends on the quality of deliberation that inheres within that democracy. Within Communication Studies, the utility of public sphere theory is hotly contested, and critics have been quick (and astute) to point out the limitations of grounding democracy in deliberation. Yet even so harsh a critic of public sphere as Kendall Phillips would likely agree with Nancy Fraser’s assessment that “something like Habermas’s idea of the public sphere is indispensable to critical social theory and democratic political practice.” One lesson that public sphere theorists, and especially their critics, draw from Habermas is an appreciation for the fragility of democracy. Habermas does, after all, chart the *transformations*—the emergence and recession—of particular conditions under which democracy was possible. Indeed, Habermas’ critics often claim to be more attuned to this point than Habermas himself, suggesting that the emergence of the public sphere which Habermas so carefully traces was never a sufficient grounding for democracy. Democracy, the critics contend, is even more fragile than Habermas would have us believe.
Gerard Hauser defends the utility of the notion of the public sphere by defining it rhetorically.\(^{37}\) Although Hauser is certainly no friend of the Habermasian version of the public sphere,\(^{38}\) he argues that the concept is useful because it can function as a critical tool, a sort of democratic standard of judgment against which discursive practices may be judged. He writes,

> Insofar as a public sphere excludes ideas and speakers through impermeable boundaries, privileges public relations over deliberation, enforces the technical jargon of elites over contextualized language specific to issues and their consequences, limits believable appearance before an audience of strangers on the basis of class and identity, presupposes conformity of values and ends, and imposes a preordained orientation, its discursive features compromise the rational integrity of its outcomes and undermines its status as a *public* sphere.\(^{39}\)

Hauser is here suggesting that only particular types of rhetorics—particular “discursive features”—are amenable to the constitution of a truly *public* sphere. Insofar as particular speech acts tend to compromise the deliberation and argument that would otherwise constitute a *public* sphere, these speech acts should not be considered public.

Perhaps the most vigilant advocate for the necessity for a public sphere that is preserved through particular practices of speech is Hannah Arendt. Born a Jew in 1906 in what is now Hanover, Germany, Arendt witnessed the eclipse of the public sphere by the Third Reich and experienced first hand its disastrous results. Perhaps because of her
biography, or perhaps because of her classical training, Arendt is keenly attuned to the fragility of the public sphere. The “peculiarity” of the public sphere, she writes, is that it does not survive the actuality of the movement which brought it into being, but disappears not only with the dispersal of men—as in the case of great catastrophes when the body politic of a people is destroyed—but with the disappearance or the arrest of the activities [of speech and action] themselves.  

The preeminent lesson I have learned from Arendt is that the public sphere is always prone to disappear. Only when citizens deliberate amongst themselves, Arendt argues, and only when they deliberate about common events from a multiplicity of perspectives, will the public sphere survive. When this deliberation ceases, or when only one perspective is advanced, the public sphere, along with the possibilities for democracy that inhere within it, disappears. For this reason, Arendt too suggests that rhetorical practices are to be judged by whether or not they are political, which, for her, amounts to asking if any given rhetorical practices preserve and engender further debate. Any speech that functions to shut down debate or insists on a singular authoritative perspective is, for Arendt, an antipolitical form of speech because it undermines the conditions of plurality and agonism on which politics depends.

This is why the subsumption of confession into a logic of expressivism is so dangerous: expressivism is what Richard Rorty might call a “conversation stopper.” Expressivism shuts down deliberation and thereby collapses the public sphere. Rorty, of course, first used his famous phrase (“conversation stopper”) to refer to religious
arguments. Throughout his writings, however, he is insistent that the reason religious discourse stops conversations is not because it is religious, but rather because it appeals to what he calls a “final vocabulary,” a “set of words” and a rationale that function as “common sense” and cannot be questioned. A “final vocabulary” is “final,” Rorty explains, “in the sense that if doubt is cast on the worth of these words, their user has no noncircular argumentative recourse.” To use Rorty’s (too simple) example, the person who objects to abortion using a final vocabulary (“because God says so”) is “far more likely to end a conversation than to start an argument.” It is the finality of the vocabulary that is at issue: such claims end conversations, Rorty argues, because they don’t admit of argument; how could a non-religious person possibly persuade a religious person to change their view of God’s commands? Further establishing the fact that Rorty is more concerned with final vocabularies than with religious discourse, he writes in Achieving Our Country that the academic Left “is entirely too much like religion.” Rorty explains that the decisive thing that the Left shares with religion is a final vocabulary—this time called “theory”—that shuts down conversation and undermines the possibilities of democracy.

In the opening pages of Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity, Rorty implies that expressivism may also be a final vocabulary. He argues that we must not think of language as a form of expression, a means of “articulating what lies deep within the self.” Although Rorty doesn’t develop the argument (because his concern lies elsewhere), the problem with such views of language is that “what lies deep within the self” functions as a final authority that cannot be questioned. Charles Taylor explains that the rise of expressivism in the eighteenth century was premised on the authority of
nature: “Nature stands as a reservoir of good, of innocent desire or benevolence and love of the good.” Moreover, because nature—this “reservoir of good”—is “within us,” access to the natural is earned via “articulation”: “we can only know what [nature] is by articulating what these impulses impel us to.” Expression here becomes a good in and of itself. The content of the expression is insignificant; what matters is that expression buys access to the natural. And, as we have known since Sophocles’ division of power into physis and nomos, the natural carries its own unquestionable authority. With the authority of nature, self-expression came to function as a final vocabulary, an unquestionable argument, and, in the words of William Wordsworth, a “truth which is its own testimony.” And a “truth which is its own testimony” is, in Arendt’s terms, a profoundly antipolitical form of speech because it will admit of no questioning.

Taylor explains that expressivism, which got its start with the romantics in the eighteenth century (and with Rousseau in particular), has been so influential that “our cultural life, our self-conceptions, [and] our moral outlooks still operate in the wake of [expressivism].” One particular area in which expressivism has been particularly influential is twentieth-century writing instruction in America. James Murphy explains that in the wake of World War I English studies made a “notable turn” away from classical rhetoric and toward self-expression as a means of writing instruction. As expressivism moved into the classroom context there was a shift in emphasis; expressivism was not taught as means of getting in touch with nature, but rather as a means of rhetorical invention. Even in these new contexts, however, expressivism still functions as a final vocabulary. Murphy notes that the “expression of the writer is the product of a private and personal vision that cannot be expressed in normal, everyday
parlance.” And if a “personal vision” cannot be articulated in a common vocabulary it will, by definition, be a conversation stopper. Murphy emphasizes that expressivism entails a relentless privileging of the personal over and against the political. For this reason, he explains, expressivism was challenged by writing instructors with political motivations. Although Joseph Harris argues that the expressivist turn in English studies was more politically driven than Murphy suggests, he too concludes that it is a final vocabulary and a conversation stopper. With the advent of expressivism, Harris explains, writing “begins to be valued more as a form of self-discovery or self-expression than as a way of communication with others.” As Harris makes clear, self-expression and communication become, with expressivism, mutually exclusive goals. This is a particularly important point, and one that I will develop extensively in Chapters Two, Five, and Six: the ideals of expressivism and the classical ideals of speech (communication) are profoundly opposed to each other.

Perhaps nobody has captured the political consequences of teaching composition as expressivism as well as James A. Berlin. In his celebrated Rhetoric and Reality, Berlin argues that “expressionistic rhetoric” is premised on the belief that political flourishing will spring from the natural goodness of the student: “[A] school in which children are encouraged freely to develop their potentialities is the best guarantee of a larger society truly devoted to human worth and excellence.” Although this is the premise of expressionistic rhetoric, it is, Berlin argues, mistaken. Because expressionistic rhetoric rejects language which “refers to the public world of sensory data” and prefers instead “a private and personal vision which cannot be expressed in normal, everyday language”—in short, because expressionistic language endorses a final vocabulary—it cannot serve as
a foundation for political community. Expressionistic rhetoric, Berlin concludes, “denies the social nature of language and experience and has students respond to internal conflicts through such activities as keeping a journal and writing personal essays, rather than by engaging in public discourse to affect the social and political context of their behavior.”

From its invocations in the eighteenth century to its deployment in the twentieth, then, expressivism has always been aligned against classical notions of speech and the political community that such notions of speech make possible. From the perspective of public sphere theory, which I adopt throughout the dissertation, expressivism is thus by definition, antipolitical because it undermines the practices of deliberation on which democracy depends. In Part Two of my dissertation, I will trace the particular and concrete ways in which expressivism shuts down deliberation. The confession to the murder of Emmett Till and Jimmy Swaggart’s confession to charges of prostitution form particularly concrete examples of the insidious conversation-stopping power of expressivism.

It is too simplistic, however, simply to assert that self-expression always shuts down deliberation. There is an important—and mostly feminist—body of literature that suggests that proscriptions of self-expression often function as techniques of enforcing the silence of those whose political voice is grounded in personal experience. Nancy Fraser, for example, argues that democratic participation “means being able to speak in one’s own voice” and suggests that proscriptions of self-expression would be “tantamount to filtering diverse rhetorical and stylistic norms through a single, overarching lens” and making “discursive assimilation a condition for participation in
public debate.” To Fraser’s mind, the insistence on classical notions of speech function as one more way to circumscribe democracy and ensure that its protections reach only those who are willing and able to abandon their personal voice. It is precisely the failure to recognize the political potential of self expression, Rosa Eberly explains, that accounts for the apolitical reception of Andrea Dworkin’s *Mercy.*

I certainly agree with Fraser, Eberly, and others who have demonstrated the political potential of self-expression. I have no quarrel with self-expression, only with *expressivism.* In particular, and by way of distinction, the problem with expressivism is not related to its valorization of self-expression. Rather, the problem with expressivism is that the valorization of self-expression is driven by a conviction that the inner self is natural and, as I argued above, carries its own unquestionable authority. Expressivism, then, tends to depoliticize its disclosures by endowing them with the privileged authority of nature. Politically speaking, this can be quite pernicious. Eberly argues that critics of *Mercy* depoliticized the novel because in explaining it *ad personam* the critics missed “the social issues raised by the book.” The lesson I take from Eberly’s reading of the reception of *Mercy* is this: expressivism not only endows its disclosures with the authority of nature, it *naturalizes* political and contingent truths.

Joseph Harris is particularly important on this point; he explains that although expressivism’s appeal lies in its purported access to nature—or experience, or truth, or the self, or some other unshared authority—this power to *access* nature depends on particular cultural codes that would dignify particular textual markers (and not others) as “authentic.” He writes, “It makes little sense to me to try to imagine one discursive genre . . . as being somehow more authentic than another.” It is only arbitrary and reversible
power relations, Harris argues, that would accord the “personal letter,” say, more expressive power than a “business letter,” or a “scholarly article.” Harris is reminding us that expressivism is not an equally available resource; it does not inhere in any particular genre but rather in cultural codes that would authenticate some discourses and not others. From this perspective, expressivism seems arbitrary and loses its appeal; it provides access, not to nature, but only to cultural codes that would privilege certain ways of speaking over others. Harris, sounding an awful lot like Judith Butler, thus concludes that nature is “performed” through expressivism rather than accessed: “[A] writer’s text can be seen not as an expression of some inner reality, some authentic self, but as a kind of performance.”

The relevance of Harris’ discussion for a study of confession can be aptly illustrated by a recent debacle at Wheaton College. In the spring of 2004, Wheaton fired assistant professor of medieval philosophy Joshua Hochschild for converting to Catholicism. Nearly two years later the debate surrounding this contested dismissal has not yet subsided. Indeed, the debate received national attention for the first time when, on January 7, 2006, The Wall Street Journal devoted the entirety of its front page to the controversy. What is at stake in the Hochschild controversy is not the prerogative of private institutions to discriminate on religious grounds; religious schools have long hired and fired for so-called “missional purposes,” and their right to do so is relatively uncontested. The debate, rather, is over who may deploy the power of confession-as-self-expression. In the months-long debate between Hothschild and the administration, the assistant professor maintained that his conversion to Catholicism had no bearing on his ability to confess his adherence to Wheaton’s “Statement of Faith,” which contains no
explicit proscriptions of Catholicism. The administration disagreed, arguing that as a Catholic Hochschild could not make the required confession. Hochschild discovered that his confession didn’t count, not because of the particularities of his speech—a lack of sincerity, say, or contradictory affirmations—but because the power to confess is never an equally available resource. No matter how assiduously Hochschild insisted that he really believed the “Statement of Faith,” his words could never count as a confession because, in his particular political economy, his performance carried no authority; his words were not treated as an expression of his beliefs.⁵⁷

The upshot of Harris’ argument and the Hochschild debacle is this: “Confession” has no more intrinsic ability to express nature than does deliberative, forensic, or any other kind of speech, it only seems that way because invocations of the self function as cultural markers of authenticity and truthfulness.⁵⁸ Peter Brooks explains that it is only this arbitrary cultural privileging of the self that “appears to make [confession] the vehicle of the most authentic truth.”⁵⁹ The important point is this: if confession does not provide access to nature, if it doesn’t, in Brooks’ words, bear a “special relationship to truth,” then it is, as Harris suggests, better understood as a performance of authenticity rather than an expression of authenticity. And if the nature that expressivism purports to access is only a performance, then it is, by definition, not natural. In short, expressivism does not access nature, it naturalizes unnatural things. Confession-as-expressivism is a ritualized performance in which spoken disclosures are accorded a unique validity and treated as if they were natural. In other words, when confession is subsumed under expressivism and understood as the voicing-of-the-self rather than the speaking-of-transgression, the transgression itself is naturalized because it functions only as an
expression of, and an index to, the natural self within. The confession, so figured, tropes transgression by turning it into one more way of saying, “this is who I am”—a refrain that recurs throughout the pages of Rousseau’s *Confessions*. And this, of course, is politically disastrous. In each of my case studies, I argue that the false naturalization of political actions contributes to an elision of justice. Expressivism framed the racially motivated murder of Emmett Till as natural and inevitable, for example, and it allowed Jimmy Swaggart to dismiss his sexual trysts as the inevitable consequences of human nature.

It is precisely because of this capacity of the natural to evade interrogation and judgment that the false production of nature has long been a target of critical social theory. Judith Butler notes that the exposure “of contingent acts that create the appearance of a naturalistic necessity” has “been a part of cultural critique at least since Marx.”60 Within rhetorical studies, Michael Warner has been particularly vigilant in the crusade to expose the contingency of the seemingly natural. He argues convincingly that the seeming naturalness of gender categories has been an insidious tool of oppression that is rarely recognized.61 As Butler, Warner, and other recognize, the false naturalization of contingent acts threatens the public sphere by reifying contingent political acts as natural. This capacity of expressivism to naturalize contingent acts means that even if it doesn’t shut down conversation in a literal sense, it nonetheless controls the terms of the conversation by establishing its own disclosures as natural.
Publicness and the Methodological Necessity of Traditions

The argument I have been making about expressivism and politics has assumed the publicness of confession. After all, it would seem to be no disparagement of private confession to claim that it is inconsistent with the demands of democracy or the public sphere. But what, exactly, counts as a private or public confession turns out to be trickier than it might seem. For example, what is public about Hochschild’s disavowed confession? So far as I know, his only proclamations of allegiance to Wheaton’s “Statement of Principles” happened behind the closed doors of the President’s office. Moreover, every Wheaton faculty member confesses her or his belief in the “Statement of Principles” only by an annual signature that is routed through inter-campus mail and then filed away in Blanchard Hall. There is virtually nothing public about Wheaton’s entire confessive system. Yet despite the secrecy of the system, Hochschild’s attempted confession made headlines in The Wall Street Journal and insidehighered.com. In response to these headlines, Wheaton responded by making its password-protected intranet publicly accessible and posted a vigorous (but silly) defense of Hochschild’s dismissal on their homepage. Is this a private confession because it occurred behind closed doors or a public confession because it was widely disseminated? Difficulties such as these may perhaps be why Foucault refuses to even acknowledge a substantial distinction between private and public forms of confession. Despite these difficulties, I argue in this section that it is necessary to distinguish public and private confessions because it is publicness that guides my methodology and helps me avoid some well-recorded errors of genre studies.
If a confession is public, it cannot be adequately studied via a genre studies approach that would treat confession as an artifact to be described in the minutest of detail: the content, form, or function of confession must be elaborated, as well as the conditions in which it is deployed and the liabilities to which it is prone. Although this attempt to rigorously circumscribe confession may have certain advantages, it has no capacity, as a critical methodology, to account for the publicness of public confession. And, although my three case studies are dissimilar in many respects, their shared publicness is their decisive characteristic and it is only their publicness that justifies their being grouped together in the same dissertation and read as exemplars of public confession.

What then is a public confession? What makes a confession public? Is it the intention, the dissemination, the destination, or the content? Because my ultimate aim is to understand the politics of public confession, I define public confession in terms of its reception. I am interested in those discourses that are treated as confessions, regardless of their formal characteristics, immediate or secondary audiences, methods of dissemination, or intentions of the speaker. A given speech act will be counted as a public confession if there are contextual discourses that refer to it as a confession or debate its status as a confession. In other words, a confession can never be intrinsically public, nor can the confessant wholly control the publicness of his or her confessions. The publicness of a confession depends on its being taken up in contextual discourses as a confession. The confession to the murder of Emmett Till, for example, was not immediately a public confession. Although the confession took place in October 1955 and was published in Look magazine in January 1956, it was not until the Look article was interpreted as a
confession in contextual discourses that the confession became a public confession. To be clear: not even the publication in *Look* rendered the confession public. Because *Look* magazine was under contractual obligations not to print their story as a confession, they went to great pains to suggest that the disclosures they were printing were not in fact “confessions.” In spite of *Look*’s intentions to the contrary, and despite the fact that the article they printed bears few characteristics recognizable as confessive, I insist on reading the article as a public confession precisely because it has been interpreted time and again as a confession.

It is by defining public confession in terms of reception rather than by formal characteristics that I distinguish my own study from genre studies. Because I am concerned here with texts and speech acts that have been publicly thought of as confessions, I am relatively unconcerned if these same texts have formal characteristics that would suggest that they belong to a different genre. Moreover, it seems an unproductive task to claim particular discourses for particular genres. For example, from the perspective of genre studies, the three speech acts on which I focus might well be classified as apologias, autobiographies, memoirs, or coming out speeches rather than confessions. Indeed, in every instance, there are those who claim, with recourse to formal considerations, that the texts in question don’t count as confessions. In each case, however, these voices are in the minority; I focus on these three speech acts precisely because the evidence suggests that they have been widely thought of as confessions. Although my three case studies are dissimilar in form, content, and context, they share one decisive characteristic: they were consistently talked about in the media as confessions.
The dissimilarities among my case studies are important for another reason. That three texts, so dissimilar in so many ways, can nonetheless be publicly classified as confessions teaches us something important about the nature of public confession. Namely, it teaches us that there is very little consensus about what kind of speech act constitutes a public confession. Peter Brooks suggests that this uncertainty can be attributed to the fact that contemporary practices of confession are an amalgamation of competing confessive traditions. Brooks argues that Bill Clinton’s “Map Room Speech” following the Lewinsky scandal, for example, is a product of both the Roman Catholic tradition of auricular confession and a distinctively American tradition of confession rooted in debates over the Miranda rights. Although there can be no doubt that legal practices of confession differ greatly from Roman Catholic practices, Brooks argues that they “coexist with a certain accepted cultural blurring of the distinctions between them.” In other words, the formal, generic, and contextual boundaries that might separate religious and legal understandings of confession are consistently disregarded in the discourses that surround confessions and render them public. The lesson is this: public confessions, by virtue of their publicness, will be explicable only as an amalgamation of never-quite-distinguishable traditions.

The auricular tradition of Roman Catholicism and the American legal tradition, however, are hardly the only two relevant traditions. Indeed, Brooks argues that contemporary understandings of confession can also be traced to the diverse and often competing influences of Augustine, Rousseau, psychoanalysis, autobiography, and literary representations of confession. He concludes that a nuanced understanding of the American “confessional imagination”—what Americans think about when they think of
confession—requires “cross-cutting” between various traditions of confession. Proceeding according to a similar logic, I argue that a nuanced understanding of the politics of public confession requires “cross-cutting” between the two confessive traditions that have always insisted that public confession is a first-order political practice: the religious tradition of Augustine and the romantic tradition of Rousseau. My project, then, is, in part, one of parsing: In each of my three case studies I explain the politics of public confession with recourse to the adversarial traditions which fund them.

Traditions thus assume a methodological importance: they are, in a sense, the material of publicness. Without a plurality of confessive traditions, assumptions, and forms, the divergent speech acts which I focus on could never be described by the media as confessions. To return to Brooks’ example: it was precisely the availability of the Roman Catholic tradition of auricular confession and the American legal tradition of confession that enabled the widespread classification of the “Map Room Speech” as a confession. Apart from the circulation of these two traditions and the ideas and assumptions that animate them, there would be no grounds for classifying Clinton’s speech as a confession. The fact that it was so widely praised and critiqued in confessive terms speaks to the influence and circulation of competing traditions of confession.

Moreover, traditions are methodologically important for a second reason: Kathleen Hall Jamieson explains that antecedent rhetorical practices constrain contemporary rhetorical performances. Jamieson argues that “even where immediate circumstance may seem clearly to solicit a certain form of rhetorical response, it is sometimes a different, even incompatible form that comes, through stubborn habituation, to rhetorical expression.” This stubborn perdurance of rhetorical practices suggests that
we must understand the confessant, in Michael Leff’s terms, as a “hermeneutical rhetor”—the rhetor who employs “historical texts to serve as equipment for future rhetorical production.” The rhetor is thus invested in *imitatio* in the classical sense: not the production of a “conspicuous likeness of the original, but rather what is understood and revalued in the original.” Traditions of rhetorical practices thus function for the hermeneutical rhetor as *loci (topoi)* from which current discursive practices may be formed. Hermeneutical rhetoric thus depends on traditional practices even as it remakes those practices by revaluing particular moments in the history of the practice. In other words, rhetorical traditions, although altered by their invocation, are nonetheless essential to understanding contemporary rhetorical production and reception.

I thus understand confessions as interventions into rhetorical history, speech acts that depend on and preserve confessive traditions, even as they remake those traditions. Yet, because I understand the confession to be invested in the rich sense of *imitatio* described above, my dissertation will not be subject to a critique often leveled against genre studies, namely, that they are “responsive not to the special features of individual cases so much as to the repeated gestures among them.” I propose to attend to the particularities of public confessions in order to understand how the individual speech acts renew and revalue, rather than simply repeat, inherited understandings of confession. Thus the study of confession in terms of its own rhetorical history will not blind me to the idiosyncratic and, in Leff’s words, “radically particular” nature of the individual speech act.

As a critical methodology, this practice of understanding contemporary practices in terms provided by rhetorical traditions is put to its best use in James Darsey’s *The
Prophetic Tradition and Radical Rhetoric in America. In this award-winning book, Darsey argues that because the “essential form” of radical rhetoric in America “appears to be both recurrent and stable, it cannot be reduced to the vagaries of the particular situation.” He thus seeks to understand contemporary radical rhetoric in terms of its “nascent, primitive, and historical form”: the prophetic tradition of the Old Testament. He thus devotes the first portion of his book to articulating a theory of prophetic discourse based on the exemplars of the Old Testament. Through a close reading of these representative and exemplary texts, Darsey elucidates what he calls the “shape and function” of the prophetic form and prepares himself to read contemporary instantiations of radical rhetoric against its “primitive form.” In other words, rhetorical traditions provide Darsey with a set of terms to understand the political implications of contemporary rhetorical practices.

Finally, this particular critical methodology is important for another reason: it fills an important gap in the literature on confession. There is not a single study within communication studies that reads public confessions by the light of its own historical traditions. There have been a few studies of confession that are wholly unconcerned with the ways in which contemporary practices are informed by theoretical traditions. More often, however, studies of contemporary practices of confession take Foucault’s History of Sexuality as their theoretical starting point. Indeed, Foucault’s understanding of confession as a technology of social control has now become so widely accepted within communication studies that it is difficult to understand the politics of confession in any other way. In sum, it is as if there has been a willed amnesia, a refusal to consider contemporary confessional practices in light of the theoretical traditions that inform those
practices. The roughly 1,300-year mistake that Edwin Black made when he claimed that public confession was a “post-medieval” development is not an anomaly; it is, rather, indicative of our discipline’s much larger resistance and seeming unwillingness to consider contemporary practices of public confession in light of traditional understandings. 

A Look Ahead

Due to the length and internal complexity of the following chapters—and due to the fact that it is, after all, a dissertation—it may be easy to lose the forest for the trees. Moreover, although each chapter is dedicated to my argument against expressivism, each chapter is also written as a relatively autonomous essay that may be read and comprehended apart from the whole. For these reasons, it may be helpful to conclude this introduction with a succinct summary of the six forthcoming chapters that foregrounds their contributions to my overall argument.

In Chapter One, “Confessing Rhetoric: Augustine and the Politics of Confession,” I begin by offering a reinterpretation of Augustine’s famous denunciation of his post as a professor of rhetoric as a “chair of lies.” I argue that this resignation was not a rejection of rhetoric, but a rejection of “professing.” For Augustine, “profession” is, like prayer, a natural language. It is an expression of the self-love that, because of original sin, is the decisive characteristic of human nature. As a natural language, Augustine insists that profession is both timeless (it is given to infinite repetition) and it is a form of silence. Augustine’s insistence that profession is “silent” is, to be sure an odd claim, and I will
investigate it at length in Chapter One. For now, it is important simply to note that Augustine believes that profession is self-defeating; because it approximates silence it removes itself from what Augustine calls the “world of men”—which is, of course, the realm of speech and politics. By contrast, I argue that the decisive characteristic of the Augustinian *confessio* is that it “runs between men” and thereby creates the very possibility of political association.

In Chapter Two, “Jean-Jacques Rousseau: The Language of Confession and the Politics of Expressivism,” I argue that the public confession is Rousseau’s attempt to save speech and political freedom from the oblivion into which he feared they were sinking. I argue, however, that both of these projects are undermined by his insistence on defining confession in terms of expressivism. This chapter, then, is dedicated to explicating the rhetorical assumptions and political consequences of expressivism.

In Chapter Three, “Michael Foucault: Politics, Genealogy, Confession,” I engage a wide range of Foucault’s work in order to argue that the real target of Foucault’s famous arguments against confession is not confession but what he calls the “hermeneutics of the self,” a rigorous evaluation of the inner self and the construction of an essential identity. This argument is, of course, grounds for the larger claim with which I started my dissertation: that the Foucauldian critique of confession as a technology of social control is possible only because Rousseau first troped the confession and turned it into a discourse of self-expression. Indeed, I suggest that we can productively read Foucault’s critique of the hermeneutics of the self as a critique of expressivism. It is only when confession is understood as expressivism that it becomes, for Foucault, an instrument of political domination. And this, of course, means that Foucault is for me a
colleague and conspirator in my dissertation-length crusade against the politics of expressivism.

Throughout the first three chapters I have been examining the political and rhetorical consequences of different understandings of confession on a theoretical plane. This is not to suggest that the first three chapters are not grounded in careful rhetorical criticism; it is simply to say that I have heretofore focused my critical efforts on developing and discovering theories of confession. I even read the *Confessions* of Augustine and Rousseau not as concrete examples of confession to be explained with recourse to their immediate contexts, but rather as theoretical articulations of generalizable rhetorical forms. With Chapter Four I shift gears and focus on twentieth- and twenty-first-century American public confessions. I attempt to explain the contemporary rhetorical and political consequences of public confession by reading confession in terms of their immediate contexts. In Chapter Four, “The Shocking Story of Emmett Till and the Politics of Public Confession,” I argue that expressivism naturalized the murder of Emmett Till by suggesting that it was not a product of speech, action, or human agency, but rather simply a product of the way things are in the pre-civil-rights South. This framing of the murder as natural, I suggest, helped the murderers of Emmett Till elide the claims of justice.

In Chapter Five, “Jimmy Swaggart: Expressivism, Speech, and Politics,” I argue that Jimmy Swaggart’s nationally televised 1988 confession may be the purest example we have of expressivism. In many ways, Swaggart out-Rousseaus Rousseau; he takes the Rousseauian insistence that confession is self-expression to its logical end in which the speaking-of-transgression is no longer an obligatory part of confession. Not even
Rousseau was so purely expressive; although he claimed that the “particular object of my confessions is to make known my inner self,” Rousseau nonetheless recorded stealing ribbons and other particular sins. Swaggart, on the other hand, recorded nothing but his emotions and it is precisely because Swaggart’s sermon was widely interpreted as a confession despite the fact that he did not mention a single misdeed that I suggest that his confession is a remarkably pure specimen of expressivism. Swaggart’s confession, then, merits careful attention because it displays with uncommon clarity the rhetorical and political assumptions that drive expressivism. Drawing on Swaggart’s confession, I argue that the rhetorical assumptions of expressivism are diametrically opposed to the rhetorical assumptions about speech on which democracy depends.

Finally, in Chapter Six, “Confessing Citizenship: James McGreevey and the Politics of Expressivism,” I argue that McGreevey understood confession-as-expressivism to be an essential part of citizenship. Drawing on Foucault as well as journalistic responses to McGreevey’s confessions, I argue that expressivism fictionalizes and naturalizes citizenship. And, as I argue throughout this dissertation, this is politically devastating. The naturalization of politics is the end of politics; any rhetorical form that falsely naturalizes political processes undermines the prospects of democracy by explaining misdeeds as the natural expression of the self.
Notes


4 “History reveals to us time and again how interlocked are the fortunes of democracy and the arts of persuasion. From antiquity to the present, the health of one remains in no small measure a function of the other: as the polity goes, so goes rhetoric” (Ibid., 96).

5 “[C]onfession as a procedure of power is, I think, primary and fundamental and it is around this practice . . . that the rule of silence is able to function.” Michel Foucault, *Abnormal: Lectures at the College De France 1974-1975* (New York: Picador, 1999), 169. Foucault is so convinced that confession is complicit in the production of silence that, at one point, Foucault refers to confession as “confession-silence” (Ibid., 203).

6 “Academic philosophy, as a matter of fact, has ever since been dominated by never-ending reversals of idealism and materialism, of transcendentalism and immanence, or reality and nominalism, of hedonism and asceticism, and so on. What matters here is the reversibility of all these systems, that they can be turned ‘upside down’ or ‘downside up’ at any moment in history without requiring for such reversal either historical events or changes in the structural elements involved. The concepts themselves remain the same no
matter where they are placed in the various systematic orders.” Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press), 292-3 (emphasis mine).

7 I do not want to overstate the radicalness of Rousseau’s break with Augustine, because there certainly was, prior to Rousseau, precedent for understanding confession as self-expression. Rousseau was influenced not only by Augustine, whose *Confessions* he read immediately before composing his own, but also by Montaigne, whose *Essais* Rousseau thought of as not-very-good confessions and which were concerned, above all, with self-expression. Yet Montaigne offers no prescriptions for confession; it is not until Rousseau that confession as a rhetorical form comes to be defined by self-expression.


9 Indeed, it is no exaggeration to say that Foucault dominates the literature on the politics of confession. For my purposes, the most relevant Foucauldian understanding of confession is provided by Bonnie Dow, who draws on Foucault to explain the politics of public confession. Dow, Bonnie J., “Ellen, Television, and the Politics of Gay and Lesbian Visibility,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 18, no. 2 (2001): 123-40. Roseann M. Mandziuk explicitly and exclusively draws on the theoretical assumptions of Foucault in an attempt to understand “the confessional discursive form.” Roseann M. Mandziuk, “Confessional Discourse and Modern Desires: Power and Please in *True Story* Magazine,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 18, no. 2 (2001): 190. More examples of Foucault’s dominance within communication studies (understood broadly) include Alice Templeton, “The Confessing Animal in Sex, Lies, and Videotape,” *Journal*
of Film and Video 50, no. 2 (1998): 15-26; Carolina Acosta-Alzuru, “Change Your Life! Confession and Conversion in Telemundo's Cambia Tu Vida,” Mass Communication & Society 6, no. 2 (2003): 137-59; and Angela Devas, “Reflection as Confession: Discipline and Docility in/on the Student Body,” Art Design & Communication in Higher Education 3, no. 1 (2004): 33-46. Outside of communication studies, Foucault still dominates. In Cultural studies see Jeremy Tambling, Confession: Sexuality, Sin, the Subject, Cultural Politics (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1990); in Sociology see Mike Hepworth and Bryan S. Turner, Confession: Studies in Deviance and Religion (London: Routledge, 1982); and in critical-legal studies see Peter Brooks, Troubling Confessions. All of the above explicitly ground their work on confession in the work of Foucault. I am sad to report that most Foucauldian studies of confession more often than not treat only The History of Sexuality—though this is hardly the only relevant text. Moreover, most of these studies repeat ad nauseum the same quotations from The History of Sexuality.


12 Brooks, Troubling Confessions, 144. Brooks uses the term to refer to the place of confession in the American consciousness. Although “the American consciousness” is a troublesome notion because it reduces difference to a single consciousness, I nevertheless find the term useful.


“[T]hough the picture of a cosmic order with ‘superior’ levels rightfully regulating the ‘inferior’ remained a permanent feature of Augustine’s thought, he ceased to apply this scheme to political authority. The hierarchy of nature and the hierarchy of society had been prised apart. The two kinds of order do not coincide in society . . . . Political subordination cannot be assimilated to natural subordination.” Robert Markus, *Saeculum: History and Society in the Theology of Augustine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 94 (emphasis mine).


Ibid., 11.


24 Ibid.

25 Deliberation between individuals is, for Rousseau, not only not needed, it is also counter-productive. Deliberation is not needed: “The first man to propose [laws] only gives expression to what all have previously felt, and neither factions nor eloquence will be needed to pass into law what every one has already resolved to do.” Nor is deliberation beneficial: “[O]wing to excessive deliberation, the fruits of deliberation are lost”(*The Social Contract*, 109, 67).

26 Arendt, Aristotle, Isocrates, Augustine, Rousseau, Foucault and others that I draw on regularly throughout my dissertation use masculine pronouns to refer to humanity in general. To avoid clutter and an endless succession of *sics*, I only mark it this once.


29 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 27. The translations from Greek are Arendt’s.


“Public Sphere Theory” in communication studies and “Deliberative Democracy” in political theory are two examples of sub-disciplines that owe a huge intellectual debt to Habermas, even if some in these sub-disciplines now try to disown their Habermasian heritage.


40 Arendt, The Human Condition, 199.

41 “[T]he reality of the public realm relies on the simultaneous presence of innumerable perspectives and aspects in which the common world presents itself and for which no common measurement or denominator can ever be devised” (Ibid., 57).


44 Rorty, Philosophy, 171.


46 Rorty, Contingency, 11.

47 Taylor, Sources of the Self, 368-90.

48 Ibid., 372.

49 Ibid., 393.

50 James J Murphy, A Short History of Writing Instruction (Mahwah, NJ: Hermagoras Press, 2001), 261.


53 Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," 126.


55 Harris, *A Teaching Subject*, 34-35.


57 Marouf Hasian is also particularly good on the politics of authenticity. He argues that authenticity is a quality that is "granted" or "constructed" rather than a property intrinsic to particular discourses. Marouf Hasian, "Authenticity, Public Memories, and the Problematics of Post-Holocaust Remembrances: A Rhetorical Analysis of the Wilkomirski Affair," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 91, no. 3 (2005).

58 "In an increasingly secularized culture, truth of the self and to the self have become the markers of authenticity, and confession . . . has come to seem the necessary, though risky, act through which one lays bare one’s most intimate self" (Brooks, *Troubling Confessions*, 9).


62 Wheaton has now taken down their defense of Hochschild and it is, to my knowledge, nowhere available in the public domain.

63 Foucault’s argument about confession remains the same whether he is talking about private confessions given to a confessor or public confessions prior to execution. See Chapter Three. I doubt, moreover, that Foucault would, if pushed, acknowledge a difference between public and private confessions. My guess is that he would dismiss the terms “public” and “private” as belonging to a Liberal tradition of political theory—a tradition that he believes is unable, because of its terms, to account for the phenomena of modern power.

64 It is not only an unproductive task, but it is a problematic task because, in the words of Roderick P. Hart, it tends to “treat the classification of discourse as an end in itself.” "Contemporary Scholarship in Public Address: A Research Editorial," *Western Journal of Communication* 50 (1986): 292. Moreover, such classification seems never to succeed; Jaskon Harrell and Wil A. Linkugel have argued that any given discourse can be sorted into any given category. "On Rhetorical Genre: An Organizing Perspective," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 11 (1978): 262-81.


66 Brooks argues that the blurring of the boundaries between competing traditions of confession is compounded by the fact that the traditions were never completely distinct in
the first place; later traditions invoked, modified, and revalued previous traditions. Thus:

“The religious tradition of confession [is] crucial to our conception of confession in law, literature, and everyday life even if we have not been raised in a church that practices it” (Troubling Confessions, 111).

67 Brooks, Troubling Confessions, 144, 4.


70 “Since the past is not something that can be preserved in a pristine, original form, it must come to life through interventions that interpret the relationship between past and present. For the rhetorical humanists, orators are the agents who undertake this kind of intervention.” Michael Leff, "Tradition and Agency in Humanistic Rhetoric," Philosophy and Rhetoric 36, no. 2 (2003): 145.


72 Michael C. Leff, "Textual Criticism: The Legacy of G.P. Mohrmann," in Readings in Rhetorical Criticism, ed. Carl R Burgchart (State College: Strata Publishing, Inc., 2000), 552. As Berkenkotter and Huckin demonstrate, studying the development of rhetorical forms need not ignore the idiosyncratic, for genres “are always sites of contention


74 Janet Lyon follows a similar methodology in *Manifestoes.* In the first chapter she articulates the form of the manifesto and it is this form that guides her later critical work. *Manifestoes: Provocations of the Modern,* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1999).

75 Even outside of communication studies, there are few attempts to understand contemporary confessive practices in the light of confessive traditions. Peter Brooks provides the best model of this attempt. He seeks to understand the legal confession, primarily as it is iterated and disciplined by *Miranda v. Arizona,* in the light of the Catholic and Rousseauean traditions of confession. Although Brooks is aware of Augustine’s influence, he seems to assume that confession did not assume a prominent cultural influence until the Catholic tradition came to the fore in the Middle Ages. Peter Brooks, "The Overborne Will." *Representations* 64 (1998): 6-7. In terms of quantity, literary studies produces the most readings of confessive discourse in terms of confessive traditions. Here the work of Barbara Howard is exemplary. She seeks to explain Dostoyevsky’s *Notes from the Underground* in terms of Rousseau’s assumptions about confession. "The Rhetoric of Confession: Dostoevskij's *Notes from the Underground* and Rousseau's *Confessions,*" *The Slavic and East European Journal* 25, no. 4 (1981): 16-32.
Exemplary here is Charles Carlton’s work on scaffold confessions. Carlton assumes that he can understand “the genre” without attending to anything but the speeches themselves. "The Rhetoric of Death: Scaffold Confessions in Early Modern England," *The Southern Communication Journal* 49 (1983): 67. There has also been significant work done that attends to confessional magazines and television talk shows as contemporary examples of confessional discourse. The work of Maureen Honey is likely the best in this category. Yet, even Honey makes no attempt to understand contemporary confessive practices in light of confessive traditions. "The Confessional Formula and Fantasies of Empowerment," *Women's Studies* 10 (1984): 303-20.

It should be noted that, within communication studies, this unwillingness to consider contemporary practices in light of theoretical traditions is quite unusual. Indeed, Thomas B Farrrell has suggested that rhetoric is one of the few disciplines that is still “actively informed by its own traditions.” Thomas B. Farrell, *Norms of Rhetorical Culture*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 1. And this observation sometimes rings true; discursive practices such as *apologia* or prophetic discourse are routinely understood in terms of their own theoretical traditions. My project, then, can be understood as the attempt to treat confession in the same way our discipline has treated other discursive modes—to allow confession to be actively informed by its own traditions.
Chapter One

Confessing Rhetoric: Augustine and the Politics of Confession

“Speech runs between men.” --Augustine, *The City of God* VII.14

In Book Nine of his *Confessions*, Augustine confesses rhetoric itself. Augustine had been a well-respected teacher of rhetoric until, upon his conversion, he decided that his vocation as a “seller of words” was incompatible with his new-found religious beliefs. In no uncertain terms, Augustine confesses that his conversion to Christianity compelled him to abandon his “chair of lies” (*cathedra mendacii*) in favor of a holier and, it seems, quieter calling. James J. Murphy adequately captures the religious fervor with which Augustine disavowed his calling as a professor of rhetoric: “It would be only a slight exaggeration to say that in a sense [Augustine] was converted from rhetoric to Christianity.”

This renunciation of rhetoric, of course, is one of the most troubling passages for rhetoricians seeking to make sense of Augustine as a rhetorician who holds an important place in histories of rhetorical theory. Catherine Chin succinctly explains the dilemma facing such scholars. Augustine was, she writes, “a late Roman rhetor; yet rhetoric, both as a practice and a profession, is markedly problematic to the Augustine of the *Confessions.*” Scholars have responded to this problematization with strategies of containment. James J. Murphy, for example, asks scholars to consider Augustine’s resignation as a professor of rhetoric as exceptional, as out of keeping with his larger
project of adapting the secular *ars rhetorica* for Christian purposes. Calvin Troup, advocating another strategy of containment, argues that we should understand Augustine’s resignation not as a rejection of rhetoric *simpliciter*, but a rejection of the historically specific and theoretically unique rhetorics of the Second Sophistic. In both cases, the strategy has been to contain and circumscribe Augustine’s rejection of rhetoric. It seems that there has been a widely shared impulse that if Augustine is to remain a significant part of rhetorical histories, his rather embarrassing dismissal of rhetoric must be contained and limited; it must be shown that this dismissal is marginal, exceptional, and not related to Augustine’s otherwise important contributions to rhetorical theory.

I argue just the opposite. Although this impulse to contain Augustine’s disavowal of rhetoric is understandable, it prevents us from understanding the significance of the Augustinian confession. If we are to understand the rhetorical contribution of *The Confessions* we must not understare the severity of Augustine’s dismissal of rhetoric. By contextualizing Augustine’s Book Nine resignation within a critique of speech that spans the entirety of *The Confessions*, I argue that it is difficult to overstate Augustine’s critique of speech. Augustine’s resignation, after all, is only the most dramatic moment in what is a book-long critique of the rhetorical practices of the Manicheans. The Manicheans were loquacious—a term Augustine uses often, and always negatively, to connote meaningless speech—and loquacity, Augustine insists time and again, is so meaningless that it loses its speechful character; in an important sense it ceases to be speech at all. Loquacity, in other words, eventuates in silence. This is, to be sure, an odd claim, and I will interrogate it at length below. For now, it is important to simply note that Augustine believes that loquacity is self-defeating; as it approximates silence it
removes itself from what Augustine calls the “world of men”—which is, of course, the only realm in which speech operates.

Augustine’s desertion of the professoriate and his larger critique of loquacity must not be understood to be a blanket indictment of speech as such, for the *Confessions* are themselves “filled with speech” and exhibit a “preoccupation with language.” Moreover, it has become a critical commonplace to suggest that the *Confessions* are not simply preoccupied with language, but also, in the words of Ralph Flores, “depict a new form of language” and provide the first model of an enduring rhetorical form: the public confession. Northrop Frye, to cite just one example, writes that Augustine “appears to have invented” the confession. No less commonplace is the claim that the Augustinian confession, once invented, evinced a remarkable originary influence. Charles Taylor, to again cite only one example, suggests that the Augustinian confession “generated models of self-exploration which have crucially shaped modern culture.” The *Confessions* thus contain, in one and the same text, both a sustained critique of loquacity and the deployment of a new rhetorical form, the originary influence of which scholars are still grappling to contain.

It is my assumption that these two tasks—the critique of loquacity and the development of a new rhetorical form—are complimentary and, accordingly, that the contours of the Augustinian *confessio* will emerge and take shape precisely as it is understood against what Augustine refers to often—and always negatively—as loquacity (*loquax*). To understand the *confessio*, then, one must first understand the critique of loquacity that runs throughout the *Confessions*. Although Augustine’s desertion of the professoriate is clearly part of this critique, scholars have heretofore focused too
exclusively on this evacuation and thus understated the severity of Augustine’s indictment of loquacity. This failure to appreciate the rigor of Augustine’s critique has, in turn, kept scholars from recognizing the unique contours of the Augustinian confessio and the profound rhetorical contributions of *The Confessions*.

It is, then, against the both the excessiveness and emptiness of loquacity that the Augustinian confession emerges. Because the confessio is defined against loquacity it emerges as Augustine’s political mode of speaking par excellence. For unlike loquacity the confessio is not prone to silence and thus it perdures in the world and, as he puts it in *The City of God*, “runs between men.” The confessio, then, is not simply a religious form of speech in which sinners acknowledge their sinfulness. It is, rather, archetypal of speech as such: in its capacity to thwart silence it is uniquely suited for negotiating the barnyard of human affairs and thus confession fulfills the first obligation of speech, to function in the world between men. In stark contrast with loquacity which loses its speechful character, confessio is the epitome of speech, the truest realization of a distinctly human faculty. For this reason, the study of the Augustinian confessio has much to teach us about speech as such, and the first step in these lessons is an examination of the two dominant interpretations of Augustine’s critique of speech.

**Interpreting Augustine’s Rejection of Rhetoric**

It is not surprising that Augustine’s famous desertion of the professoriate has troubled scholars seeking to make sense of Augustine as a rhetorician who holds an important place in histories of rhetorical theory. Scholars have responded by containing
Augustine’s critique of rhetoric as either theological or historical. I argue that the theological explanation fails because it is inconsistent with what we know of Augustine from his other writings, while the historical explanation fails because it can’t account for the originary influence of the *Confessions*. Although they fail for different reasons, it is the shared assumptions of both explanations that interest me here: both understate the severity of Augustine’s critique of loquacity. I attend to each explanation in turn.

**Critique of Rhetoric as Theological**

The fact that Augustine abandoned his post as a professor of rhetoric immediately following his conversion—and that he did so with religious fervor—has led some scholars to argue that Augustine’s critique of speech is a theological one. On this score, it is Augustine’s conversion to Christianity that marks the death knell for the privileged place of rhetoric in his thought.\textsuperscript{10} Classicist Harold Hagendahl, for example, suggests that “rhetoric is not exempted from the contemptuous censure of profane culture” that is the *Confessions*.\textsuperscript{11} Such conclusions, however, are at pains to reconcile themselves with Augustine’s post-conversion celebrations of “profane culture” in general\textsuperscript{12} and his continued dedication to the *ars rhetorica* in particular. To the latter point, the fourth book of Augustine’s *De doctrina Christiana* provides Augustine’s “most complete statement on rhetorical theory”\textsuperscript{13} and appears to completely reconcile Christianity and rhetoric:

For since by means of the art of rhetoric both truth and falsehood are urged, who would dare say that the truth should stand in the person of its defenders unarmed against lying, so that they who wish to urge falsehoods
may know how to make their listeners benevolent, or attentive, or docile in
their presentation, while the defenders of truth are ignorant of that art?\textsuperscript{14}

Augustine continues at some length along similar lines and concludes that the art of
rhetoric should be learned and deployed by Christians “for the uses of the good” and “the
service of truth.”\textsuperscript{15} Augustine’s critique of speech, then, cannot be considered primarily a
theological critique, for his later work demonstrates that his theology, far from requiring
a censure of rhetoric, demands training in rhetoric.

Perhaps responding to the scholarship that reads Augustine’s theological
commitments as anti-rhetorical, Michael Leff and James Murphy have championed
precisely the opposite reading of the relationship between Augustinian rhetoric and
Augustinian theology. They argue that Augustine’s rhetorical project was one of
adaptation;\textsuperscript{16} it was the work of appropriating the secular \textit{ars rhetorica} for the holy
purposes of the Church. And, in so far as one is dealing with \textit{De doctrina Christiana}, this
is a highly defensible thesis.\textsuperscript{17} Yet, if scholars such as Hagendahl have difficulty
accounting for Augustine’s later affirmation of rhetoric,\textsuperscript{18} scholars who celebrate
Augustine’s adaptation of rhetorical theory for Christianity typically have trouble
accounting for the passages in the \textit{Confessions} which appear to condemn rhetoric
theologically. Michael Leff and James J. Murphy, for example, each celebrate
Augustine’s formulations of a uniquely “Christian” rhetorical theory, but both pass over
in silence Augustine’s disavowals of rhetoric as if they were unrelated to a Christian
adaptation of rhetorical theory.\textsuperscript{19} In \textit{Rhetoric in the Middle Ages} Murphy goes so far as to
mention (in a footnote) Augustine’s contempt for his “chair of lies,” but suggests that
focusing on this rejection “may obscure” Augustine’s very real contributions to rhetorical theory made in *De doctrina Christiana*. It seems as though Murphy is suggesting that an understanding of Augustine’s Christian adaptation of rhetoric depends on ignoring those passages in the *Confessions* which contradict his thesis.

In sum, the relationship between theology and rhetoric in Augustine’s work is, at the least, a vexed relationship. The ability of Leff and Murphy to reverse Hagendahl’s thesis is perhaps evidence that both Leff and Murphy *and* Hagendahl are misguided—perhaps we cannot explain Augustine’s resignation of rhetoric by focusing on the relationship between theology and rhetoric. At the least, by focusing on this relationship scholars have been unable to accomplish what Augustine himself seemed to accomplish: a reconciliation of rhetoric and Christianity. I suggest below that Augustine accomplished this reconciliation not by positing a relationship between theology and rhetoric but rather by rendering speech autonomous, that is, unrelated to theology. For while theology deals with humanity’s relationship to God, “speech runs between men.” This is not to say that Augustine’s theological beliefs play no part in his critique of loquacity. In fact, I will suggest below that Augustine’s critique of speech is closely connected to the human condition of createdness, which, for Augustine, is a theologically charged category. Yet I resist labeling Augustine’s critique of speech theological because for too many years and for too many scholars this label suggests that the post-conversion Augustine divided the world into the sacred and the profane, either embracing the former and dismissing the latter (Hagendahl) or deploying the former to transform the latter (Leff and Troup). Nothing could be further from the truth.
Critique of Rhetoric as Historical

A second explanation for Augustine’s desertion of the professoriate also originated with Murphy and has since found wide acceptance among communication scholars. This line of thinking suggests that Augustine’s critique of speech is not theological, but rather historical. In particular, Calvin Troup (the ablest defender of this thesis) suggests that what Augustine rejects upon his conversion is not rhetoric per se, but the historically specific rhetorical practices associated with the Second Sophistic. Troup is careful to note that Augustine does not even reject the whole of the Second Sophistic, but only those portions of it that would falsely divide philosophy from rhetoric. For once philosophy and rhetoric were sundered it was but a short theoretical step to the dichotomization of form and content. And, on Murphy and Troup’s view, it was precisely Augustine’s “firm espousal of a union between meaning and expression that marks his rejection of the sophistic” and explains his denunciation of the professoriate.

Rhetorician Christine Mason Sutherland agrees; she argues that “it was precisely the sophistic divorce of style from content of which [Augustine] felt he must repent.” She concludes that Augustine’s conversion effectively “rescued” him from the “false division between words and the truth, between form and content, between style and matter.”

Inasmuch as Augustine’s rejection of his post as a rhetorician centered on this false division between form and content, it is not surprising that Murphy, Troup, and Sutherland each cite the marriage of form and content as the highest goal of Augustinian rhetoric. Murphy argues that the first task of the Augustinian orator is to unite form and content. Troup concludes that the lesson we are to learn from Augustine’s evacuation of
the professoriate and dismissal of rhetoric is this: “[T]he value of rhetoric [is] to be determined by its association either with wisdom or foolishness.”²⁷ Sutherland, however, puts it most cogently:

For if there is one thing that emerges more clearly than anything else from these works [De doctrina Christiana and the Confessions]—so far as rhetoric is concerned—it is Augustine’s deep conviction that there can be so separation between style and content; such disjunction, it seems to me, was considered by Augustine to be a disunity belonging to the province of evil.²⁸

All of them, however, agree that Augustine’s rejection of rhetoric was no more than a rejection of the historically specific practices of the Second Sophistic. By containing Augustine’s critique within the historical boundaries of the Second Sophistic, these scholars seek to create the possibility that the study of Augustine’s work might reveal important contributions to contemporary theories of rhetorical practice. Unfortunately, as I suggest below, the attempt backfires; by taming Augustine’s critique of rhetoric, they also tame his contributions to rhetorical theory.

To do justice to Troup and Sutherland, it must be admitted that Augustine’s critique of speech did indeed signal a distaste for the rhetorical excesses of the Second Sophistic; throughout the Confessions Augustine emphasizes the need for wisdom to attend and authorize eloquence.²⁹ Yet, if this was the sum of Augustine’s concerns, it must be admitted that this was not a radical nor even a newsworthy critique but simply a re-articulation of an argument that Augustine could not possibly have missed as he
scoured Cicero’s writings. In short, to accept the thesis that Augustine’s dismissal of rhetoric in the *Confessions* is only a dismissal of the pernicious practice of sundering form and content is also to accept the fact that the *Confessions* make no original contribution to rhetorical theory. Thus Troup:

> True, Augustine excoriates the Second Sophistic, but not without providing an alternative framework for the advance of a new rhetoric that corresponds quite closely to the later work in book 4 of *De doctrina Christiana*. The correspondence would be even more distinct if the negative images were considered.

The “new rhetoric” that Troup would find in the *Confessions* turns out only to be a (p)re-articulation of book Four of *De doctrina Christiana*. Although the *Confessions* were written nearly thirty years before *De doctrina Christiana*, the latter is the closest thing Augustine has to a rhetorical treatise—it engages issues of rhetorical concern with far more directness and clarity than does the *Confessions*. If, then, the rhetorical theory set forth in the one “corresponds quite closely” to the theory set forth in the other, the rhetorician would have no need to wade through the wandering pages of the *Confessions* when *De doctrina Christiana* presents the same theory directly and concisely.

The enduring rhetorical interest in the *Confessions*, however, and the widely corroborated claim, mentioned in the introduction, that the *Confessions* depict a new rhetorical form, and, above all, the “preoccupation” with language exhibited in the *Confessions* all suggest that the rhetorical significance of Augustine’s autobiography cannot be reduced to another iteration of the necessity to unite form and content. In sum,
just as Augustine’s critique of rhetoric in the Confessions cannot be explained
theologically, neither can it be explained as a rejection of the historically specific
practices of the Second Sophistic.

This, of course, is not to say that Augustine’s critique of speech is not historical; it
certainly was directed against a historically specific group of people. For too long,
however, it has been thought that this historical group of people were the rhetoricians of
the Second Sophistic, although not a single person who could be considered to be even
on the margins of the Second Sophistic appears in the Confessions. As I develop below,
the antagonists of the Confessions, and the historically specific group against whom
Augustine directed his critique of speech were the Manicheans. In order to avoid
confusion, then, I suggest that Augustine’s critique of loquacity be thought of primarily
as rhetorical rather than historical. That is, in the Confessions Augustine directs a
theologically motivated attack against the Manicheans in which he suggests that their
practices of speech, which he refers to as loquax (chattering, talkative, prating),
undermine the potential of speech to endure in the world as a political force.

A More Radical Critique: Loquacity Versus Speech

In the Confessions, Augustine’s critique of loquacity begins long before he
renounces his post as a professor of rhetoric in Book Nine. Indeed, to understand
Augustine’s post-conversion dismissal of rhetoric, one must contextualize this dismissal
and understand it as part of his larger critique of loquacity that pervades the entire
Confessions. In the very beginning of the text, immediately before Augustine launches
into his account of his sinful infancy, he makes a seemingly paradoxical remark that will serve as the foundation for his critique of loquacity:

> What have we said, my God, my life, my holy delight? Or what does any man say when he speaks of you? Yet woe to those who keep silent concerning you, since even those speak much are as the dumb. (Conf., 1.4.4)

Augustine is suggesting that speaking about or to God is both necessary and futile. This conundrum is a commonplace of Augustine’s thought and finds its most concise expression in *De doctrina Christiana*: “Although nothing worthy may be spoken of Him, [God] has accepted the tribute of the human voice and wished us to take joy in praising him with our words.”

Yet the last line of the above quotation from the *Confessions*—“even those who speak much are as the dumb”—suggests that Augustine is not simply concerned with the incapacities of human language to describe the ineffability of God. He is suggesting that the obligation to speak of God despite the futility of the enterprise may be compromised in two ways. One may default on this obligation to speak through either silence or its functional equivalent: “speaking much.” Indeed, the force of this passage is Augustine’s suggestion that to speak much is functionally equivalent to silence (*mutus*): in Watt’s translation, “those that speak most, are dumb.” Lest the reader miss this initial lesson, Augustine repeats this relationship between excessive speech and silence again in Book Seven: “For me, O Lord, that was a sufficient answer to those men, themselves deceived and deceiving others, *dumb yet talking much* [loquaces mutos]” (Conf., 7.2.3; emphasis
mine). The men in question were *loquaces mutos*, or, more accurately, they were *mutus* because they were *loquax*. Sheer talkativeness resulted, for these men, in silence.

Commentators agree that the referent of both passages—“those that speak most” and “those men”—are the Manicheans. Classicist Gillian Clark, for example, suggests that “Augustine uses *loquaces* of people who have much to say, like the Manicheans, but all of it mistaken or trivial: almost ‘the chattering classes,’” and Jean-Bethke Elshtain notes that so long as Augustine was under Manichean influence, “he remained ‘all words.’” The Manicheans were a small but influential third- and fourth-century heretical Christian sect with whom Augustine identified for the nine years immediately preceding his conversion to Christianity. In the *Confessions* the Manicheans were Augustine’s primary antagonists whose chief vice was an excess of speech. Loquacitas, O’Donnell notes, was always a “pejorative” term for Augustine and it was, in the *Confessions*, the “fault charged to the Manichees.” Indeed, insofar as the Manicheans play a significant role in *The Confessions*, their significance derives from their loquaciousness. Even their views on the substantiality of evil, which Augustine will refute in Books IV-V, are of secondary importance when compared to this primary attribute: the Manicheans were too talkative: “And so I fell in with certain men [Manicheans], doting in their pride, too carnal-minded and glib of speech (*nimis et loquaces*), in whose mouth were the snares of the devil” (*Conf. 3.6.10*).

O’Donnell provides a perfect description of the Manicheans as they are represented in the *Confessions*: they “rattle on, their language out of control.” So loquacious were the Manicheans that nearly every time Augustine mentions them he emphasizes the sheer proliferation of their talk. He describes the writings of their
founder, Mani, as “ravings” (Conf., 5.3.6). He describes them as “vain talkers” (Conf., 8.10.22) whose books are filled with “long-spun-out tales” (Conf., 5.7.12). In their attempt to sway the young Augustine to Manichaeism they “boomed forth your name at me so many times and in so many ways, by the voice alone and by books many and huge.” The various names of their deities, Augustine notes, were “never absent from their mouths.” They were “always saying, ‘Truth! Truth!’ Many times they said it to me” (Conf., 3.6.10; emphasis mine). The exceptionality of the Manichean teacher Faustus casts light on the Augustine’s appraisal of the rest of the Manicheans. Augustine recounts that he was pleasantly surprised to learn that Faustus was “not one of those wordy fellows . . . who attempted to instruct me in these matters but said nothing” (Conf., 5.7.12; emphasis mine).

This critique of Manichean speech is not limited to the Confessions; in The City of God Augustine dismisses “the silly talk, or rather the delirious raving, of the Manicheans. They would not have babbled like this if they had believed in the truth.” The excessive character of Manichean speech, however, is perhaps most evident in Augustine’s treatise against Julian—a Pelagian whom Augustine accused of supporting Manichaeism: “Does talking give you so much pleasure that you must try by a superabundance of words to prove something we confess and teach, as though we denied it?”

The Manichean heresy, then, was both theological and rhetorical. Insofar as Manichaeism was a rhetorical heresy, it results from the excessiveness of their speech: they rattled on; they offered instruction, but said nothing; they were given to a superabundance of words; above all, they were *loquaces mutos*—dumb yet talking much. To Augustine, the sheer loquaciousness of the Manicheans rendered their speech silent.
The rhetorical heresy, however, can not be considered apart from the theological heresy. Augustine’s critique is not simply that they speak a lot, but also that they divorced wisdom from eloquence. Thus O’Donnell: the Manichees are talkative, but their talkativeness is *de facto* silence, for what comes forth is not the Word, but mere words.”43 For O’Donnell it seems it is as if Manichean speech is silenced not because of its excessive character, but because of its empty content—it was all form. Troup would agree with this conclusion; he suggests that the Augustinian critique of speech is directed only towards those who would divide wisdom from eloquence. Yet, just as the rhetorical heresy cannot be separated from the theological heresy, the theological heresy cannot be separated from the rhetorical heresy. What O’Donnell and Troup miss in their suggestion that the functional silence of the Manicheans resulted wholly from the falsity of their words is the fact that the theological heresy of folly is not prior to the rhetorical heresy of loquacity. Augustine is insistent that it is not simply that folly leads to loquaciousness, but, and this is his point, that loquaciousness also leads to folly. The theological heresy and the rhetorical heresy are, in other words, intractably intertwined, and the former cannot claim logical or temporal priority over the latter. Hence Augustine describes Mani’s speech as *multum locutus*, a variation of *multiiloquax* which emphasizes talkativity. O’Donnell argues that this is a reference to Proverbs 10:17: “Where there are many words, transgression is unavoidable.” In this instance it is Mani’s loquaciousness that leads to his folly and not vice-versa. We can only conclude that the Manicheans’ folly resulted both in and from a particular rhetorical practice—loquacity—and it was this practice that rendered their speech silent: “those that speak most are dumb.”
This, then, is the critique of speech that will recur throughout the \textit{Confessions}: faulty speech is not merely the consequence of faulty reasoning, but also the cause of faulty reasoning. The particular fault of speech that Augustine indicts is its excessiveness—a fault that he captures with the term \textit{loquax}—“talkative, prating, chattering, loquacious, full of words.” The radical character of Augustine’s critique stems from his assertion that loquacity is not simply speech divorced from wisdom, but it is, in some sense, silent: non-speech. “Those that speak most, are dumb.” At this point we must ask why? By what logic is excessive speech functionally silent? This question takes us to the heart of the Augustinian \textit{confessio}, for it forces us to confront the essence of the Augustinian self and its characteristic modes of expression. It will be seen that loquacity is the natural expression of a particular form of the self and we cannot understand it without understanding the self from which it springs.

\textbf{The Augustinian Self and Its Expressions}

Upon reading Cicero’s (now lost) \textit{Hortensius} Augustine relates that he was “stirred up and enkindled and set aflame to love, and pursue, and attain and catch hold of . . . wisdom itself” (\textit{Conf.}, 3.4.8). Thus inspired, Augustine began reading the “Holy Scriptures,” but immediately abandoned them because they lacked the dignity of Cicero’s eloquent exhortations to philosophy. The problem, Augustine insists, was not with the “humble style” of the scriptures, but rather with his own “swelling pride” (\textit{Conf.}, 3.5.9). Throughout the \textit{Confessions}, pridefulness of the self is connected with practices of speech. Here, his own pride prevented his appreciation for the plain-styled scriptures;
elsewhere it will be the pride of the Manicheans that leads them into excessive speech. In this the Manicheans are exemplary of the *Confessions* as a whole; throughout the text the sinful over-estimation of one’s self—pride (*superbia*)—leads to vanity (*vanitas*), which, in turn, is always accompanied by an unrestrained loquacity—as if excesses of the self were also and automatically excesses of speech.

This association of a mismanaged self with mismanaged speech forms a powerful part of Augustine’s critique of loquacity. Indeed, throughout *The Confessions* Augustine suggests that forms of linguistic expression are intractably linked with forms of the self. Disordered speech is both the cause and effect of a disordered self, and vice-versa. Although the self and its modes of speech are, for Augustine, inextricable, for the purposes of understanding Augustine’s arguments it is helpful to first bracket his concern with speech in order to focus on the composition of the self. It is to the Augustinian self, then, that I now turn.

**The Augustinian Self**

The most decisive characteristics of the Augustinian self are its loves and the most important characteristic of Augustinian love is its function as a coupler: love changes the self by joining the self to that which is loved. Thus Peter Brown can write that the Augustinian self is a “notoriously erratic being” precisely because it is “capable of a bewildering variety of loves.” This bewildering variety of loves notwithstanding, it is also important to note that all loves are, for Augustine, reducible to two kinds: the love of God and the love of self:
There are, then, two loves, of which one is holy, the other unclean; one turned towards the neighbor, the other centered on the self; one looking to the common good . . . the other bringing the common good under its own power, arrogantly looking to domination; one subject to God, the other rivaling him . . . .

Augustine’s “catalogue of contrasts” continues, but the essential point is that all loves are reducible to two—the love of God (caritas) and the love of self (cupiditas)—which, Augustinian scholar Robert Markus notes, stand in “radical opposition” to each other. As the above catalogue might suggest, the two terms (caritas and cupiditas), although radically opposed to each other, are nonetheless remarkably pliant and polysemous for Augustine. The best Markus can do is to describe the two loves as “loving God or loving something else.”

The love of anything other than God manifests itself in pride. Such a love manifests itself not simply in narcissism as one might expect, but also in a love for the things of this world—for the things of this world and the self share one decisive characteristic: createdness. Neither the self nor the things of this world are the Creator (God) and thus the love for either counts as “loving something else” and is a fundamentally misplaced love and a form of pride. Misplaced though it might be, the proud love of this world is inevitable and, for Augustine, diminishes the self. In the following passage note the connections between a diminished self (a self approaching “nothingness”) and pridefulness:
To be sure, man did not fall away from his nature so completely to lose all being. When he turned toward himself, however, his being became less complete than when he clung to Him Who exists supremely. Thus, to forsake God and to exist in oneself—that is, to be pleased with oneself—is not immediately to lose all being; but it is to come closer to nothingness.  

(DCD, XIV.13)

The fundamental lesson is this: pridefulness—the love created things (self or world) rather than the creator—diminishes the self. This process is perhaps most evident in Augustine’s reflections on loving the world. Because love is a coupler, the love of the world joins the self to the world and diminishes the self by dispersing it, by joining it to the world and thus spreading it out into the world. This dispersion of the self is so complete that the self, having loved the world, can no longer distinguish itself from the world. The self has been radically and completely dispersed and distended: “Behold my life is a distention, or distraction” (Conf., 11.29.39).

It is important to note, however, that the distended self is not simply the consequence of misplaced love (cupiditas instead of caritas); it is also the result of disordered love. Because the love of the world is inevitable the important point for Augustine is to love the world in the correct proportion and with the proper degree of intensity: “This is true of everything created; though it is good, it can be loved in the right way or in the wrong way—in the right way, that is, when the proper order is kept, in the wrong way when that order is upset” (DCD, XIV.22).
Augustine determines the proper order of loves with his use/enjoyment (uti/frui) distinction. Some things, Augustine relates, are to be enjoyed for their own sake, others are to be used for the sake of those things which are to be enjoyed. To enjoy something is “to cling to it with love for its own sake” while to use something is to approach it with a “transitory love” useful for “obtaining that which you love” for its own sake. Both things used and things enjoyed are loved, but with different degrees of intensity. While things worthy of enjoyment are to be loved for their own sake, things used, although not loved for their own sake, are nonetheless the proper objects of a lesser “transitory” love: “we love those things by which we are carried along for the sake of that toward which we are carried.”

For Augustine, the only thing to be enjoyed (loved for its own sake) is God. Everything else in the world is to be loved with a “transitory” love and “referred” to God, who is to be loved for his own sake. Augustine thus concludes that it is proper to love the things of this world because these things are goods and undoubtedly they are gifts of God. But if the higher goods are neglected . . . and those other goods [the things of this world] are so desired as to be considered the only goods, or are loved more than the goods which are believed to be higher, the inevitable consequence is fresh misery and an increase of the wretchedness already there. (DCD, XV.4)
The conclusion Augustine reaches is this: caritas and the proper dependence upon God requires not only the proper object of love, but also the proper ordering of love. Thus Augustine prays in The City of God: “Order in me my love” (XV.22).

The philosophical reason (as distinct from the theological reason) that only God is to be loved for his own sake is that Augustine understands love as a kind of “craving” which can be satisfied only by the uninterrupted possession of that which is craved. Because everything in the world is marked by temporality and thus begins and ends, the love of the world is a craving that can never be satisfied, for the joy of possession will always by compromised by the fear of loss. It is only the rightly ordered love that enjoys God for his own sake and uses everything else with a transitory love that can be satisfied. Because God is eternal, the love of God will not be frustrated by a fear of loss.

This meditation on Augustine’s ordering of loves is important because it sheds light on the existential reality of the Augustinian self. It is only the rightly ordered self that is happy and at rest: “[W]e direct our course towards him with love so that in reaching him we may find our rest, and attain happiness because we have our fulfillment in him” (DCD, X.3). By way of contrast, Augustine insists that the frustration of the inordinate lover is experienced as restlessness. In Book Four of The Confessions Augustine is recalling his youth in which he did “not know how to love men as men should be loved.” This inability to love properly led directly to restlessness: “Therefore I raged, and sighed, and wept, and became distraught, and there was for me neither rest nor reason” (Conf., 4.7.12).
It is precisely the *restlessness* of the inordinate lover that, for Augustine, defines the distended self. He opposes rest to movement and change. Thus he notes that he found rest at his country retreat at Cassiciacum, “where far from the madding world [*aestu saeculi*] we found rest in you” (*Conf.*, 9.3.5). *Aestu* is a form of the Latin *Aestus* which means: “an undulating, waving, boiling, tossing motion.” It is a word often used to describe the ceaseless movements of the seas; it is, in other words, the epitome of restlessness. Rivers and seas are powerful metaphors for Augustine precisely because their endless movement so perfectly mirrors the restlessness of the distended self.⁷⁰ “If Adam had not fallen away from you,” Augustine writes, “from his reins there would not have flowed that salt sea water, the human race, so deeply active, so swelling in storms, and so restlessly flowing” (*Conf.*, 13.20.28).⁷¹ This, then, is the distended self: the self dispersed into the world through inordinate loves and thus tossed about by the world.

By way of contrast, the dependent (humble) person who loves God rather than the self is, through this love, coupled with God. This coupling is not as complete as the joining of the self-lover to the world. Love for God is not a means of being joined to God, but rather a means of “clinging to God” (*inhaerere Deo*).⁷² Just as pridefulness results in the diminution and distention of the self, so the love for God results in a fullness of the self: “[T]he good angels did not turn to themselves, who had less being, but to Him Who supremely is, and that, cleaving to Him, their own being was enlarged by participation in Him.”⁷³ Just as Augustine figures the diminished self as “dispersed,” so he figures this process of “enlargement” as a process of gathering: He praises God who “gathers me together again from that disordered state in which I lay shattered in pieces” (*Conf.*, 2.1.1).
Further, just as the distended self is experienced as restless, so the gathered self is experienced as restful: “You have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you” (Conf., 1.1.1). Both clauses of this famous sentence express the dependence of the creature upon the Creator. The first clause announces the dependence—“you have made us for yourself”—while the second describes the existential consequences of this dependence: because the human condition is one of creaturely dependence, humanity will be at rest only insofar as it clings to the Creator through love. Thus Augustine: “In themselves they are but shifting things; in him they stand firm” (Conf., 4.12.18). Because rest is opposed to movement, it is precisely the sempiternal changelessness of God that provides rest for those who cling to him: “You are surpassingly the Selfsame, you who change not, and in you there is rest, forgetful of all labor” (Conf., 9.4.11).  

We have, then, in Augustine two possible selves: on one hand the independent, prideful, vain, distended, and restless self that loves the world and, on the other hand, the dependent, gathered, enlarged, whole, and restful self that clings to God. Each of these selves entails its own forms of rhetorical expression. It to these forms of expression I now turn.

**Expressing the Distended Self**

Augustine writes that the Manicheans “profess themselves”: “They become vain in their thoughts and ‘profess themselves to be wise,’ by attributing to themselves things that are yours” (Conf., 5.3.5). “Profession” (professio), then, is the mode in which the vain express themselves. It is here important to remember that vanity (vanitas) is, for
Augustine, a shorthand term to capture the shallowness of the distended self. To be prideful, to be too concerned with oneself, is to find oneself shallow, dispersed, without substance: vain. The distended self, then, professes itself.

The act of profession is defined by Augustine in two ways. He suggests it is characteristic of the Manicheans (and of Mani in particular), and it is opposed to the practice of confession:

It is vanity to make profession (profiteri) of these worldly subjects even when they are known, but it is piety to make confession (confiteri) to you. Hence this devious character [Mani] spoke at length (multum locutus) on natural philosophy only to this effect, that when refuted by others who had learned the truth concerning such things, they would clearly recognize what sort of knowledge he had. (Conf., 5.5.8)

Note first that profession is opposed to confession. While the former is associated with pride and is the expression of the distended self, the latter is an expression of dependence and thus a form of clinging to God: “The distinction between profession and confession is important because its first prong enables the intellect to turn away from God, while the second permits the will to return to the sustaining ground of its existence.” Profession is thus the expression of independence, pride, and self-love, while confession is an expression of dependence. It is not surprising, then, that Augustine later contrasts confession with presumption: “I would be able to detect and distinguish how great a difference lies between presumption and contrition [praesumptionem et confessionem]” (Conf., 7.20.26). This binary will persist throughout the Confessions; confession is
always opposed to any form of expression—such as profession or presumption—that would suggest the independence of the self. The attitude towards oneself, then, is decisive for determining the expressions of the self. The self-loving and prideful person professes; the dependent person confesses. O’Donnell emphasizes this connection between the self and its mode of expression: both profession and confession denote “not only the speech itself, but the predisposition that makes . . . speech possible.” The mode of expression, in other words, is a direct result of the self that is speaking.

Profession is also, for Augustine the equivalent of loquacity. Augustine records that Mani—the “professor” in the above quotation—was multum locutus: he was talkative; his speech was characterized by loquacious excess. This is the point: the loquacity that Augustine critiques throughout the Confessions is the product of a distended self. In this sense it is important to recognize that Augustine consistently associates the prideful and distended self with the loquacity he deplores: “I was already the leading student in the school of rhetoric [rhetoris], and in my pride I rejoiced and I was swollen up with vanity” (Conf., 3.3.6). This passage is not exceptional; O’Donnell notes that Augustine associates loquacity with vanity seventeen times throughout his works. One of the most explicit and damning is found in his description of those who are “swollen with pride”:

A talkative man loves lies. What gives him pleasure? Only talking. He does not even listen to what he is saying; all that matters is to keep talking. It is not possible for a person like that to be guided aright.77
The distended self is the loquacious self, concerned only with proliferation of talk—“all that matters is to keep talking.” Augustine’s account of the Manichean teacher Faustus is another example of the recurring association between a prideful self and loquacity. Faustus was an exceptional Manichean; unlike the others he was “properly modest” and thus “not one of those wordy fellows . . . who attempted to instruct me . . . but said nothing” (Conf., 5.7.12).

Moreover, the loquacity which is the object of Augustine’s critique is continually associated with restlessness, the existential reality of the distended self. Consider, for example, Watts’s translation of Augustine’s famous opening: “Our heart cannot be quieted [inquietum] till it may find repose [requiescat] in thee.” The generally excellent translation of John K. Ryan—which in this case translated inquietum as “restless”—speaks to the extent to which the tension between loquacity and quietness is, throughout the Confessions, correlated to the tension between restlessness and rest. This correlation is confirmed in the closing paragraphs of the Confessions, in which Augustine prays for the pacem quietus (Conf., 13.35.50)—translated “the peace of rest” by Ryan and “the peace of quietness” by Watts. It is not surprising, then, that Augustine describes the loquacity of the Manicheans as “exhausting” (Conf., 3.6.10), for the rest Augustine seeks is defined precisely against the loquacity of the Manicheans. The most direct link between restlessness and loquacity, however, comes in Book Five. Augustine writes, “The wicked, who are without rest, may go their way and flee from you” (Conf., 5.2.2). The Latin that Ryan translates above as “wicked” is “inquieti iniqui,” or, as Watts translates it, “unquiet naughty people.” In this instance loquacity is the decisive
characteristic of the distended self. This is, O’Donnell notes, the “closest [Augustine] comes to identifying ‘inquietude’ with wickedness.”

Pride distends the self, renders it vain, and by spreading it out into the world pride also diminishes the self. This distended self professes, and these professions are marked by loquacious excess. This, however, is not all: the excesses of speech, in turn, further distend the self. Augustine notes that his rhetorical education “carried [me] towards vanity, and estranged [me] from thee, O my God” (Conf., 1.18.28). Moreover, when Augustine describes the “sound and clatter” of the Manicheans as “exhausting” (Conf., 3.6.10), he is again suggesting that the excesses of speech contribute to the restlessness and thus the distention of the self. Loquacity is, then, both the expression and the foundation of the empty and distended self. The sins of the self and the sins of language feed each other in a vicious circle: excesses of speech distending the self, a distended self loquaciously chattering.

Augustine repeats this pattern when he describes his classmates in the school of rhetoric as “eversores” (Conf., 3.3.6). Although many translators choose “wreckers;” the literal translation is “overturners”—the name itself providing the first hint of excess. O’Donnell notes that the term eversores is a legal term and it suggests a “squandering of paternal property . . . the sort of thing a prodigal son might do.” Given that Augustine is describing his fellows in the school of rhetoric, it is not too much to suggest that Augustine is accusing them of squandering the words they had been learning, of speaking without discrimination. Thus Augustine poses his own quietness against the indiscriminating speech of the wreckers: “You know, O Lord, that I was far quieter in my behavior and had no share in the riotousness of the eversores.” These wreckers,
apparently, had no truck with silence, and they squandered their words in order to squander the modesty of the newer and quieter students: “[T]hey wantonly mocked at the natural shyness of new students” (*Conf.*, 3.3.6). Excesses of speech here ruin the natural quietness of the new students who in turn squander the natural quietness of others. The pattern is consistent: loquacity as the expression and foundation of a distended self.

The reciprocal nature of the relationship between loquacious profession and the distended self is important to emphasize, if only as a corrective to those scholars who would temper Augustine’s critique of speech by suggesting that he is critiquing only the speech that is empty of content. Recognizing the reciprocity between loquaciousness and the distended self allows us to recognize a much more radical critique of speech: speech is not only the expression of a distended self, but also and importantly the cause of the distended self that would separate wisdom from eloquence in the first place.

It is now possible to provide an initial answer to the “why” question advanced above: Why does Augustine equate loquacity with silence? Because loquacity is the linguistic practice of the distended self, the self that is “coming closer to nothingness.” Within Augustine’s thought, chatterers are simply accelerating their own distention into the world and thus undermining the subject position from which they speak. Augustine left his position as a teacher of rhetoric, then, not because his conversion to Christianity suddenly made him aware of the need to unite wisdom with eloquence (he had long known this from Cicero), but rather because his activities as a “professor”—in the most literal sense of the word—undermined the possibility that he would ever unite wisdom with eloquence. In other words, Augustine’s evacuation of the professoriate was not predicated upon a need to append wisdom to an already perfected form of eloquence, but
rather upon the need to alter his very form of speech. It is true that Augustine rejected his job as a professor of rhetoric, but this was not a rejection of rhetoric. It was, rather, a rejection of professing itself, for the “professor” by definition could never attain the wisdom Augustine sought.

It is certainly true that, within Augustine’s thought, loquacity contributes to the distention of the self. It is equally true that his rejection of the professoriate was a rejection of “professing” rather than rhetoric. However, it must be noted that these observations about the relationship between professing and the distended self by no means explain Augustine’s insistent equation of loquacity with silence. For it must be admitted that although the Manicheans’ speech might well distend them into the world, the Manicheans remain fundamentally talkative. Their speech is progressively divorced from wisdom, to be sure, but it would seem that it remains speech all the same. To understand this equation of loquacity with silence we must press on and consider the expressions of the gathered self.

Expressing the Gathered Self

I now return to the “gathered” self that Augustine opposes to the distended self and suggest that, like the distended self, the gathered self also has its own mode of expression. The most important thing to note is that this form of expression is not confession. The “radical opposition” of the two loves needs to be here recalled. The love of God only constitutes the gathered self when it is “carried as far as contempt of self” (DCD, XIV.14). Because the two loves are, for Augustine, mutually exclusive so also are
the two selves: the distended self finds its perfect antithesis in the gathered self. And although above I described confession as discourse of dependence on God—which it is—it is also the discourse of one who needs to be gathered, it is the discourse of a sinful and distended self seeking wholeness. It follows then that insofar as the gathered self is the perfect antithesis of the distended self, its mode of expression cannot be that of a sinful self. I suggest that the mode of expression appropriate to the gathered self is not confession but rather the *verbum mentis* (mental word or inner word).

At several points throughout the *Confessions* Augustine engages in “intellectual assents” in which he narrates a retreat into himself and “up” to Wisdom itself. The most famous of these assents is the so-called “Vision at Ostia” in which Augustine recounts an experience that he shared with his mother Monica immediately preceding her death. The two of them were overlooking a garden in the town of Ostia when together they ascended to Wisdom. Augustine describes it carefully. They first passed through “all bodily things” until they reached “the highest delight of the fleshly senses.” From here Augustine narrates their continued trek upward from the senses and into the mind: “We ascended higher yet by means of inward thought and discourse and admiration of your works, and we came up to our own minds.” They continue still higher past the mind to the “region of abundance that never fails” and in this region they encounter, ever so briefly, Wisdom itself, disembodied and unchanging (*Conf.*, 9.10.24). These intellectual assents have been a cause of great debate among scholars: the debt to neo-Platonism through Plotinus is incontrovertible, but the extent to which Augustine “Christianizes” these assents (or adapts them for Christian purposes) remains hotly contested.
Setting aside the issue of the degree of Augustine’s indebtedness to Plotinus, I wish to focus on one important aspect of the vision at Ostia: In the narration of this assent Augustine provides a clear account of the discursive practices of the gathered self.

Consider first Augustine’s description of their brief encounter with unchanging Wisdom:

[I]f this [encounter] could be prolonged, and other visions of a far inferior kind could be withdrawn, and this one alone ravish, and absorb, and hide away its beholder within its deepest joys, so that sempiternal life might be such as that moment of understanding for which we sighed, would it not be this: ‘Enter into the joy of your Lord?’ (Conf., 9.10.25)

Augustine here equates his momentary encounter with Wisdom, if it could have been prolonged, with entering into the “joy of the Lord.” The momentary encounter with Wisdom, then, represents the epitome of the inhaereo Deo (clinging to God) which gathers the self and results always and only in joy.  

If at Ostia Augustine and Monica experience, if only for a moment, the absolute gathering of the self and thus the perfect antithesis of the distended self, it follows that the discursive practices of that moment will provide a clue to the expressions of the gathered self. Towards this end, Augustine, in one of the most grammatically tortured sentences of the Confessions, provides a linguistic description of their encounter with Wisdom. The sentence is twenty-four lines long (in the Ryan translation) and defies paraphrasing. Because the sentence is of central importance to understanding the expression of the gathered self, I here quote a great portion of it.
Therefore we said: If for any man the tumult of the flesh fell silent, silent the images of earth, and of the waters, and of the air; silent the heavens; silent for him the very soul itself, and he should pass beyond himself by not thinking upon himself; silent his dreams and all imagined appearances, and every tongue, and every sign; and if all things that come to be through change should become wholly silent to him—for if any man can hear, then all these things say to him, ‘We did not make ourselves,’ but he who endures forever made us—if when they have said these words, they then become silent, for they have raised up his ear to him who made them, and God alone speaks, not through such things [words] but through himself, so that we hear his Word, not uttered by a tongue of flesh, nor by an angel’s voice, ‘nor by the sound of thunder,’ nor by the riddle of a similitude, but by himself whom we love in these things, himself we hear without their aid . . . (Conf., 9.10.25, emphasis mine)

Augustine here describes the expression of the gathered self. The most fundamental aspect of this mode of expression is its non-materiality. Augustine insists that God, and the gathered self that clings to God, speak to each other not through words “uttered by a tongue of flesh” but through what Augustine elsewhere refers to as “inner speech” or the “verbum mentis.” Unlike the word spoken by the “tongue of flesh,” the verbum mentis “is neither uttered in sound nor thought of in the likeness of sound which necessarily belongs to some language.” The verbum mentis, then, like the professions of the Manicheans, is silent. Unlike the Manicheans, however, this silence is not the result of
excessive speech (loquaces mutos), but rather from the fact that the verbum mentis is not speech at all. Augustine is sure of this; the verbum mentis precedes speech and “belongs to no language.” Just as the verbum mentis is spoken silently, it is also heard silently, with the “inner ears” (DCD, 16.60).

Augustine goes to great lengths to emphasize the silence of the verbum mentis. Immediately before the awkward sentence I quoted above, Augustine contrasts the verbum mentis with the “noise of our mouths” (Conf., 9.10.24) and later with the “noise of syllables” (Conf., 11.3.5). Moreover, the quotation above insists that silence must surround these silent words. The condition of “hearing” the verbum mentis is silence; before the verbum mentis is “heard” by “any man [who] can hear” there must be a sixfold silence: flesh, images of earth and water, the heavens, the soul itself, dreams, and “all things” must be silent before the verbum mentis can be “heard.” Further, after “these things say to him, ‘We did not make ourselves’ . . . they then become silent.” In sum: the verbum mentis is itself silent, it proceeds from and returns to silence.

The encompassing of silence suggests the apolitical character of both the gathered self and its expression. It harks back to the Greek bio theoretikos and its Latin derivative, the vita contemplativa. In both of these traditions “eternity discloses itself to mortal eyes only when all human movements and activities are at perfect rest.” Politics, then, and the activities of the world are set against the verbum mentis. The inner word and the bustle of world are mutually exclusive; the former emerges only as the latter recesses. Augustine was certainly familiar with classical conceptions of the vita contemplativa and his descriptions of the verbum mentis suggest that the experience of the gathered self is explicable with recourse to this tradition. Recalling his assent to Wisdom with Monica,
Augustine writes, “Yet, O Lord, you know that on that day when we were speaking of such things . . . this world with all its delights became contemptible to us in the course of our words.” Monica took this contempt to its logical end: “What am I doing here [in this life]” (Conf., 10.10.26). The apolitical character of the verbum mentis is reinforced by its timeless character. For Augustine, time is coextensive with the political world; time began with the creation of the world and will end with the end of the world. Outside of time there is no world and there is, thus, no politics. The verbum mentis, however, operates not within time in the realm of the political, but outside of time in the realm of the eternal. The experience of the verbum mentis so removed Augustine and Monica from the realm of the political that Augustine despised even the delights of this world and Monica could find no reason to stay in the world.

Despite the sharpness of the contrast between the loquacity of the distended self and the verbum mentis of the gathered self, it is important to note their shared characteristics. The most important of these characteristics is silence itself. Loquacity eventuates in silence; the verbum mentis is encompassed by and only understandable within silence. This coincident silence is related to a second shared characteristic between the professio and the verbum mentis: both are fundamentally timeless. The Professio is timeless because of its proclivity to endlessness—“all that matters is to keep talking”—and the verbum mentis, because it is literally outside of time, is also understandable as endless. Augustine contrasts the noisy and temporal words of language with the timeless silence of the verbum mentis: “The Word of God abides above me forever” (Conf., 11.6.8).
Despite the wide divergences between the distended self and the gathered self, and despite the wide divergences between their modes of expressions, it is their coincident characteristics that are decisive for Augustine. The recognition that loquacity shares with the *verbum mentis* both its silence and its endlessness is an insight of fundamental importance for this reason: it is a recognition that what loquacity shares with the *verbum mentis* are precisely those characteristics which render speech antipolitical. Loquacity is, like the *verbum mentis*, both silent and endless—the very things which for Augustine relate not to the political world but to eternity. It is now possible to provide a more satisfactory answer to the “why” question posed above. Why does Augustine equate loquacity with silence? Because excessiveness of loquacious speech takes it out of the world in which speech runs between men.

The real contrast in *The Confessions*, then, is not that between *professio* and the *verbum mentis*—for the shared characteristics of these two forms of speech are far more important to Augustine than their differences. The real contrast is between both of these and the Augustinian *confessio*—a form of speech marked by historicity (it is not timeless) and spokeness (it is not silent). I suggest, then, that confession is Augustine’s political mode of speaking *par excellence*. To understand this mode of speech, however, we must first understand the political self from which it springs.

**The Politics of Confession**

The first thing to note is that love is not only the decisive characteristic of the Augustinian self, it is also definitive for Augustinian politics. The two loves adumbrated
above—the love of self and the love of God—stand in “radical opposition” to each other and each produces its own polity: “We see then that the two cities were created by two kinds of love: the earthly city [civitas terrena] was created by self-love reaching the point of contempt for God, the Heavenly City [civitas Dei] by the love of God carried as far as contempt of self” (Augustine, DCD, XIV.28). Just as the two loves stand diametrically opposed to each other, so these two cities share no overlap. They are defined against each other and are “mutually exclusive.”

“The result is that although there are many great people throughout the world, living under different customs in religion and morality and distinguished by a complex variety of languages, arms, and dress, it is still true that there have come into being only two main divisions, as we may call them, in human society” (DCD, XIV.1). Each of these contending polities is populated by the respective subject positions outlined above: the civitas terrena is composed of distended self-lovers; the civitas Dei of gathered selves. Indeed, because the civitas Dei and the gathered self spring from the same love of God, and because the civitas terrena and the distended self spring from the same love of the self, it follows that the self and its respective city stand in isomorphic relationship; the city being theoretically no more complex than the self, simply larger. The division between the civitas Dei and the civitas terrrena, then, like the relationship between the distended and the gathered self, is theologically absolute, eschatologically evident, and psychologically fundamental.

The second, and far more important, thing to note is that these categories are not political. This point cannot be overemphasized. The civitas terrena and the civitas Dei are theological, eschatological, and psychological categories only. The categories are useless for political discrimination precisely because the two cities are intractably
intermingled in “their course through this world.” Augustine is insistent on this: the two cities are “intermixed with one another in this present world [saeculum]” ([DCD], X.32). Moreover, this intermixing is so complete that it is beyond human capacities to discriminate between them. Only God can discriminate between the intermixed cities, and He does so only in the Bible. That is why books XV-XVIII of *The City of God*, which purport to track the development of the two cities in this world, remain wholly tethered to the scriptures and read as little else but scriptural commentaries. Commentary was all Augustine could legitimately provide; to track the progress of the cities outside of scriptural accounts would have necessitated a capacity for discrimination that Augustine consistently disavowed. At the beginning of Book XVI, for example, Augustine addresses the question of whether the *civitas Dei* was interrupted in the generations immediately following the flood. He concludes that there can be no definitive answer to this question because the Bible is silent and, apart from the Bible, there is no means by which to identify people as citizens of either city.

This refusal to discriminate between the cities is at the root of Augustine’s theologically neutral attitude towards the Roman Empire exhibited in the first ten books of *The City of God*. Markus notes that this theologically neutral attitude required Augustine to rejected two dominant strains of religio-political thought. First, Augustine rejected a tradition, which found its most powerful expressions in the writings of Hippolytus, that encouraged a rejection of politics as profane, unspiritual, and for Hippolytus, evil. This tradition was firmly rejected by such authors as Eusebius, who understood the Christianization of the Empire under Constantine as “the unification of the world in a single harmonious order, one Empire devoted to the worship of the one true
God.” Augustine, for his part, rejected both traditions, for both claim to be able to historically distinguish between the *civitas terrena* and the *civitas Dei*. The Hippolytan tradition looked at the Roman Empire and saw the *civitas terrena*; the Eusebians looked at the Roman Empire and saw the *civitas Dei*. Augustine firmly and consistently rejected both; the cities were mixed, and the descriptions of the two cities provided in scripture could not be used as political templates against which to measure earthly politics. Markus summarizes:

> The only clue to sacred history is the Bible. Where this is silent, human guesswork about divine purposes in history lacks foundation. The Christianization of the Roman Empire is as accidental to the history of salvation as it is reversible; there is nothing definitive about the *christiana tempora*.\(^1\)

The profound ambivalence Augustine demonstrates towards the heroes of the Roman Empire in Book V of *The City of God* is a direct product of his refusal to see the Roman Empire in spiritual terms.\(^2\) He refused to grant the arguments of some (*DCD*, V.22) that the Roman Empire fell because of its Christianization under Constantine, and he likewise refused the suggestion that the Roman Empire fell because its citizens profaned the Christianization of the empire through vice. The radical conclusion of the early books of *The City of God* is that the Roman Empire collapsed because it was politically inept.\(^3\) The failure of the Empire was not explicable with recourse to either city. Markus concludes that this persistent theologically neutral attitude towards politics is the very original contribution of Augustine.
The relevant political category for Augustine, then, is neither the *civitas Dei* nor the *civitas terrena*, but rather the *saeculum*.109 “And we should translate this vital word, not by ‘the world’, so much as by ‘existence’—the sum total of human existence as we experience in the present, as we know it has been since the fall of Adam, and as we know it will continue until the last judgment.”110 The *saeculum*, then, is the world as it is given and as it is experienced. In sharp contrast to Augustine’s “cities”—which can only be spoken of in theological terms—“the realities of the *saeculum* must be spoken of in historical or political, not in theological, terms.”111 In contrast to the two cities, then, which are for Augustine, timeless apolitical abstractions intended to capture eschatological reality, the *saeculum* is defined precisely against these abstractions and is intended to capture the world as it is experienced in time.

The most decisive characteristic of the *saeculum* is its temporality. The *saeculum* is temporal twice over. First, it is defined temporally rather than spatially, being the expanse of time between Adam’s expulsion from the Garden of Eden in the past and the return of Christ in the future. Second, and more importantly, the *saeculum* is, as it were, stained by time. It is the world in which things begin and end; Augustine refers to it as the “fleeting world”112 and a “mutable world” which “does not stand firm” (*Conf.*, 12.8.8). It is, then, unstable, marked by the “vicissitudes of time” and composed of “passing seasons that come and vanish away” (*DCD*, XVIII.1, XX.3). Augustine concludes that the *saeculum* is “this life in which there is nothing solid and stable [*nihil solidum, nihil stabile*] which is retained in our possession” (*DCD*, XX.3). This second sense of temporality indicates one further essential characteristic of the *saeculum*. It is a time of perpetual restlessness, of disaffection, and of distended living.113 Recalling
Augustine’s search for rest as a search for something stable and secure, it is immediately clear that “the most obvious feature of man’s life in this *saeculum* is that it is doomed to remain incomplete.”¹¹⁴ The incompleteness of the *saeculum* finds its most elegant prose in Chapters 4-7 of Book XIX, some of the most powerful and eloquent chapters in the entirety of *The City of God*. In these chapters Augustine argues that even the virtues “which are certainly the best and most useful of man’s endowments here below, bear reliable witness to man’s miseries” because they do not “have the power to ensure that the people in whom they exist will not suffer any miseries” (*DCD*, XIX.4). He concludes that no one is “capable of listing the number and the gravity of the ills which abound in human society amid the distresses of our mortal condition” (*DCD*, XIX.5). In short, because the *saeculum* is neither stable nor solid love can never be satisfied and the enjoyment of uninterrupted possession that is the *telos* of all love is systematically deferred. The “gathered self” that rests in God, is here—in the *saeculum*—exposed as a counterfactual ideal.

Augustine thus shifts the foundations of the political from the *polis* to the *saeculum*, from a place to a time, or, more accurately, to the times. This is a major displacement of classical political theory, which had always grounded politics in existence of the physically locatable *polis*. This dis-placement of politics has major repercussions for political theory, the most important of which is a novel conception of the political actor. The classical political theory from which Augustine departs had always figured the political actor as the citizen—the person whose identity was inextricably invested in the identity of the *polis*. Augustine accepts *in toto* this understanding of the citizen, but since his cities are not political categories, neither are his
citizens political actors. For Augustine, then, citizenship refers to the final allegiance of one’s heart: either to the city of man or the city of God. Like the cities themselves, citizenship is a theological and eschatological category that cannot be determined until the return of Christ. Even Augustine’s “gathered self”—the citizen of the Heavenly City par excellence—that clings to the changeless God rather than the changing world will, like the civitas Dei itself, only be realized eschatologically.  

It is no accident that when Augustine recounts his “Vision at Ostia” he emphasizes its momentary character. The point is that this experience of a perfected inhaereo Deo could not be prolonged; the very instability of the saeculum forced him and Monica to leave the vision “behind” and return to the “noise of our mouths, where a word both begins and ends” (Conf., 9.10.24). Politically speaking, then, both the civitas Dei and the “gathered self” are counterfactuals. As the two cities “make their course through this world” citizenship is veiled and, from the standpoint of the world, irrelevant: “[B]oth cities alike enjoy the good things, or are afflicted with the adversities of this temporal state” (DCD, XVIII.54).

To be sure, from the standpoint of the self, one’s citizenship remains decisive. The citizens of the civitas Dei, although living in the saeculum alongside citizens of the civitas terrena, experience the saeculum in completely different ways. Although “both cities alike enjoy” good things and bad, Augustine writes, they experience these things with “a different faith, a different expectation, a different love, until they are separated by the final judgment” (DCD, XVIII.54). Augustine believes that the citizen of the civitas Dei experiences the saeculum as a stranger in a foreign land, as a peregrinus, a “resident alien” or “pilgrim” who is passing through, en route to his true home above.
When those two cities started on their course through the succession of birth and death, the first to be born [Cain] was a citizen of the world, and later one appeared [Abel] who was a pilgrim and a stranger in this world [saeculum], belonging as he did to the City of God. He was predestined by grace, and chosen by grace, by grace a pilgrim below, and by grace a citizen above. (*DCD*, XV.1)\(^{116}\)

The *saeculum*, then, is composed of citizens of the *civitas terrena* and pilgrims of the *civitas Dei*—these are Augustine’s political actors. Because the distinction between the citizen of the *civitas terrena* and the pilgrim of the *civitas Dei* is based on the different loves with which they love the world, the distinction will be invisible until the return of Christ.\(^{117}\) The Heavenly Citizen, or gathered self, is politically instantiated in the *saeculum* as a pilgrim and thus citizenship in the *civitas Dei* is a politically irrelevant category. It should be noted that citizenship in the *civitas terrena* is, just as much citizenship in the *civitas Dei*, primarily a theological category. However, because this theological category is marked by a love for this world, it is also a political category. This is simply to say that the ultimate allegiance of the citizens of the *civitas terrena* is to the political realities of the *saeculum*.\(^{118}\)

The “pilgrim” and the “earthborn citizen” (Augustine’s shorthand for a citizen of the *civitas terrena* (*DCD*, XV.15)) are not, however, equally capable political actors. Augustine believes that the pilgrim will be more effective at securing peace within the *saeculum* than the earthborn citizen. To understand this, however, we must investigate further the character of the pilgrim.
The Pilgrim as the Political Self

Peter Brown explains the significance of Augustine’s choice of “peregrini” to describe Christians in the *saeculum*: “Even to call them ‘pilgrims’ somewhat weakens the impact of Augustine’s terminology: they are *peregrini* in the full classical sense; they are registered aliens, existing, on sufferance, *in hoc maligno saeculo*.”\(^{119}\) It is the tension in the phrase “registered aliens,” or, as Brown puts it elsewhere, “resident strangers” that is of importance here.\(^{120}\) On the one hand, the pilgrim is an alien, a stranger whose civic commitments, like his citizenship, lie elsewhere. As an alien, the pilgrim recognizes the radical incompleteness of life in time and hopes for the realization of his citizenship and the gathering of his self beyond time in the eternity of the *civitas Dei*.\(^{121}\) In this sense the pilgrim is oriented always to the absolute future of eternity, for only in eternity will his citizenship be redeemed and his self made whole. On the other hand, the pilgrim is a “resident” of the *saeculum* and thus cannot wholly disavow it in theory or disengage it in practice. Brown writes that the pilgrim “must accept an intimate dependence on the life around him: he must realize that it was created by men like himself, to achieve some ‘good’ that he is glad to share with them.”\(^{122}\) Elshtain agrees; she suggests that the pilgrim is “one who is tethered to this earth through bonds of affection and necessity, but who recognizes at the same time that these arrangements are not absolute and not final.”\(^{123}\) The citizen as pilgrim, then, is Augustine’s famous divided self that William James poked fun of as the perfect example of the religious “discordant personality.”\(^{124}\) The pilgrim is divided between a hope for eternity and the very real claims of history,
claims that spring not from the *civitas Dei* but from the theologically neutral *saeculum* and thus bind him to the political as such.

It is precisely the divided nature of the pilgrim that makes him Augustine’s political actor *par excellence*. Indeed, even though the *saeculum* is composed of both pilgrims and earthborn citizens, it is the pilgrims who are equipped to accomplish Augustine’s political work. The pilgrim, unlike the earthborn citizen, has dual commitments, and the commitment to the *civitas Dei* reinforces the commitment to the *saeculum*. The political necessities of the pilgrim’s dual commitments emerge quite clearly in the only discussion Augustine provides of the “state.”

In Books II and XIX of *The City of God* Augustine challenges Cicero’s definition of a *res publica*, or commonwealth. Cicero, through Scipio, defined a commonwealth as “a multitude united in association by a common sense of right and a community of interest” (*qtd. in Augustine, DCD, XIX.21*). Augustine argued that this definition would effectively exclude not only the Roman Empire, but all forms of association here on earth, for “where there is no true justice there can be no association of men united by a common sense of right” (*DCD, XIX.21*). Augustine advanced an alternative definition of a *res publica*: “A people is the association of a multitude of rational beings united by a common agreement on the objects of their love” (*DCD, XIX.24*).

It is important to note that when Augustine advances his definition of a people as a group united by a common object of love, he is strangely silent about the type of love, or intensity of love with which this common object is loved. He doesn’t specify if it is to be loved for its own sake or if it is to be loved with a transitory love and referred to something higher. For a thinker otherwise obsessed with the proportionality of love, this
silence is peculiar and important. By not mentioning the order of loves, Augustine is ensuring that a “people” will be constituted of both pilgrims and citizens of the *civitas terrena.* For, Augustine reasons, God has created plenty of good things that can be loved by both “earthborn citizens” and pilgrims. “Speech, light, air to breathe, water to drink, and whatever is suitable for feeding and clothing the body, for the care of the body and the adornment of the person” (*DCD*, XIX.13); all these things, Augustine emphasizes, can and should be the proper objects of love for both earthborn citizens and pilgrims. Above all, temporal peace, the earthly equivalent of the divine rest that Augustine so ardently sought in the *Confessions*, is to be loved by all: “For peace is so great a good that even in relation to the affairs of earth and our mortal state no word ever falls more gratefully upon the ear, nothing is desired with greater longing, in fact, nothing better can be found” (*DCD*, XIX.11).

Pilgrims and earthborn citizens will, of course, love this earthly peace with a different type of love. Earthborn citizens will love it inordinately, attempting to enjoy it and they will thus be frustrated by its temporality. Pilgrims will refer this love of earthly peace to God, using it so that they may enjoy God: “We see, then, that all man’s use of temporal things is related to the enjoyment of earthly peace in the earthly city; whereas in the Heavenly City it is related to the enjoyment of eternal peace” (*DCD*, XIX.14).

Augustine was a theologian and *The City of God* is, primarily, a theological treatise; it is *only* in his capacity as a theologian that Augustine notes the discrepancies between the loves with which the earthborn and the pilgrims love the temporal peace. Politically speaking, this distinction is moot precisely because it is hidden and concealed in the depths of man’s motivations.
Augustine’s insistence that the *res publica* embrace both the earthborn and the pilgrim is central to understanding the respect Augustine accorded the political realm. Augustine’s *res publica*, like the Roman Empire itself, is theologically neutral and politically autonomous. That is to say: the *res publica* is not an earthly instantiation of the *civitas Dei*; it is not governed by the ideals of the *civitas Dei*; and, most importantly, the *civitas Dei* does not replace or alleviate the need for a vibrant *res publica* in which earthborn citizens unite with pilgrims for the purposes of attaining temporal peace.  

The autonomy of the *res publica* ensures that the earthborn are not excluded from the political simply because their inner motivations for peace differ from the pilgrim. Indeed, the political is defined “formally, by the possibility within it of coincident decisions springing from fundamentally differing structures of motivation.”  

Equally important: the *res publica* is not explicable with recourse to the *civitas terrena*. The *res publica* is autonomous—it does not answer to the laws of either of Augustine’s cities but is rather an irreducible composite of both earthborn citizens and heavenly pilgrims. This composition, however, obtains for the *res publica* a significance for pilgrims it would not have if it were equated with either city. If the *res publica* were an instantiation of the *civitas terrena*, it would have no claims on the life of the pilgrim; if it were an instantiation of the *civitas Dei*, it would not need the assistance of the pilgrim. Augustine refuses both options; the “ethic of the pilgrim” entails the recognition that the transitory things of this world are valuable precisely because they were created by God and thus Heavenly citizenship reinforces the very loves from which the *res publica* may spring. Indeed, the love of God which is the identifying mark of the Heavenly citizen on pilgrimage itself drives the pilgrim into the *res publica*: “[I]t is the compulsion
of love that undertakes righteous engagement in [human] affairs” (DCD, XIX.19). The political may be autonomous, Markus summarizes, “but in its very autonomy it is a matter of deep concern to the citizen of the heavenly city.”

All we can know is that the two cities are always present in any historical society; but we can never . . . identify the locus of either. Hence concern for the secular realities of any society, with all their ultimate ambivalence, was itself forced upon its members by the quality of their ultimate concerns: their faith and their love. . . . For the citizen of the heavenly city, concern for the saeculum is the temporal dimension of his concern for the eternal city. This is the ground for Augustine’s mature consciousness of the real and deep claims which bound a Christian to a temporal society devoted to the service of objectives which lay well on this side of the final goals of life.

The pilgrim’s inner commitments of faith and hope, then, are not politically irrelevant, and the autonomy of the res publica is not reducible to a proto-liberal argument in which faith is excluded from public decision making. Rather, the pilgrim’s ultimate citizenship in the civitas Dei demands political engagement but forbids that this engagement should be grounded in the precepts of the civitas Dei.

Conclusion: Confession and the Expression of the Political Self

The political self (pilgrim, divided self) is opposed to both the distended self of the civitas terrena and the gathered self of the civitas Dei. The political self is, for
Augustine, the historical self, the self in time, and its mode of expression is the *confessio*. In this section I return to the *Confessions* in order to articulate the contours of the *confessio* as they emerge in their contrast with the shared characteristics of the *verbum mentis* of the gathered self and the *professio* of the distended self. I argue that, in contrast to both the *verbum mentis* and the *professio*, the *confessio* is defined by its spokeness and its temporality. That is to say: the *confessio* is opposed to the silence and the endlessness of Augustine’s other modes of speech and, as such, functions as the political mode of speech *par excellence*.

The opposition of confession to silence is evident from the very first episode Augustine recounts: his transition from “infancy” to “boyhood.” This transition is important not only because it is the first episode of the *Confessions* but also because it marks Augustine’s transition from an infant “who could not speak” to “a chattering boy” (*Conf.*, 1.8.13). The beginning of Augustine’s *Confessions* thus coincides with the beginning of Augustine’s speech—this coincidence, we shall see, is not trivial. Here it is important to note that the decisive characteristic of infancy, for Augustine, is its speechlessness: “For it is at boyhood that man begins to talk, after he leaves infancy—which is so called because it has not the power of speech” (*DCD*, XVI.43). Augustine thus recalls the frustration of his infantile inability to make his known his desires:

> Yet I could not [make known my desires], because the wants were within me, while those outside could by no sensible means penetrate into my soul. So I tossed my limbs about and uttered sounds, thus making such few signs similar to my wishes as I could, an in such fashion as I could, although they were not like the truth. (*Conf.*, 1.6.8)
The thing to note here is the character of the speech with which Augustine confesses: it is marked by commotion and noise—“I tossed my limbs about and uttered sounds.” Augustine concedes that he attempted to reveal himself “by means of various cries and sounds and movements” (Conf., 1.8.13). It is also important to note that Augustine did not oppose this commotion to speech; rather, he understood it as a stage in the progressive development of speech.

It is, then, not surprising that although Augustine quickly moves beyond the speechlessness of infancy, his Confessions never lose their noisy and audible character. Augustine repeatedly emphasizes the spokeness of his confessions. Despite the fact that his Confessions are addressed to a God who hears them without the necessity of speech, it nonetheless seems to be of the utmost importance to Augustine that his confessions are spoken “in such manner that men may hear” (Conf., 10.3.3). He repeatedly characterizes his confessions as a “speaking out” and routinely prays that God would help him to speak: “Have pity on me, so that I may speak” (Conf., 1.5.6); “Grant that my heart and my tongue may praise you” (Conf., 9.1.1). Moreover, in sharp distinction to the loquacity of the Manicheans which eventuates in silence and the inner speech of the gathered self that emanates from silence, Augustine confesses precisely to avoid silence: “I will not pass over in silence [that] which must be confessed to you” (Conf., 8.2.3).

The sheer noisiness of Augustine’s Confessions suggests that he never attains the “peace of rest” (pacem quietus) which he so ardently pursued. Indeed, the entirety of the Confessions can be read as Augustine’s confession that fact that the “heart is restless until it rests in thee” entails as its necessary correlative the fact that the heart will rest only in
the eternity of the civitas Dei. In Book 7 Augustine explicitly connects the noise of his confessions with the restlessness of the effort: “How much of that torment did my tongue direct from there into the ears of my closest friends! Did my soul’s tumult, for which neither time nor my tongue sufficed, ever resound in their ears?” Augustine confesses that in this tumultuous speech he could find “no place of rest” (Conf., 7.7.11). If this search for a place of rest was frustrated in Book 7, it is theoretically undermined in Book 10. There Augustine confesses that “there is no place” (et nusquam locus) where God may be found and the heart may rest in him. Thus, in Book 13 the pacem quietus becomes the quietem ex tempore—“the rest that comes after time” (Conf., 13.17.52). The peace of quietness has become the quietness of eternity. After describing the whole of the Confessions as Augustine’s search for rest, Eric Voegelin concludes that the only rest Augustine achieves “would be appropriately defined as exhaustion.” In sharp contrast to the rest of ultimate satisfaction that Augustine sought, this rest of exhaustion results from the final failure of his enterprise: he will not experience the pacem quietus until the quietem ex tempore. And, given the fact that the experience of the quietum ex tempore will perforce coincide with the perfection of the inhaero Deo, the moment of quiet rest will be the precise moment when the self’s mode of expression shifts from the noise of the confessio to the silence of the verbum mentis. The confession, then, insofar as it is spoken is also profoundly restless.

For Augustine, the restless commotion of confession strongly suggests the temporality of confession. Unlike the verbum mentis which stands outside of time all together, and unlike professio, which through repetition annuls time, the confessio is
Theoretically speaking, then, in its very constitution as a noisy and temporal form of speech, the confession functions as Augustine’s uniquely political mode of speech. The shift from the *pacem quieta* of Book One to the *quiem ex tempore* of Book Thirteen is telling: confession cannot provide the ultimate satisfaction Augustine seeks; it is, by definition, a thing of this world, and its enactment only brings home to Augustine the realization that the quietness which he seeks will be, of necessity, deferred until he enacts his citizenship in The City of God.

Practically speaking, confession is a powerful mode of speech because it is a speaking-of-transgression. Augustine argues that transgressions are fundamentally a-communal; they isolate the self. Confession reverses the isolating power of transgression: by rending transgressions in speech Augustine turns the isolating power of transgression into a political force that unites humans in community. On this score it is important to note that the fundamental sin Augustine confesses is the sin of pride, or self-love. All the particular sins that Augustine mentions—the pear stealing, the sexual trysts, his attachment to heretical beliefs—are all sinful primarily because they are assertions of a proud independence: “‘What is iniquity?’ . . . . It is a perversity of the will, twisted away from the supreme substance, yourself, O God, and towards lower things” (*Conf.*, 7.16.22).

The point here is not simply that pride is the sin that Augustine confesses; rather, the point is that the practice of confession is itself a formal acknowledgement of dependence: “When I am evil, to confess to you is naught else but to be displeased with
myself; when I am upright of life, naught else is to confess to you but to attribute this in no wise to myself” (*Conf.*, 2.1.1). Augustine does not simply confess his proud independence, he also suggests that confession itself is a form of dependence. Thus Augustine figures confession as a “casting” of the creature upon the goodness of the Creator. In other words, the pride of independent autonomy is not a topic to be confessed, one sin among many; it is at the root of all sin and the *confessio*, regardless of content, is a discourse of fundamental dependence.

It is precisely as a renunciation of prideful independence that constitutes confession as Augustine’s political mode of speech. Here it is necessary to return once more to Augustine’s two loves and, this time, note that the love for God is fundamentally communal, while the love of self is, because it is an expression of pride, fundamentally private. Augustine argues that pride, or the love of self, is

the attitude by which a person desires more than what is due by reason of his excellence, and a certain love of one’s own interest, his private interest, to which the Latin word *privatus* was wisely given, a term which obviously expresses loss rather than gain. For every privation diminishes. Where pride, then, seeks to excel . . . [it turns] from the pursuit of the common good to one’s own individual good out of a destructive self love.\(^\text{137}\)

Markus explains:

‘Private’ and ‘sociable’ are two fundamentally opposed forms of loving: the one enclosing the self in its own narrowness, the other setting it free in
sharing it with others. These are the two opposed ‘loves’ which define the earthly and the heavenly Cities: the heavenly City is structured by mutual love and sharing, the earthly city by possessive individualism. . . .

Augustine tends to think of man’s evil impulses in terms of self-enclosure.\textsuperscript{138}

It is precisely the “evil impulses . . . of self-enclosure” that confession is intended to counter. Augustine insists, in other words, on putting the isolating and self-enclosing sin of pride into speech in order to reverse its isolating effects. While earthborn citizens are necessarily “turned towards themselves” and “self-pleasers” (\textit{DCD}, XIV.13) because they have no mechanism for dealing with their propensity toward self-enclosure, pilgrims are communally oriented. And, significantly, this communal orientation is a product of confession, for confession is a political force because it allows pilgrims to counter the otherwise privatizing and disruptive forces of sin. It is the only form of speech that moves “between men” because it is the only form of speech that is a product of a “sociable” love. Unlike profession which isolates and encloses, and unlike the \textit{verbum mentis} which is silent and runs between God and man, the confession “runs between men” and, as such, constitutes the very condition of politics.\textsuperscript{139}

It is, finally, worth noting that to refer to confession as self-expression would be, for Augustine, unthinkable. Thirteen centuries after Augustine, Rousseau will recalibrate confession and give it a relentlessly inward focus, but this recalibration is not simply an appropriation of the Augustinian \textit{confessio}, it is a complete rejection of it. For Augustine, the significance of confession derives from its outward focus, from its ability to
overcome the inward focus and self-interest of pride. Confession, for Augustine, is a means of getting beyond oneself. This is perhaps best seen in the magisterial Book 10 of *The Confessions*. Here Augustine turns from narrating his past history, to an attempt to confess “what I know about myself.” This attempt to reveal himself through speech quickly falters, for Augustine recognizes immediately that only the “Lord, who made [man], knows all things that are in him.” His attempt to confess what he knows about himself thus turns immediately to a different, more dependent project: “Let me confess also what I do not know about myself” (*Conf.*, 10.5.7). Throughout the remainder of Book 10, Augustine attempts to put himself into words, but finds himself continually frustrated at his inability to do so. This frustration reaches its apex in his famous consideration of memory. Augustine considers the faculty of memory to be the locus of the self: “There too I encounter myself and recall myself” (*Conf.*, 10.8.14). Yet he finds his memory so vast and unbounded that he cannot express its depths and thus he cannot articulate himself:

Great is the power of memory, exceeding great is it, O God, an inner chamber, vast and unbounded! Who has penetrated to its very bottom? Yet it is a power of my mind and belongs to my nature, and thus I do not comprehend all that I am. (*Conf.*, 10.8.15)

Augustine thus notes the difficulty of disclosing his self: “I labor upon myself. I have become for myself a soil hard to work and demanding much sweat” (*Conf.*, 10.16.25). He will not, however, cede the task: “Let me examine myself once again, and more diligently” (*Conf.*, 10.37.62). Yet this re-examination will fail, for Augustine ultimately
concludes that he is profoundly unable to confess his self: “I have become a riddle to myself (quaestio mihi factus sum), and that is my infirmity” (Conf., 10.33.50). But, if the infirmity is a riddled self, the remedy is a rhetorical practice—confession—that will take him outside of himself, for “this is where we achieve our ultimate integrity as persons, in the eye of God, from the outside.”¹⁴⁰
Notes


4 To my knowledge, no one has contextualized Augustine’s famous denunciations of rhetoric in the context of his critique of loquacity. This is surprising, for the denunciations of rhetoric are merely an episode in a much larger critique. It has, I believe, been this failure to contextualize Augustine’s denunciations of rhetoric that have led to so many misunderstandings.


6 Flores, "Reading and Speech in St. Augustine's Confessions," 2.Ibid.


9 Jamie Scott, for example, is trying to contain and limit the purported influence of the Augustinian confession by demonstrating antecedent practices of confession on which Augustine was dependent and by suggesting that the Augustinian confession should be properly understood in the context of Christian martyrdom (Scott, "FromLiteral Self-Sacrifice to Literary Self-Sacrifice,” 31-66).


15 Ibid.
The language of adaptation is Murphy’s (“Christianization,” 27).

Augustine himself seems to endorse this thesis: “When the Christian separates himself in spirit from their miserable society, he should take this treasure [the liberal disciplines] with him for the just use of teaching the gospel” (On Christian Doctrine, 2.40).

Hagendahl seems to assume that Augustine simply changed his mind between the disavowal of rhetoric in the Confessions and its re-affirmation in De doctrina Christiana. Although Augustine did change his mind on a number of substantial issues over the course of his writings (See Robert Markus, Saeculum: History and Society in the Theology of Augustine [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988]), James O’Donnell has argued that speech (loquax) is not one of them. James O’Donnell, Augustine: Confessions, 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 2:28.


21 In fact, Augustine defined “the world” (*saeculum*) precisely by its indivisibility. As I discuss below, the City of God and the City of Man are, in the world, irreducibly intertwined and indivisible.

22 The first articulation of this thesis is in Murphy’s “Saint Augustine and the Christianization of Rhetoric.” It is more fully explained in his *Rhetoric in the Middle Ages* and subsequently widely accepted. Troup explains this thesis in detail (Troup, *Temporality*, 11-35).


26 Murphy, "Christianization."


28 Sutherland, "Love as Rhetorical Principle: The Relationship between Content and Style in the Rhetoric of St. Augustine," 140.
For example, when Augustine encounters Cicero’s *Hortensius* he notes: “. . . nor did it impress me by its way of speaking but rather by what it spoke” (*Conf.*, 3.4.7). See also *Conf.*, 5.13.23 in which Augustine laments his early practices of listening to the preaching of Ambrose: “I hung eagerly on his words, but I remained uninterested in his subject matter.”

Cicero’s challenges the dichotomization of form and content in all three of his major works: *De inventione* 1.1.1, *De oratore* 1.4.20-22, and *Orator* 3.13-15 (Troup, *Temporality*, 17).


This pattern is remarkably consistent. Bathory, like Troup, claims that Augustine’s critique of rhetoric in *The Confessions* was directed against those who would divide form from content. He then finds Augustine’s contributions to rhetorical theory everywhere but *The Confessions*: *De Magistro, De doctrina Christiana*, and *De catechizandis rudibus*. Peter Bathory, *Political Theory as Public Confession: The Social and Political through of St. Augustine of Hippo* (New Brunswick: Transaction Books, 1981), 98, 101-109.

Augustine, *Ddc*, 11.


Heretic is used here as a historically descriptive term rather than a normative or evaluative term. Cf. Brown: “To an African Catholic, the Manichees were the ‘heretics’ par excellence” (Brown, Augustine, 43).


Vaught: “Augustine reserves his most sustained attack for the founder of the Manichean sect.” Vaught, Journey, 121.

O’Donnell, Saint Augustine, 2:27-8. In Augustine’s later writing, this fault will be the “pre-eminence flaw of Julian’s character” (Ibid.).

O’Donnell, Saint Augustine, 2:27.

Hereafter citations to the City of God will be given parenthetically using the Latin abbreviation DCD.


Lewis & Short Latin Dictionary. Available online.

“And so I fell in with certain men, doting in their pride, too carnal-minded and glib of speech, in whose mouth were the snares of the devil” (*Conf.* 3.6.10).


“Vanitas is linked with loquacitas at least 17X in [Augustine’s] works” (O’Donnell, *Augustine*, 2:27).

This association might find its most direct expression in Book XVI of *The City of God* in which Augustine considers the relationship between the faults of character that led to the tower of Babel and the attendant consequences for speech: “Since a ruler’s domination is wielded by his tongue, it was in that organ that his pride was condemned to punishment.”

“What else is love except a kind of life that binds, or seeks to bind, together some two things, namely the lover and the beloved” (*On The Trinity* 8.10.14). “Who can separate you from what you love” (*Conf.* 2.6.13)?


R.A. Markus, *Saeculum: History and Society in the Theology of Augustine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 60. The reduction from a “bewildering variety of loves” to two essential loves involved Augustine is some highly nuanced definitional games. For example, the love of ones neighbor is folded into the love of God because, to be technical, it is not the neighbor who is loved, but God in the neighbor. Arendt is particularly good on this point: “I do not love my neighbor in the concrete and worldly encounter with him. Rather, I love him in his createdness. I love something in him, that is, the very thing which, of himself, he is not.” Hannah Arendt, *Love and Saint Augustine*, eds. Joanna Vecchiarelli Scott and Judith Chelius Stark (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 95.
Markus, *Saeculum*, 68. And it must be said, Augustine himself provides some evidence of this very general distinction: “So much less does he love you who loves anything else” (*Conf.* 10.29.40).

“Perverse self-love, rooted in pride, is the basic disorder in the human self.” Markus, *Saeculum*, xviii. For Augustine’s account of the relationship of pride to self-love see *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, 11.15.19.

Thus Augustine describes the Manicheans, who for him are “swollen with pride” (self-love), thus: “They change your truth into a lie, and they worship and serve the creature rather than the creator” (*Conf.* 5.4.5).

On the point of the inevitability of the love for this world, Brown writes that “Augustine had come to expect the Christian to be aware of the tenacity of the links that would always bind him to this world” (Brown, *Augustine*, 324).

“Yet the force of love is so great that the mind draws in with itself those things upon which it has long reflected with love, and to which it has become attached by its devoted care, even when it returns in some way to think of itself” (*On The Trinity* 10.5.7).

Arendt explains: Through an improper independence “I lose the unity that holds me together by virtue of which I can say ‘I am.’ I thereby become dispersed in the manifoldness of the world and lost in the unending multiplicity of mundane data” (*Love and Saint Augustine*, 23).

Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, 1.3.3-4, 1.35.39.

Ibid., 1.35.39.
“The things which are to be enjoyed are the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit” (*On Christian Doctrine*, 1.5.5). “But if you cling to that delight and remain in it, making it the proper end of your rejoicing, then you may truly and properly be said to be enjoying it. And this kind of enjoyment should not be indulged except with reference to the Trinity, which is the highest good and immutable” (Ibid., 1.33.36). “Rest in him, and you will in truth have rest” (*Conf.* 4.12.18).

The proper way to “use” something to “enjoy” God is to “refer” all things to God: “For in order that a man may know how to love himself an end [God] has been established for him to which he is to refer all his action” (*DCD*, X.3). For Augustine, God is the *Summum Bonum* (highest good) “to which we refer all our actions, which we seek for its own sake, not for any ulterior end, and the attainment of which leaves us nothing more to seek for our happiness” (*DCD*, VIII.8). Brown: “[T]he word *referre*, ‘to refer’, or ‘relate’, is central to Augustine’s discussion of human activity; and for Augustine, of course, this human activity . . . can only reach fulfillment when it can take its place in a harmonious whole, where everything is in relation to God.” Peter Brown, "Saint Augustine," in *Trends in Medieval Political Thought*, ed. Beryl Smalley (New York: Barnes and Noble, Inc., 1965), 7.

“To know what a man’s disposition is in regard to a particular object, we need to know not only whether he loves it, but also, or rather, in what way he loves it” (*Markus, Saeculum, 66*).
“Therefore a love which strains after the possession of the loved object is desire (craving); and the love which possesses and enjoys that object is joy” (Augustine, DCD, XIV.7).

Arendt is particularly good on this aspect of Augustinian love (Love and Saint Augustine).

“And besides, if [a man] does love [the happy life] and possess it, he must needs love it more dearly than all other things, since everything else that he loves must be loved for the sake of the happy life. Again, if it is loved as much as it deserves to be loved the man who so loves it must inevitably wish it to be eternal. Therefore life will only be truly happy when it is eternal” (Augustine, DCD, XIV.25).

The goal toward which all loves aims is rest: “For the soul wishes to be and it loves to finds rest in things that it loves” (Augustine, Conf. 4.10.15).

“Many are miserable because they are in love with things that should not be loved, and they become even more miserable when they enjoy them” (Augustine, DCD, VIII.8).


“For then there shall be no more of this world, no more of the surgings and restlessness of human life, and it is this which is symbolized by the sea” (Augustine, DCD, XX.16).

Also: The civitas Dei is “on pilgrimage in this world as though in a flood” (Ibid., XV.26).

The notion of “clinging to God” is extremely important in Augustine’s thought. Although references to “clinging” pervade Augustine’s work, the concept receives its
most direct treatment in *The City of God* 12.1: “Therefore the correct reply to the question, ‘Why are the one sort happy?’ is ‘Because they cling to God’; and to ‘Why are those others wretched?’ the reply is, ‘Because they do not cleave to him.’”


The importance of resting in God might be judged from the sheer frequency with which Augustine confesses the changelessness of God. In *The Confessions*, changelessness is far and away God’s most important attribute and it was Augustine’s inability to conceive of this changelessness that for so long kept him from Christianity. See for example: 3.6.10; 4.11.16; 4.15.25; 7.4.6; 7.15.21; 7.20.26; 8.3.6; 10.5.7.

Augustine notes that when the self is distended through the love for the world, the human heart then “carries about throngs of vanity” (*Conf.* 10.35.57). O’Donnell suggests that vanity is characteristic of Augustine’s Manicheans throughout *The Confessions* (O’Donnell, *Augustine*, 2:296).


Although there is debate regarding the best translation, John K. Ryan’s translation is usually followed within Communication Studies. Calvin Troup suggests that Ryan’s translation does the best of adhering to the Latin.

Augustine, *St. Augustine’s Confessions*, 5.2.


John K. Ryan claims he is following the translation of Biggs.


See for example *Conf*. 7.17.23; 9.10.25; and 10.6.8-10.9.16.

For an overview of this debate see O’Donnell, *Augustine*, 3:133. The vast majority of Augustinian scholarship now sees Augustine moving gradually but consistently away from his early indebtedness to Plotinus, so that by the end of *The City of God* (finished in 426, only four years before his death) Augustine has largely abandoned neo-Platonism. The exception is the highly respectable Father Robert J. O’Connell who has argued with nearly everybody in order to defend his thesis that Augustine was, for the entirety of his life, explicable first and foremost as a neo-Platonist.

In *The City of God* Augustine notes that “clinging to God” is also understandable as an assent to the “heights” (*Augustine, DCD*, XVIII.18).

“For when God speaks to man in this way, he does not need the medium of any material created thing” (*Augustine, DCD*, XI.2).

Ibid., 410. “Truth, neither Hebrew nor Greek nor Latin nor barbaric in speech, without mouth or tongue as organ, and without the noise of syllables, would say to my, ‘He speaks the truth’” (*Conf.* 11.3.5).

Ibid., 409. The *verbum mentis* “precedes all the signs that signify it” (Ibid., 410).

“But when God speaks in the way we are talking of, he speaks by the direct impact of the truth, to anyone who is capable of hearing with the mind instead of with the ears of the body” (Augustine, *DCD*, XI.2).

Wisdom speaks “inwardly and soundlessly” (Augustine, *DCD*, XI.4).


See *The City of God* XIX.2 and XIX.19.

“But there can be no doubt that the world was not created in time, but with time. . . . At the time of creation there could have been no past, because there was nothing created to provide the change and movement which is the condition of time” (Augustine, *DCD*, XI.6).

Chapters 6 and 7 of Book 11 are dedicated to the timelessness of the *verbum mentis*. “So you call us to understand the Word . . . which is spoken eternally, and in which all things are spoken eternally. Nor is it the case that what was spoken is ended and another thing is said, so that all things may at length be said: all things are spoken once and
forever. Elsewise there would already be time and change” (Conf. 11.7.9). See also
10.6.5: “[God] utters words that time does not speed away.”

98 “Heaven and earth and all things in them . . . say to me that I should love you. They do not cease from saying this to all men” (Augustine, Conf., 10.5.7). Here Augustine describes the verbum mentis (non-material and non-audible speech) as endless.

99 Markus, Saeculum, 59. In one particularly harsh passage Augustine notes that the citizens of the civitas terrena were “created . . . to mark the contrast between the two mutually opposed cities” (Augustine, DCD, XVII.11, emphasis mine).

100 “I classify the human race into two branches: the one consists of those who live by human standards, the other of those who live according to God’s will. I call these two classes two cities . . . . By two cities I mean two societies of human beings, one of which is to predestined to reign with God for all eternity, the other doomed to undergo eternal punishment with the Devil” (Augustine, DCD, XV.1).

101 Immediately following the quotation in the above note Augustine says: “But this is their final destiny.” By this caveat he is emphasizing that his firm and unambiguous distinctions between the “two branches” of humans are relevant only when Jesus returns again to earth—they are not political categories and they are not relevant until the so-called “second coming of Christ” (Augustine, DCD, XV.1).

102 See also DCD, XVIII.54: The two cities “are mingled together from the beginning to the end of their history.”

“In fact from the time of Noah, who with his wife and his three sons and their wives was found worthy to be rescued from the devastation of the Flood by means of the ark, we do not find, until the time of Abraham, anyone whose devotion is proclaimed by any statement in the inspired scriptures” (Augustine, *DCD*, XVI.1).

“To the historical careers of the two cities only the Scriptures supply the clues. Beyond this human conjecture runs into the sand, being impotent in the face of the mystery hidden in God” (Markus, *Saeculum*, 63).


For evidence of this ambivalence see, in particular, *DCD*, V.13, in which Augustine argues that love of glory is “a vice that counts as a virtue.”

Augustine gives different reasons for the fall of Rome, but all are political and not religious. In Book III Augustine contends that the Roman Empire collapsed because of insufficient civic engagement. He quotes Sallust approvingly: “Men were not entitled good or bad citizens in regard to their services to the commonwealth, in this general corruption; but any man was classed as a good citizen, in proportion as his resources increased his power to hurt, and in so far as he championed the existing state of things” (qtd. in *DCD*, III.17). It was this refusal to speak out against corruption, Augustine concludes, that led to the fall of Rome. In Book V Augustine contends that the Roman Empire fell because power was not checked by glory. In what is a basic re-articulation of
classical political theory Augustine describes glory as the political virtue *par excellence*: “What else was there for them to love save glory? For, through glory, they desired to have a kind of life after death on the lips of those who praised them” (Augustine, *DCD*, V.13). When Augustine attributes the fall of the Roman Empire to a failing of glory, he is suggesting that the Empire collapsed for political reasons.

Markus claims that Augustine never elaborated his political theory “beyond the bare indications that its realm is that in which the two ‘cities’ overlap”: the *saeculum* (Markus, *Saeculum*, 104).


Markus, *Saeculum*, 104.

“In truth such men are vile in character; they fornicate against you out of love for passing, temporary trifles . . . and by embracing a *fleeting world*” (Augustine, *Conf.*, 5.12.22, emphasis mine).

“[S]uch is the instability of human affairs that no people has ever been allowed such a degree of tranquility as to remove all dread of hostile attacks on their life in this world. That place, then, which is promised as a dwelling of such peace and security is eternal” (Augustine, *DCD*, XVII.13).


Augustine is insistent that in the *saeculum* “the mind of man . . . is too weak to cleave to that changeless light and to enjoy it” (Augustine, *DCD*, XI.2).
See also: “God’s City lives in this world’s city, as far as its human element is concerned; but it lives there as an alien sojourner” (Augustine, DCD, XVIII.1).

“[T]he dividing-line between the two ‘cities’ is invisible, because it involves each man’s capacity to love what he loves” (Brown, Augustine, 322).

This contra Markus who suggests that the citizens of the earthly city in this world are just as much pilgrims as are the citizens of the civitas Dei. Markus is driven to this position by his insistence that Augustine’s cities will only be divided at the end of time. To my mind, this position seems to ignore the fact that the saeculum will be experienced differently for the members of the two cities: as a home for the citizens of the civitas terrena and as a foreign land for citizens of the civitas Dei.


“[I]t is in hope that the City of God lives, during its pilgrimage on earth, that City which is brought into being by faith in Christ’s resurrection.” Further: The City of God “lives not by the standards of men, in the present enjoyment of earthly happiness, but by God’s standards, in the hope of eternal felicity” (Augustine, DCD, XV.18).

Brown, Augustine, 323-4.

Elshtain, Augustine and the Limits of Politics, 96.

In fact, Augustine is quite explicit that the common object of love does not need to be loved in the same degree by all who are brought into community by it. The earthly city “was linked together by a kind of fellowship based on a common nature, although each group pursued its own advantages and sought the gratification of its own desires” (*DCD* XVIII.2).

“The people constituting a *res publica* are agreed in valuing certain things; they need not be agreed in valuing them on identical scales of value, still less do they need to be agreed on the objects upon which they set supreme value. The *res publica* will inevitably embrace among its members people with a variety of different ultimate allegiances” (Markus, *Saeculum*, 69).

This *pace* Arendt. Rowan Williams characterizes Arendt’s take on Augustine: “The *civitas Dei* is a substitute for the public realm and thus its enemy.” Rowan Williams, "Politics and the Soul: A Reading of the *City of God*," *Milltown Studies* 19, no. 20 (1987): 57.

Markus, *Saeculum*, 70.

This is Elshtain’s phrase.


Ibid., 101-2.

“With what profit I may confess to you, I have already said. Nor do I do this with bodily words and sounds but with words uttered by the soul and with outcry of thought, of which your ear has knowledge. . . . Hence my confession is made in silence before you, My God” (*Conf*. 10.2.2).
133 *Conf.*, 1.5.6; 5.3.3; 10.1.1


135 In *The City of God* “change and movement” are the “condition of time” (*DCD*, XI.6).

136 “Let them be converted, and behold, you are there within their hearts, within the hearts of those who confess to you, and cast themselves upon you . . . .” (Augustine, *Conf.*, 5.2.2).


139 For Augustine’s version of the relationship between speech and politics, see *The City of God*, XIX.7.

140 Taylor, *Sources* 390.
Chapter Two

Jean-Jacques Rousseau: The Language of Confession and the Politics of Expressivism

“It is impossible for a people to remain free and speak that [the French] language.”
--Jean-Jacques Rousseau

The Confessions of Jean-Jacques Rousseau begins with the historically false claim that his project “has no model and will have no imitator.” In fact, however, Rousseau has had scores of imitators and a few important models. Not only was he reading Augustine’s Confessions immediately prior to the composition of his own, he was also familiar with the autobiographical works of Montaigne and Cardano—and indeed he refers to these works twice in his Confessions. Why then this claim for singularity? Rousseau suggests that all previous autobiographical writings were simply “ingenious fictions,” hagiographies intended to buttress the reputations of writers who preferred to shine brilliantly rather than be known truthfully (Cf. 643). These auto-panegyrics could be called “histories, lives, portraits, character sketches”—anything and everything but confessions (Cf. 643). Rousseau strictly polices the boundaries of the confession and his claim for the singularity of his work indicates his conviction that his historical predecessors and future imitators in confessive writing share one decisive characteristic: they each fail to meet the obligations of the form.

This failure is, for Rousseau, best illustrated by the Essays of Montaigne: “I had always laughed at the false naivety of Montaigne, who, while pretending to confess his faults, is very careful only to give himself lovable ones” (Cf. 505). Thus although
Montaigne pretends to confess, Rousseau insists that his *Essays* instead “offer an apology; he presents himself as he wants to be seen, not at all how he is” (*Cf.* 644). Montaigne’s would-be confessions, then, are compromised by posturing; they acknowledge only his “lovable” faults and are better understood as *apologia* rather than confession. Rousseau concludes that if Montaigne does provide a portrait of his life, it is a likeness painted in “profile”—“who knows if some scar on the cheek or a missing eye on the side he keeps hidden from us would not totally have changed his physiognomy” (*Cf.* 644)?

In sharp contrast to the “ingenious fictions” of his predecessors, Rousseau insists that his own confessions will be marked by a “veracity for which there is no model” (*Cf.* 505). Over and over again Rousseau proclaims that his *Confessions* will display the entirety of his inner self—even when that self is “contemptible and vile” (*Cf.* 5). He demands that no part of his self “remain hidden or obscure”; his *Confessions* display every “aberration of [the] heart” and “every recess of [his] life” (*Cf.* 58). In the sharpest possible distinction to the profiling of Montaigne, Rousseau maintains that the singularity of his own portrait derives from its comprehensive truthfulness; he refuses to obscure his own physiognomy through strategic posturing: “I should like to make my mind, as it were, transparent to the reader, and I am therefore trying to display it from every angle, to show it in every light, and to ensure that there is no movement taking place within it that he does not observe” (*Cf.* 170). It is difficult to overstate the value Rousseau accords to this complete transparency. Peter Brooks writes, “The notion of transparency is vital to Rousseau, whose desire to abolish all veils between himself and his readers is a repeated motif in the *Confessions*.”6 Brooks, however, understates the centrality of transparency;
not only is transparency a leitmotif of the *Confessions*, it is also and more importantly the
standard by which Rousseau polices the boundaries of the confession:

> I will speak the truth; I will do so unreservedly; I will tell everything; the
good, the bad, everything, in short. *I will fulfill meticulously the terms of my title*;
ever did the most pious lady, filled with mortal fear, undergo a
more thorough examination of conscience than that for which I am
preparing myself, never did she display the innermost recesses of her soul
more scrupulously to her confessor than I will do in displaying mine to the
public. (*Cf.* 647; emphasis mine)

Unreserved truthfulness, every last commendable and condemnable fact of Rousseau’s
life put into speech, everything spoken—these are the conditions by which Rousseau
fulfills meticulously the standards of the confession and thus concludes that his
autobiography is nothing less than “the history of my soul, *to be precise, my confessions*”
(*Cf.* 648; emphasis mine). It is this precision that interests me here; Rousseau insists that
his autobiography, unlike the pretended confessions of Montaigne, meets the exacting
standards he has set for the confession. This explains Rousseau’s claim for the singularity
of his *Confessions*: never has an autobiographer been so truthful, so unreserved in the
writing of a life, so meticulous in the pursuit of transparency that the work may, precisely
speaking, be called a confession. Because Rousseau discloses, with equal candor, the
praiseworthy and blameworthy incidents of his life, he is “not afraid that the reader will
forget for a moment that *it is my confessions* that I am offering, and conclude that it is my
apology” (*Cf.* 270; emphasis mine). Such a conclusion would be mistaken; Rousseau
insists that his autobiography is “a confession, not a justification” (Cf. 349). In other words, what Rousseau believed was without precedent and would be forever without imitation was his complete satisfaction of the demanding obligations that attend public confession; the singularity of his achievement lies in the fulfillment of a rhetorical form—his autobiography would be the only autobiography that is also a confession.

Rousseau, then, is not simply writing his confessions, he is, in his own self-understanding, inventing the genre of confessions. Or, more accurately, he is redefining the genre so radically that he can claim his is the only work that merits the title “Confessions.” Like Augustine, Rousseau understood himself to be involved in the invention and deployment of a new rhetorical form:

To say what I have so say would require me to invent a language as new as my project; for what tone, what style could I adopt that would disentangle this vast chaos of sentiments, so diverse, so contradictory, often so vile, at times so sublime, and by which I have been so ceaselessly agitated? (Cf. 647; emphasis mine)

The task of the Confessions is a rhetorical task; Rousseau needs to “invent” a language capable of meeting the exacting standards of confession. Peter France puts it this way: as Rousseau wrote his Confessions he “had to appear totally sincere, not a performing writer but a man baring his soul. He was conscious of the great difficulty of the undertaking; this lay not only in choosing what to write and what to omit, but equally in finding a way of writing about it.”7
In this chapter, I suggest that the language Rousseau “invented” is expressivism; he turned confession into a speaking-of-the-inner-self. Confession is no longer, as it was for Augustine, a speaking-of-transgression; nor is it, as it was for Montaigne, an apologia; confession is here, for the first time, wholly dedicated to self-expression. Confession is now predicated upon a “thorough examination of conscience” and is dedicated to the display of “the innermost recesses of [the] soul.” It is defined precisely against the posturing and strategizing so characteristic of Montaigne; such posturing indicates a calculativeness incompatible with the demands of sheer transparency. Confession is, for Rousseau, wholly expressive: it is valid only to the degree that it expresses the inner self without modification or adaptation. To be sure, Rousseau’s insistence that his Confessions is not a work of strategic self-defense has not prevented scholars from reaching a near-unanimous decision to the contrary. Rousseau scholar Christopher Kelly, for example, writes, “It is impossible to deny either the personal character of the work or that public attacks on Rousseau’s character from people like Hume and Voltaire spurred him on.”  

R.J. Ellrich agrees, labeling the period of Rousseau’s life between the 1760 and 1776 (the period in which the Confessions was written) as the “apologetic period.” Despite the surety of the fact that Rousseau was writing in self-defense, however, it is the counter-factual ideal of pure expressivism that determines his redefinition of confession. And, if we are to understand the Rousseauian confession, it is to this counter-factual ideal that we must attend. Moreover, if Peter Brooks and Charles Taylor are to be trusted, it is precisely the counter-factual ideal of expressivism that has been incredibly influential in shaping modern conceptions of confession.
In this chapter, then, I explore the rhetorical and political contours of Rousseauian expressivism. Rousseau believed that expressivism was an integral rhetorical and political practice. Rhetorically speaking, Rousseau believed that speech was inexorably declining into silence and expressivism was the last, best hope for saving speech. Unlike the conventional practices of speech, which Rousseau believed isolated his contemporaries from one another, the decisive characteristic of expressivism was its capacity for achieving a “transparent communication between mind and mind.” It is precisely this capacity for unhindered transparency that rendered expressivism Rousseau’s language of confession par excellence. Politically speaking, Rousseau believed that the inexorable decline of speech was concomitant with a decline of political freedom. Reflecting on the calculative, strategic, and posturing rhetorical practices of eighteenth-century Paris, Rousseau concluded that “it is impossible for a people to remain free and speak that [the French] language.” The development of expressivism, then, was not simply Rousseau’s attempt to save language from silence by deploying a language of perfect transparency, it was also his attempt to secure and preserve political freedom.

In this chapter I argue that, despite Rousseau’s insistence to the contrary, expressivism undermines political freedom because it compromises the faculty of judgment and falsely naturalizes political events. That is to say, although Rousseau’s Confessions are, in many ways, a catalogue of his political mistakes and errors in judgment, expressivism naturalizes these mistakes and errors by suggesting that they are simply a product of Rousseau’s inner nature. And, as a product of his human nature rather than his questionable decision-making, these political mistakes shed their political
character and assume instead the false veneer of nature. And, with this veneer, they assume an unquestionableness, a givenness, a normalness—in short, a naturalness—that protects them from judgment and suggests that Rousseau, although he may be the perpetrator of these deeds, is in no sense responsible for them; for the deeds are as natural as Rousseau himself. In this chapter, I aim not so much to expose the contingent and political character of Rousseau’s misdeeds, as to critique the rhetorical practice—expressivism—which would naturalize those misdeeds in the first place.

In the first section, “Transportation and Transparency,” I suggest that Rousseau’s language of confession (expressivism) must be calibrated to express what Rousseau refers to as the “moral sentiments,” the powerful emotions which Rousseau can only compare to intoxication, rapture, and transport. In the second section, “The Language of Confession,” I provide a reading of Rousseau’s *Essay on the Origin of Languages* to explain why Rousseau believed that only expressivism, and not speech, was able to communicate the moral sentiments. In the third section, “Expressivism as a Rhetorical Form,” I explain the rhetorical contours of expressivism and argue that expressivism is diametrically opposed to classical notions of speech. Finally, in the fourth section, “The ‘Melodious Language of Freedom’ and the Politics of Expressivism,” I return to the *Confessions* and argue that expressivism undermines the possibility of democratic politics by naturalizing transgressions and precluding political judgment.
Transportation and Transparency

For all Rousseau’s talk of unreserved truthfulness, even a cursory reading of the *Confessions* reveals that Rousseau is not unreservedly truthful. Rousseau admits as much; he concedes that his composition process involved the selection—and thus the deflection—of events in his life: “a single example chosen from a thousand will permit the reader to judge for himself” (*Cf*. 455). Yet, to Rousseau’s mind, the omission of the nine-hundred and ninety-nine events does not compromise his pursuit of transparency. What is more, even if the single example was misstated, transparency is still not threatened.

I may make factual omissions, transpositions, errors in dates; but I cannot be mistaken about what I felt, nor about what my feelings led me to do; and this is what principally concerns me here. The particular object of my confessions is to make known my inner self, exactly as it was in every circumstance of my life. (*Cf*. 270)

Historical omissions or factual mistakes are inconsequential for Rousseau; they are unrelated to his project of articulating his inner self. Rousseau placed so little importance on factual history that even when he realized his *Confessions* contained factual errors, he felt no compulsion to correct them. This disregard for the historicity of his own life is not, at least to Rousseau’s mind, inconsistent with his desire for transparency. He believes that his self exists, as it were, prior to and behind his own history. Indeed, in the Preface to the *Second Discourse* he suggests that the processes of history obscure rather than clarify the human self:
And how will man manage to see himself as nature formed him, though all the changes that the sequence of time and things must have produced in his original constitution, and to separate what he gets from his own stock from what circumstances and his progress have added to or changed in his primitive state.\textsuperscript{14}

Although the self disclosed in the \textit{Confessions} is a far cry from the “natural self” described in the \textit{Second Discourse}, both texts proceed by purporting to separate the historical circumstances of life from the substance of the self. Rousseau is so convinced that historical or circumstantial mistakes pose no threat to his search for transparency that, when he discovered such mistakes prior the publication of his \textit{Confessions}, he did not even consider them worth revising—he was apparently convinced that misstated facts would not affect the portrait he was drawing.\textsuperscript{15} Ann Hartle concludes that if Rousseau was trying to provide a historical narrative of his life, his \textit{Confessions} must surely be considered a failure.\textsuperscript{16}

Hartle argues, however, that the \textit{Confessions} is not a failure, for “Rousseau is not identifying the truth about himself with accuracy about the ‘objective’ data of his life.”\textsuperscript{17} If Rousseau is unconcerned with his life in its historicity, he is “principally concerned” with his feelings. Here the \textit{Confessions} depart from the \textit{Second Discourse}. In the \textit{Second Discourse}, the passions, along with circumstances, obscure the natural self which Rousseau seeks.\textsuperscript{18} In the \textit{Confessions}, his self is intractably connected with his passions.\textsuperscript{19} Indeed, in sharp distinction to his uncertainty regarding the facticity of his life, Rousseau believes that he “cannot be mistaken” about his feelings. Moreover, it is
these feelings that “principally concern” him and form the “particular object” of his
*Confessions*. Immediately following his introduction, Rousseau’s first confessive
sentence declares the primacy of the affections: “I had feelings before I had thoughts: that
is the common lot of humanity” *(Cf. 8).* 20 These feelings must form the “particular
object” of his confessions, for whereas the objective facts of life provide insight only into
history, the feelings provide an index to moral truths. 21 If Rousseau, then, neglects the
historicity of his life, he pays particular attention to the affections, for it is only through
the affections that Rousseau will be able to discover his truest self. Rousseau suggests
that if one were to die without encountering situations that incite the “sensibilities of the
heart,” one would “feel nothing and would die without having known his true self” *(Cf.102).* Starobinski writes of Rousseau: “[H]is existence seems to him to consist of a
sequence not of thoughts but of feelings, a ‘train of secret emotions.’” 22 Rousseau
himself suggests that his *Confessions* must reveal the “aberrations of [his] heart” *(Cf. 58)*
and he concludes that he “would not be fulfilling the purpose of this book if I did not . . .
reveal my own innermost feelings” *(Cf. 84).* 23 It is the affections that must be rendered
transparent.

To claim that Rousseau’s *Confessions* reveal his “innermost feelings,” however, is
insufficiently precise. In the *Second Discourse*, Rousseau distinguishes the “natural
sentiments” from the “moral sentiments.” The natural sentiments are “physical,” rooted
in human biology; they are, moreover, “calm” and relatively “inactive.” Rousseau’s
example *par excellence* of the natural sentiments is “pity”—man’s “innate repugnance to
see his fellow man suffer.” Rousseau emphasizes the naturalness of pity; it is “innate,”
“mechanical,” and it “precedes . . . the use of all reflection.” 24 To understand Rousseau’s
“moral sentiments,” it is important to first understand Rousseau’s unique definition of morality. For Rousseau, morality is always understood in opposition to the physical relations characteristic of the state of nature: “I conceive of two sorts of inequality in the human species: one, which I call natural or physical, because it is established by nature . . . the other, which may be called moral or political inequality, because it depends upon a sort of convention . . . .” The moral sentiments, then, are not natural; they are political, they are “born in society.” Rousseau’s primary example of the moral sentiments is “vanity” (amour-propre), the inclination to hold oneself in “greater esteem” than anyone else. Vanity is neither mechanical nor instinctual; it requires “reflection” and “comparison.” It is best understood as a sustained and acutely felt anxiety over how one is perceived by others. Unlike the calm of pity, vanity and the moral sentiments more generally are “violent” and a source of “torment.”

In the Confessions, it is the moral sentiments that Rousseau seeks to communicate. Here it is important to remember that in the Confessions, unlike the Second Discourse, Rousseau is not attempting to disclose the self as it existed in the state of nature. He is, rather, disclosing his own self and his own sentiments, the tumultuousness of which bespeaks the extent to which Rousseau is, despite himself, a product of society and not the state of nature. Indeed, the intensity of his emotional reactions to the various situations in his life forms the dominant leitmotif of the entire Confessions. Rousseau is unable to control the intensity of his emotional reactions; he is incapable of moderation; his heart “cannot give itself by halves” (Cf. 602).

The moral sentiments overwhelm Rousseau. Even the “most trivial” movements of the heart “affected me as powerfully as if their object were the possession of Helen or
of the loftiest throne in the world” (Cf. 214). Rousseau does not so much possess passions as his passions possess him. He regularly confesses a certain helplessness and powerlessness over the emotions that take hold of him.28 Consider, for example, Rousseau’s description of a kiss from Mme d’Houdetot:

I need not dwell on the agitation, the trembling, the palpitations, the convulsions, nor the swoonings I experienced continually. . . . This kiss alone, this fateful kiss, even before I had received it, fired my blood to the point where my mind was in turmoil, my dazzled eyes were blinded, my trembling knees would no longer carry me; I was forced to stop, to sit down; my whole system was in a state of unimaginable disorder. (Cf. 435)

I cite this passage only as an example. Rousseau regularly recounts such experiences; his Confessions is little more than a catalogue of similarly described overpowering emotional experiences. These experiences of emotional transport are often occasioned by the most menial of events; Ellrich explains the phenomenology of reading Rousseau: “[O]ne has the impression of a dream in which powerful emotions are unleashed by rationally inconsequential events.”29 However inconsequential the events which unleash his passions may be, the power of the passions are remarkable. Rousseau argues that the experience of the passions “transports” him (Cf. 27), “completely consumes” him (Cf. 38), “devours” him (Cf. 40), “enraptures” him (Cf. 51), “electrifies” him (Cf. 132), and “intoxicates” him (Cf. 104). They are as powerful and all-consuming as sexual orgasm (Cf. 66)—they leave him “weak, wearied, spent, scarcely able to stand” (Cf. 435). As I hope is becoming clear, it is difficult to overstate both the intensity and consistency with
which Rousseau is overpowered by emotion. He resorts to the eighteenth-century vocabulary of the sublime to describe the experience of the moral sentiments: he is transported and consumed, enraptured and intoxicated. And, most importantly, it is this transport that Rousseau must render transparent.

The reference to the sublime is telling. Given the intensity of the moral sentiments, how are they to be described? How could the language of confession possibly convey the tumultuous—and seemingly ineffable—moral sentiments? Starobinski explains that Rousseau believes that what he “says almost never corresponds to what he truly feels: words elude him, and he eludes his words.”

Given this anxiety grounded in the elusiveness of words, it is perhaps not surprising that Rousseau is, throughout the *Confessions*, keenly attuned to the relationship between the moral sentiments on one hand and, on the other hand, speech and writing. In various philosophical essays, Rousseau drew on Plato’s *Phaedrus* in order to make distinctions between speech and writing. In the *Confessions*, however, the distinction between speech and writing is far less important than the relationship of both of these language arts to the moral sentiments. Indeed, in the *Confessions*, as we shall see, Rousseau at times intentionally conflates the distinctions between speech and writing in order to foreground the more important relationship between language in general and the moral sentiments. Despite his equivocations on the distinctions between speech and writing, however, he remains insistent on one thing: both speech and writing find their value in their relationship to the moral sentiments. This relationship between the moral sentiments and the language arts is important to attend to in some detail, as it has much to teach about Rousseau’s language of confession.
The experience of transport, Rousseau claims, is so powerful that in its wake he can hardly think, let alone speak. “Feelings burst upon me like lightning and fill my soul; but instead of illuminating, they burn and dazzle me. I feel everything and see nothing. I am transported yet stupid; to be able to think, I need to be composed” (Cf. 110). This inability to think, Rousseau continues, manifests itself in an inability to speak or write. He claims that the “impetuosity of feeling” undermines his capability to have a conversation and even his ability to write: “I could not write a word” (Cf. 111). The essential quietude and speechlessness of emotional transport is a topos that recurs throughout the Confessions. When Rousseau is caught gazing at Mme Basile through an open door, he finds himself transported with emotion and unable to speak: “[M]y vision became clouded, my chest constricted, my breathing at every moment became more labored and more difficult to control, while all I could do was exhale noiseless and awkward sighs into the silence in which we often found ourselves” (Cf. 72; emphasis mine). When he sees his friend D’Alembert, just released from prison, he is likewise overtaken with emotion and rendered mute: “I had eyes only for him: and with one bound, one cry, I was clasping him in my arms, with my face pressed against his, speechless except for the tears and sobs that spoke on my behalf” (Cf. 341; emphasis mine). The experience of transport, then, overwhelms the faculty of speech and reduces Rousseau to noiseless and awkward sighs.31

But time passes, the emotions subside, and as they subside they eventuate in speech rather than noiseless sighs. “Imperceptibly, the great movement subsides, order succeeds chaos, everything finds its proper place.” And, as everything finds its place, Rousseau finds the words that had escaped him in the height of passion; a “delightful
spectacle” emerges from the “tumult” of his passions. This emergence of delight from tumult, Rousseau concedes, is “more or less what goes on in my head when I am trying to write” (Cf. 111). “If only I had learnt to wait, and only afterwords to render in all their beauty the things I had seen in my mind’s eye, few writers would have surpassed me” (Cf. 111). Just as the emotions first overpowered the faculty of speech, they then, if Rousseau is willing to wait, provide so delightful an inspiration that Rousseau can count himself nearly unsurpassed among writers.

It is then not surprising that when Rousseau talks about his career as a writer, his writings are always the products of emotional transport. It is for this reason that Rousseau turned down the opportunity to be a regular contributor to the prestigious *Journal des Savants*. The post would have provided much-needed income, but it would have required him to write without passionate inspiration: “My indifference towards these things would have frozen my pen and dulled my wits. People thought that I could write to prescription, like other men of letters, instead of which I could only ever write from passion” (Cf. 502). At times it seems that Rousseau means this quite literally; the transports of passion are the condition *sin qua non* of speech: “When moved by passion, I can sometimes find words for what I need to say; but in ordinary conversation I can find nothing, nothing at all” (Cf. 35). When Rousseau, then, claims that he can only “write from passion,” he seems to mean that without passion there is quite literally nothing to say—at least nothing worthy of speech.

Consider, for example, Rousseau’s account of his “conversion” on the road to Vincennes. He was reading the newspaper as he walked along the road and “happened upon” a question posed by the Academy of Dijon: “Has the progress of the sciences and
arts contributed to the corruption or the purification of morals” (Cf. 341-2). This question incited his passions and, with them, his pen:

The moment I read these words I saw another universe and I became another man. . . . I was in a state of agitation bordering on delirium. . . . My feelings, with incredible rapidity, had soon risen to the same pitch of fervour as my ideas. All my little passions were stifled by my enthusiasm for truth, for liberty, for virtue, and, what is most surprising of all, this ferment continued unabated in my heart for four or five years at as high a degree of intensity as it ever has, perhaps, in the heart of any other man. I went about writing this essay in a very singular fashion and one that I have almost always followed in my other works. (Cf. 342; emphasis mine)\(^{32}\)

Indeed, when Rousseau talks about the composition of his other works, he consistently notes the emotional transports that inspired them: “[W]hen I wrote [Julie] I was in ecstasies of the most burning passion” (Cf. 535). Further, Rousseau attributes the success of his early works to an intoxication of virtue that left him in a state of “ferment” for nearly six years (Cf. 407).\(^{33}\) Finally, the Confessions themselves would be impossible were they not inspired by the sweet transport of the passions. He claims repeatedly that in writing his Confessions, his “chain of feelings” is the “one faithful guide upon which I can rely” (Cf. 270). For without this “chain of feelings,” Rousseau would have nothing to say.
This conviction that speech must be tethered to the moral sentiments had, for Rousseau, very practical consequences: it meant that the content and well as the style of his speech could not be judged by the standards of society. Thus Rousseau consistently excuses the haphazard organization of his *Confessions* on the grounds that he can only follow his feelings: “My narrative can no longer proceed except haphazardly and according to whatever ideas return to my mind” (*Cf.* 608). Because Rousseau’s words are legitimized only insofar as they the product of such emotional intoxications, he cannot be held accountable to such standards as order, logic, and arrangement—standards external to the passions which authorize speech in the first place. Likewise Rousseau asserts that his panegyric that prefigures the *Second Discourse* must be excused from societal conventions: “If I were unfortunate enough to be guilty of some indiscreet excess in this lively effusion of my heart, I beg you to pardon it as the tender affection of a true patriot.” Speech is here the outpouring—effusing—of the heart, and such speech cannot be subjected social conventions.

It is not surprising, then, that Rousseau’s most overt condemnations of speech are for speech that that is beholden to the mores of society rather than the dictates of the moral sentiments. He deplores the social conventions that demand speech divorced from passion: “Nothing so narrows the mind and the spirit, nothing generates more triviality, gossip, slander, teasing and lies than to be eternally shut up in a room with lot of other people, reduced . . . to the necessity of chattering continually” (*Cf.* 197). The necessity of chatter derives from the “imperative to talk” that society places on people who have nothing to say because they are unmoved by the moral sentiments, inactive, in a word, “idle.” Such idle people would be better off silent. Rousseau notes that the obligation to
speak is a form of social control: it is “of all forms of constraint the most uncomfortable” 
(*Cf. 197*). Speech divorced from passion produces “an unstoppable flow of words,” for words are, in their divorce from passion, rendered autonomous; there exists no principle by which they might be constrained (*Cf. 198*). Rousseau’s critique of autonomous speech recurs at numerous places throughout the *Confessions*. For example, “I was soon so infatuated with the opera that, annoyed at having to chatter, eat, and play cards in a box, when all I wanted to do was listen” (*Cf. 305*). Note that here speech is associated with eating and playing cards because, like these other activities, it is unconnected from the passion of listening to the opera. This disdain for dispassionate speech reaches its apex in Book Twelve. Rousseau is confident that the liveliness of his imagination will prevent his retirement as a writer from eventuating in boredom. Rousseau will not mind giving up his livelihood as a producer of speech; he would, however, be bored to tears if he was forced to continue to produce speech apart from the passion that once excited his pen:

> It is only the idle chatter of the salon, with everybody sitting opposite everybody else and exercising nothing but their tongues, that I have never been able to endure. . . . [T]o sit there, arms crossed, discussing the weather and the flies, or, worse still, exchanging compliments, that to me is an intolerable torture. (*Cf. 587-8*)

It is not the necessity to speak, in itself, that raises the ire of Rousseau, but rather the fact that particular social situations (such as the salon) force him to do nothing but speak, to produce an “unstoppable flow of words,” to speak without inspiration and thus without the guidance of the moral sentiments.
Expressivism, the language confession which Rousseau must invent to render himself transparent, then, must be a language that draws on and expresses the moral sentiments. This is true for two reasons. First, because the moral sentiments are the content of Rousseau’s life which demand expression, and second because speech itself is only legitimate to the extent that it is understood in terms of the moral sentiments. What are the marks and contours of such a language? For this task we turn to Rousseau’s *Essay on the Origin of Languages*, a text in which Rousseau notes the differences between passionate and dispassionate speech.

**The Language of Confession**

Rousseau directly addresses the relationship of the moral sentiments and language in his posthumously published *Essay on the Origin of Languages*. The *Essay* is fantastic; philosopher Newton Garver notes that it “is probably the most outrageous thing [Rousseau] ever wrote, and one of the least plausible of the numerous general treatises on language in the history of western thought.” Among other outrageous ideas advanced in the *Essay*, Rousseau suggests that regional differences in speech are reducible to the climatic differences between regions and, even more preposterously, that a language of gesture would be “sufficient to establish societies little different from those we have.” As a historical document the *Essay* is an unquestionable failure; Garver notes that Rousseau’s account of the gradual emergence of linguistic competencies is so implausible that it doesn’t even merit scientific evaluation. If the *Essay* does not merit scientific evaluation, however, it has received volumes of critical attention. Derrida made
the *Essay* the centerpiece of both his *Of Grammatology* and the entirety of Western metaphysics, Jean Starobinski’s groundbreaking *Jean-Jacques Rousseau* uses the *Essay* as an interpretive lens through which to view the entirety of Rousseau’s corpus, and nearly every scholarly attempt to understand the importance Rousseau places on discursive practices engages the *Essay.*

Why such notable attention for so fantastic an essay? It is perhaps because the *Essay* seeks to articulate the origins and distinctive markers of a speech capable of accomplishing the “fantasy of communication” mentioned at the outset. Derrida writes of the *Essay*, “The ideal profoundly underlying [Rousseau’s] philosophy of writing is therefore the image of a community immediately present to itself, without difference, a community of speech where all the members are within earshot” (136; emphasis mine). The *Essay*, then, adumbrates a form of speech so intimately connected to the moral sentiments that it has the capability to accomplish the transparency for which Rousseau longs. This form of speech, then, will be the language which Rousseau must “invent” if he is to confess; it is the language of confession. If Rousseau’s *Essay* is dedicated to adumbrating a form of speech sufficient for the transparent communion of minds, however, Derrida’s *Of Grammatology* counters by emphasizing the primacy of “differance”—a concept by which Derrida argues that the very language which would achieve transparent communion actually precludes it. For Derrida, the *Essay* must ultimately be dismissed as a profound but ultimately misguided attempt to achieve communion through communication—profound because it provides an original reformulation of the Platonic critique of rhetoric as dissimulation, misguided because this formulation depends for its success on the suppression of *differance.* Insofar as the
The essay does attempt to suppress *differance*; it is surely misguided. It is equally misleading, however, to assume that once the essay has been exposed as a naïve attempt to suppress *differance* there remains no further reason to read the essay.\(^{45}\) I approach the essay in order to elucidate the particular characteristics of Rousseau’s language of confession—characteristics which will prove politically consequential even if they are, for Derrida, theoretically inept.

In the essay, Rousseau argues that speech has not one origin but two divergent origins, one in the south, one in the north.\(^{46}\) From this dual origin spring two fundamentally opposed languages: the sonorous language of the south and the shrill language of the north. The key difference is this: the sonorous languages of the south can communicate the passions; the shrill language of the north is good only for calculation. The essay suggests, however, that southern speech is a counterfactual yet normative ideal; it exists only in an inverse relationship to the progress (read: regress) of civil society away from the state of nature such that the recent triumph of civil society\(^{47}\) marks the eclipse of southern speech and with it the language of confession. Rousseau concludes that language has “become as perfectly useless as eloquence” (*Essay* 332). Starobinski writes, “The state of affairs described is thought to be the worst in history: man has practically lost the ability to communicate what matters, i.e., his inner feelings.”\(^{48}\) In the *Second Discourse*—from which the essay was originally drawn—Rousseau goes further: he suggests that the state of nature, and by extension southern speech, may never have existed: “The researches which can be undertaken concerning this subject must not be taken for historical truths, but only for hypothetical and conditional reasonings better suited to clarify the nature of things than to show their true
Whatever the case, the counterfactualness of southern speech should not detract from the importance Rousseau attaches to the ideal: the counterfactual functions normatively, it embodies the standards to which Rousseau’s language of confession must attend. To understand this powerful counterfactual, however, one must first appreciate Rousseau’s view of the unique place of speech (parole) in the development of language.

Although Rousseau begins the Essay by noting the sufficiency of speechless gesture to accomplish as many “things as we do with the aid of speech” (Essay 292), he quickly limits the capacities of gesture by noting that they are incapable of communicating passions—it was “the passions that wrested the first voices” (Essay 293).\textsuperscript{50} Rousseau imagines a well in a dry land as the natural meeting place of previously isolated young boys and young girls. The mere presence of the opposite sex excites the moral sentiments and, Rousseau quips, “imperceptibly water became more necessary, the livestock were thirsty more often” (Essay 314). Once the sentiments were aroused, however, “gesture no longer sufficed, the voice (voix) accompanied it with passionate accents” (Essay 314).\textsuperscript{51} The language of confession, then, must be a language of the voice, for it is the voice that has the capacity to communicate the moral sentiments. However, it must be remembered that Rousseau is charting the development of language and, just as the “voice” (voix) follows the originary language of gesture, it also precedes the development of speech (parole).\textsuperscript{52} The voice does not equal speech. When Rousseau suggests that the “voice” is capable of “presenting” the “inevitable impressions of the passions,” he is not saying that the passions are communicated through words. The voice must not be confused with speech: “Nothing in this [scene at the well] was animated enough to unloose the tongue, nothing could draw forth the accents of the ardent passions
frequently enough to turn them into institutions” (Essay 314-5). To understand how the moral sentiments are to be communicated, then, requires a careful adumbration of the voice.

The decisive characteristic of the voice is its naturalness; the voice signifies those “simple sounds” that instinctively and unintentionally issue forth from the “naturally . . . open” human mouth and glottis—the vocative organs (Essay 295, 306, 318). Cries, groans, sounds, and especially accents—these are the rich and “natural” resources of the voice (Essay 296). Rich because the myriad of possible ways in which these resources can be combined almost renders the further development of language unnecessary, “natural” because they are involuntary, unwilled, and reflexive (Essay 295). The decisive point is this: it is the accents of the voice—the sonorous distinctions and tonal variations by which the voice sounds—that render the voice capable of communicating the moral sentiments:

But the accents of the voice pass all the way to the soul, for they are the natural expression of the passions, and by portraying them they excite them. It is by means of them that music becomes oratorical, eloquent, imitative, they form its language; it is by means of them that it portrays objects to the imagination, that it conveys sentiments to the heart.53

Distinguished Rousseau scholar John T. Scott concludes that Rousseau uses the word “voice” (voix) to refer to “any uttered sound” and especially the “spontaneous accented . . . utterance of the passions.”54
Immediately following the development of the “voice” in Rousseau’s account is articulation. Like all “developments” in Rousseau’s scheme, the emergence of articulation marks a degeneration of language. Articulation is conventional rather than natural; it is “mechanical” (Essay 295); it requires technique, practice, attention, and is learned only with difficulty (Essay 295). Whereas the voice is understood as the natural and spontaneous emission of sound, articulation is the mechanical modification of that sound, it is the technique of the lips modifying and thereby muting the natural and euphonic sounds of the voice (Essay 302). Rousseau notes that articulation marks the triumph of the lips, tongue, and palate over the glottis and the naturally open mouth (Essay 302), which is to say that articulation is the human mutation and thus the muting of nature’s eloquence. When articulation is carried to its logical end it eventuates in the silence of writing: “[T]he more a language is articulated, the more articulation extends its domain, and thus gains in rigor and in vigor, the more it yields to writing, the more it calls forth writing.” Writing, for Rousseau, marks the perfect antithesis to voice; it is analytical (Essay 297), it “substitutes precision for expression” (Essay 300), and, most importantly, it cannot communicate the passions:

In proportion as needs increase, as affairs become entangled, as enlightenment extends, language changes character; it becomes more precise and less passionate; it substitutes ideas for feelings, it no longer speaks to the heart but to reason. As a result, accent is extinguished, articulation extends, language becomes more exact and clearer, but more drawn out, more muted, and colder. (Essay 296; emphasis mine)
In the sharpest possible contrast to the accented “euphony” of the voice (Essay 296), articulation moves steadily toward silence and, when the degeneration of language eventuates in writing, this articulation in extremis is quite literally silent; the euphonic voice of nature is eclipsed by silent conventions: “[W]riting is always atonal.” As it is the “beauty of sounds” that accounts for the capacities of the voice to present the passions, Rousseau believes that the progress of articulation also marks the progressive inability of language to present the passions. Transparency and writing stand at odds; the silence of the quill could never communicate the moral sentiments—Rousseau insists that his Confessions is “not a book” (Cf. 648).

It is only after Rousseau has considered the degeneration of the voice into writing that he returns to consider speech (parole) and the spoken word. Speech occupies for Rousseau a midpoint between the sounding of the voice and the muted silence of writing. Because speech is the speaking of words it requires articulation, and thus speech is complicit in that degenerative process that eventuates in writing; what else is it to speak but to “read while speaking” (Essay 300). On the other hand speech sounds, it issues from the glottis as well as the lips (Essay 318), and even the most articulate turns of phrase are modified by a particular tone of voice (Essay 300). Speech, then, is situated between the competing extremes of the voice and writing. Derrida explains:

A speech without consonantic principle, what for Rousseau would be a speech sheltered from all writing, would not be speech; it would hold itself at the fictive limit of the inarticulate and purely natural cry. Conversely, a speech of pure consonants and pure articulation would become pure writing, algebra, or dead language.
And, as Rousseau continues to chart the degeneration of language, the capacities of speech to communicate the moral sentiments will be determined by its position relative to these two poles. Although, in the long run, speech will move “naturally” and inevitably closer to the silence of writing (Essay 296, 327), this degeneration proceeds at different rates in different places. In southern climates the progression of this degeneration is much slower and thus provides Rousseau an opportunity to imagine the capacities of speech still tethered to the logic of the voice.

In southern climates “lush and fertile” lands stall the degeneration of language because they stall the formation of society (Essay 310). Rousseau quite reasonably assumes that man speaks only in society and, not quite so reasonably, that man joins society only because he is not self-sufficient. If man could provide for his own survival in isolation, society and speech would never develop. The lush and fertile climate of the south lends itself to farming, an occupation by which the solitude, self-sufficiency, and silence of man is preserved. Thus Rousseau concludes that the “southern languages” degenerate at a slower rate than do the northern languages. Moreover, it is in these southern climates that speech is recognizable as a descendent of the voice; it is not equated with the voice, but it is nearer to the voice than to writing. This relationship to the voice is essential, for it is precisely this relationship that allows speech to communicate the passions. Rousseau writes, “[I]n mild climates, in fertile terrains it took all the liveliness of the agreeable passions to being to make the inhabitants speak. The first [spoken] languages (langues) . . . long bore the sign of their father [the voice]” (Essay 315). Because this speech “bore the sign of its father,” the voice of nature was not completely eclipsed by the articulation involved in speaking. Speech was, to be sure,
articulate, and this articulateness pulled speech inexorably toward silence, but in these warm climates articulation did not eclipse nature: speech still sounded, it was recognizable as a descendent of the voice. The trace of the voice in speech manifests itself in the tone of voice: “he who speaks varies the meanings by the tone of his voice, he determines them as he pleases” (Essay 300). Starobinski’s translation of the same passage makes it clear that it is the voice in the speech, rather than the speech itself that has communicative power: “A person who speaks can vary meaning by his tone of voice and make words mean whatever he wants.”

The words themselves are not the essential element of speech, they are, by definition, articulate and they thus share more in common with the silence of writing than the sound of the voice. Despite the inevitable presence of words, however, speech still sounds, and it is the sounding of the voice that wholly accounts for the communicative power of speech. What is important here is this: it is only insofar as speech is vocative, only insofar as it “bears the sign of its father” and ensures that the articulations still sound by changing the “tone of voice” that speech has the capacity to communicate the passions. Speech is, Rousseau concludes, a “language that speaks as much by its sounds as by its words” (Essay 301). This, then, is speech as it is influenced and pulled toward the voice: it is a sonorous speech that communicates the passions through vocal inflections, accents, and tone.

In northern climates, by contrast, where “everything is dead nine months out of the year, where the sun warms the air for a few weeks only to teach the inhabitants about the good of which they are deprived” speech is heavily articulated and thus bears the signs of writing rather than the voice: northern “voices are always accompanied by strong articulations” (Essay 316). The accompaniment of strong articulations, of course, renders
the speech of the north incapable of communicating the passions. “There was nothing one had to make felt, everything to be made understood; it was therefore a matter not of energy but of clarity. For accent, which the heart did not furnish, strong and sensible articulations were substituted” (Essay 316). Recalling that it is the sonorous accents of the voice that communicate the passions, it is evident that the precise, calculative, sensible, and measured speech of the north failed for Rousseau the originary function of language: the communication of the passions.

This then is the continuum that Rousseau constructs. The voice signifies the origin of language. It is natural and it has the capacity to communicate the passions. From this originary point, speech degenerates through articulation and ultimately into writing. Writing marks the triumph of convention and the total eclipse of nature’s voice. With the advent of writing, language has come full circle: from the silence of the originary gesture to the silence of the quill. Thus Starobinski: “the history of language begins in an initial silence and ends in an idle murmur, tantamount to a final silence.” 63 Between these two poles of silence exists speech. Sometimes closer to one pole, sometimes closer to the other: “[Languages] of the south must have been lively, sonorous, accented, eloquent, and often obscure by the dint of their energy; those of the North must have been muted, crude, articulated, shrill, monotonous, clear by dint of their words rather than by a good construction.” The decisive difference between the two modes of speech, however, is that only the southern speech has the capacity to represent the moral sentiments.

In order to explain why, precisely, the accented and sonorous speech of southern climates has the capacity to represent the moral sentiments, Rousseau resorts to one his favorite intellectual hobbies: musical theory. Rousseau explains that southern languages
are *melodious* rather than *harmonic*. The principle of distinguishes between melody and harmony, Rousseau argues, is the same principle that divides the natural sentiments from the moral sentiments: the physical/moral distinction. Harmony is physical, while melody is moral. It is perhaps, then, not surprising that Rousseau argues that it is precisely the *melodiousness* of the southern languages that accounts for their expressive power.⁶⁴

Harmony is purely physical. The sensation of harmonious sound is reducible to the effect of particular sound-waves reverberating in the ear (Essay 321). Because harmony is purely physical, the sensations that result from it can be precisely calculated and will be the same for “every man in the universe” (Essay 321). Like writing, harmony is given to precision; it is a science. By way of contrast, melody is moral. That is to say, the sound of melody is, strictly speaking, not a “sensation;” it depends for its effects not on the reverberations of sound-waves, but rather on “signs and images” (Essay 319). Melody is a symbol of the vocative arts and thus also a “sign of our affections, our feelings” (Essay 322-3).

As long as one wants to consider sounds only in terms of the disturbance they excite in our nerves, one will not have the true principles of music and its power over our hearts. The sounds of melody do not act on us solely as sounds, but as signs of our affections, of our feelings; it is in this way that they excite in us the emotions they express and the image of which we recognize in them. Something of this moral effect is perceived even in animals. (Essay 323)
Rousseau is here explaining how the voice communicates the moral sentiments. Melody, like the voice, cannot be reduced to physical and calculable reverberations. There can be no science of melody for the simple reason that it operations are not universal. Melody is moral; it accrues meaning only in society; its power to express the moral sentiments derives from its ability to excite the passions already present in the mind of the hearer (Essay 322).

Indeed, because melodious speech is an “imitative art” it depends upon the presence of the passions in the mind of the listener. Rousseau argues that melodious speech is expressive because it “imitates” the “affections of the soul” which “are in the reader’s mind beforehand” (Essay 324, 322). The affections that are roused in the soul of the reader should not suggest, as it did for Kant’s aesthetics, that the universal structures of the human mind in some way render the experience of the affections universal. For Rousseau, the power of melodious speech depends not on an essentialized understanding of the human mind, but rather on the training of particular linguistic communities: “Italian tunes are needed for the Italian”; “Our most touching music [is] but an empty noise to the ear of a Carib” (Essay 324). Scott explains, “Rousseau attacks sensationist universalism . . . and insists upon the more complex interplay of natural, cultural and moral, forces in music.” The accents of music are not simply sounds but also signs of affections, and habituated members of musicolinguistic communities will recognize these signs and feel themselves stirred by the same sentiments which the accents of melody signify. In other words, Rousseau believed that particular accents and rhythms within melodies over time came to signify particular affections within a particular community.
Two examples will help to clarify this. First, consider the long debate which Rousseau instigated concerning the relative superiority of the Italian opera to the French opera. Although the Italian opera was, to Rousseau’s mind, more emotionally evocative, it nonetheless received a cold reception in Paris. Why? In terms of physical sound-waves, the Italian operas sounded equally in Venice and in Paris and thus the science of harmonics could not explain the divergent reception of the same opera in the two cities. The ability of the Italian melodies to touch the Italian soul must, then, reside in the habituated listening practices of Italians: “The most beautiful songs, to our taste, will always only indifferently touch an ear that is not accustomed to them; it is a language for which one has to have the Dictionary” (Essay 321). The powers of melody—and by extension the expressiveness of the voice—will be useless in a community not habituated to hear in the music more than harmonics.

Second, consider the sometimes cold reception of Rousseau’s novel, Julie. Rousseau notes that the “latter parts of Julie are pervaded with rapture”—they are the composed, that is, under the aegis of southern melodious speech. This speech, however, will be insufficient for the communication of the moral sentiments unless the reader can recognize in his “own heart” “the same emotion that dictated them to me . . .” (Cf. 428-9; emphasis mine). The communication of the sentiments, then, hinges on the capacity of the reader to recognize the accents within melodious speech as signs of his own affections. In a very real sense, the affections are not being transported or communicated from a sender to a receiver as much as they are being awakened in the mind of the receiver who recognizes the accents of speech as signs of his own interior affections. Consider Rousseau’s response to “hearing” the “impassioned tones” of Mme d’Houdetot:
“She spoke, and I was overcome with emotion; I thought I was simply entering into her feelings, when in reality I was yielding to similar ones of my own” (Cf. 430).

Expressivism as a Rhetorical Form

The language of confession, then, the language that has the capacity to communicate the moral sentiments, is the sonorous and melodious speech indigenous to the south. This has three practical and rhetorical consequences for Rousseau. It means, first, that expressivism—the language of confession—must be stylistically simple. Because Rousseau’s equates an ornate rhetorical style with the articulations of society, a simplicity of style tethers expressivism to the logic of the voice. That the language of confession is the melodious speech of the south means, second, that it depends on the imagination of the audience. Like melody itself, expressivism is an imitative art that depends on an arousal of the moral sentiments in the hearer’s imagination. These first two rhetorical consequences entail a third: expressivism is diametrically opposed to the classical notions of speech. In this section I attend to each of the rhetorical features of expressivism in turn.

Expressivism and Rhetorical Simplicity

The language of confession, recall, is expressive only insofar as it is vocative, as it resembles the inarticulate, reflexive, and instinctive cry of nature. Articulation, understood as an artificial technique for the modification of nature, tears speech away
from its vocative origins and renders it, comparatively speaking, mute. Derrida notes that
the articulation of speech “is the addition of a technique, a sort of artificial and artful ruse
. . . . It is a violence done to the natural destiny of language.”67 Expressivism is opposed
to technique; it is a “natural expression,”68 an “effusion of the heart”69 to which techné,
art, and convention must always be an anathema.70 Expressivism, then, must be
recognizable as an expression in words of the inarticulate voice of nature. The fact that
this expression must be in words demands that the voice of nature must, to some small
extent, be muted by the conventions of articulation. The important point, however, is that
in spite of the articulation demanded by words, expressivism takes its power from the
inarticulate sounds of the voice.

This is all very practical: expressivism communicates the moral sentiments by
minimizing tropes, figures of speech, “polite turns of phrase,” complex chains of
reasoning, logical arguments, and precise calculations and maximizing its simplicity,
instinctiveness, and reflexivity. In short, expressivism must minimize anything that might
suggest that it is the product of techné or conventional training and maximize anything
that might suggest it is simply an expression of nature’s inarticulate cries. Rousseau thus
praises “simple” and “unreflective” speech, for the simplicity and unreflectiveness of
speech suggest that it is a “natural expression” or an “effusion of the heart”—those
properties by which expressivism resists the encroachment of writing and retains its
communicative power. In Émile Rousseau argues that “simple phrases” which “speak
from heart” are far superior to the “delicate phrases and expressions by persons of
politeness.” The delicate phrases of polite society are self-evidently the product of
convention (techné) and thus threaten the expressive power of simple phrases that speak
from the heart. Rousseau thus praises “the language of plain-spoken goodness” and denounces “fine speeches carefully prepared.”

In the *Confessions*, Rousseau emphasizes the simplicity and unreflectiveness of expressivism by suggesting that it is understandable as *dictation*. The writing of *Julie*, for example, would be better understood as the transcription of *Julie*, for Rousseau claims that he simply wrote down what his emotions “dictated” to him. By claiming that his role as an author is simply to take down the dictation of his heart, Rousseau is emphasizing that the expressiveness of speech stands opposed to the artifice of *techné*. For whereas writing is an artistic and thus an artificial process, the transcription of dictation is (supposedly) a limpid medium: it allows the voice of nature to find expression clearly and without constraint. Rousseau thus regularly describes his *Confessions* as the “testimony of the heart” (*Cf.* 362) and suggests that the highest calling of “the lips” is to “betray the secret of [the] heart” (*Cf.* 147). Elsewhere he suggests that the communion that he achieved with Mlle Galley was the result of “adopting the tone dictated by our hearts” (*Cf.* 134). Likewise, describing the composition of his letters to M. de Malesherbes, which serve as a sort of rough draft of the *Confessions*, Rousseau notes that a “sentence suggested itself to me in the heat of composition” (500). In all these instances, expressivism is simply the effusion of his heart, and it is precisely this unreflective quality of expressivism that renders it fit to be the language of confession: “[A] constant need to unburden myself means that my heart is always on my lips” (*Cf.* 152-3).

This ideal of expressivism as a limpid transcription of the heart’s dictation is found throughout the *Confessions*; two prominent examples are the speech of Mme de Luxembourg and Rousseau’s own speech in the presence Mme de Warrens. In both of
these instances, Rousseau equates the power of expressive speech with its unadorned simplicity and unreflective expressiveness. Consider first the speech of Mme de Luxembourg. Her speech “does not sparkle,” is not “witty,” has no “subtlety” about it, and is, above all, “simply expressed” (Cf. 507). To Rousseau’s mind, the simplicity of her speech indicates its purity; it is the unadulterated expression of her heart: “Her flatteries are the more intoxicating for being simply expressed; *it is as though they have escaped her lips without her having given them any thought and from a heart that pours itself out for no other reason than that it is full to overflowing*” (507-8; emphasis added). It is the unreflective thoughtlessness of speech that Rousseau praises. To Rousseau’s mind the subtle nuances of speech indicate an attempt to posture oneself and present only those aspects of the self that would find acceptance by a critical audience. The simplicity Mme de Luxembourg’s speech, by contrast, is authentic because it is unreflective. She does not consider in what light her speech will reveal her, and her speech is thus as pure and simple as an overflowing heart.72

This unreflective speech also characterizes Rousseau’s relationship with Mme de Warens. Mme de Warens was, if we are to believe the *Confessions*, in many ways the single most important woman in Rousseau’s life.73 When Rousseau was a boy, Mme de Warens took care of him and found him work on several occasions. When Rousseau returned to her house as a young man, the two lived together in seemingly uninterrupted bliss for several years. During this time, the two became so intimately equated that Rousseau became her “*little one*” and she his “*Maman*.” Although this widely used term of endearment didn’t necessarily have maternal connotations, when Mme de Warens took Rousseau’s virginity he claimed that “it was as though I had committed incest” (Cf. 192).
What is important to Rousseau about this relationship is the intimacy and immediacy of their communion: “my heart lay open before her as before God” (Cf. 187) and there was a “sympathy between [our] souls” (Cf. 50). This communion was achieved through simple and unreflective expressivism: “No sooner had [a] thought struck me than I expressed it; for when I was with her to think and to speak were one and the same thing” (Cf. 201). There is here no reflective pause between thought and expression which could detract from the power of expressivism. This is the sonorous ideal of expressivism: speech understood as the uninhibited effusion of the heart.

This simplicity of expressivism which has the capacity to articulate the heart finds it antithesis in the carefully measured, ornate speech that bespeaks an artistic or technical training. Rousseau profoundly distrusted societal protocols of speaking, for social decorum obscures the effusive quality of speech: “Among ordinary people, where grand passions speak only at intervals, the sentiments of nature are more often heard. In more elevated ranks the latter are completely stifled, while, from behind a mask of sentiment, all that speaks is self-interest and vanity” (Cf. 144). Rousseau claims that he can never be in the presence of such carefully articulated and self-evidently trained speech “without feeling how deceptive judgments are that are based upon appearances” (Cf. 463). The speech of Rousseau’s primary antagonist, his one-time friend turned bitter enemy, Friedrich Melchior baron von Grimm, provides a case in point. In Book Nine of the Confessions Rousseau approaches Grimm in order to apologize for his own mistaken assumptions about Grimm. When he arrived at Grimm’s residence, Rousseau used a “few words” to apologize and was then subjected to “a long harangue which [Grimm] had prepared in advance” (Cf. 462). As Rousseau reports it, this lengthy rant was simply
Grimm’s cataloguing of his own virtues, namely his ability to preserve friendships over great lengths of time: “He returned to this point so often and so ostentatiously that it occurred to me that, if he were simply speaking from the heart, he would insist less on this [virtue], and that he was turning it into an art that could be useful to him in his plans to succeed” (Cf. 462; emphasis mine). In the person of Grimm speech has turned from the simple expression of the heart into an artistic rendering of the self, from an effusion of nature’s voice into a calculated contrivance. It is precisely this turn from the simplicity of expression to artistic composition that led Rousseau to his perennial feelings about “the deceptiveness of appearances”—only the effusive and simple expression of the heart could be adequate for the language of confession.

Indeed, Rousseau insists that his own confessions must be understood as the dictation of his heart. This is evident in his insistence that the Confessions be thought of as a portrait that is traced rather than a book that is written.

If I devote as much care to the writing of this work as I did to the others, I will not so much portray myself as mask myself. What I am engaged on here is my portrait, not a book. I am going to be working, so to speak, in the dark room, where no other art is needed except that of tracing precisely the features I see projected there. (Cf. 648)

Rousseau uses the “book” as a shorthand reference for the triumph of articulation and the death of expressive speech. In Pronunciation Rousseau argues that “the more the art of writing is perfected, the more that of speaking is neglected. . . . [B]eing perfected in books, language is distorted in speech.” In Émile Rousseau insists that books detract
from the education of Émile. When Rousseau claims that his confessions are not a “book,” then, he is arguing that the language of confession is simple and unreflective speech—the antithesis of the perfected and muted language of writing. The art of portraiture is, like expressivism itself, an imitative art—he claims to be writing by “tracing.” His *Confessions* is thus the work of an amanuensis, transcribing with great care the “chain of feelings” that constitutes his life (*Cf*. 270). Rousseau claims his writing process involves only “abandoning myself both to the memory of each impression received and to my present feelings” and from these impressions painting the “double portrait of my state of mind, at the moment when the even happened and at the moment when I described it” (*Cf*. 648).76

### Expressivism and the Primacy of the Imagination

The transports and intoxications of the moral sentiments are so primal that they escape the descriptive power of language.77 The frequency with which Rousseau resorts to the vocabulary of the sublime renders it unsurprising that he insists that the transports of the passions cannot be described. Given the primacy of the affections noted above, and given the fact that he must communicate these passions if his book is to “fulfill its purpose,” this is no small frustration. Rousseau believed that the significance of his life was reducible to these powerful experiences of transporting emotion, but these are the very experiences that defy language.

Then again, if these things consisted in deeds, in actions, or in words, I could describe and in some way express them; but how can I speak what
was never spoken, nor done, nor even thought, but only tasted, only felt, without being able to point to any other object of my happiness but this feeling itself. (Cf. 220)

Rousseau is here lamenting the fact that the very things he needs to communicate in his *Confessions* are not things at all, but only feelings. At one point, Rousseau suggests that emotional ecstasy is “felt the more the less it can be described” (Cf. 230). This places the power of the emotions and the descriptive power of speech in an inverse relationship; the intensity of the emotional experience is directly related to the inexpressibility in speech of that experience.

This of course tropes the inexpressibility of speech and turns inexpressibility into a means of expression: by emphasizing his inability to express the ecstasies of emotional transport Rousseau is, in a circuitous manner, expressing emotional transport. Yet it is the circuitousness that matters here; it ensures that the reader must *imagine* these emotional transports rather than *understand* them. Rousseau characteristically will describe the situation that incited the emotional transport in some detail and, after the situation has been sufficiently and often painstakingly described, Rousseau then asks the reader to *imagine* the transport that must attend such a situation, for if the emotional transport cannot be described, it can certainly be imagined on the basis of its effects (Cf. 102). Thus Rousseau, after describing the first injustice done to him as a child begs the reader to “imagine” the “upheaval of his heart” (Cf. 18-9): “Let the reader, I repeat, imagine all this if he can; as for me, I do not feel capable of disentangling or of pursuing the least trace of what was going on inside me at this moment” (Cf. 19; emphasis mine).
The language of confession, then, like the language of melody, depends upon an audience habituated to recognize in the examples symbols of their own affections. The reader must be a “judge in matters of sentiment” if he or she is to recognize in melodious speech, the passions which are imitated by the accents and tones of expressivism. Without this capacity for sentimental judgment, Rousseau suggests that expressivism might as well be silent; although the “latter parts of Julie are pervaded with rapture” the reader who cannot recognize within “his heart” “the same emotion that dictated them to me should shut the book: he is no judge in matters of sentiment” (Cf. 428-9; emphasis mine). Without this critical capacity for recognizing the passions signified by melodious speech within one’s own person, Julie is not even worth reading and expressivism has lost its power: the reader should shut the book.

Rousseau is painfully aware of his inability to portray himself and is thus constantly imploring the reader to reflect on the examples he provides and from them to imagine the self that Rousseau is at pains to portray:

If I were to take it upon myself to draw conclusions from all this and say to my reader, ‘Such is my character,’ he might think, if not that I am deceiving him, then at least I am deceiving myself. But in setting out for him, with total simplicity, everything that has happened to me, everything I have done, everything I have felt, I cannot . . . lead him astray. It is for the reader to assemble all these elements and to determine the being that they constitute; the result must always be his own work, so that if he is mistaken, all the error is on his side. (Cf. 170)
Rousseau refuses to draw conclusions about himself; not because he is unconcerned with the content of the conclusions (he is), but rather because expressivism proceeds via imagination; it induces the audience to recognize in themselves the moral sentiments he is at pains to communicate. In short, because his project is to portray his inner self, and because this inner self is constituted by his recurrent emotional transports, and because these transports defy the descriptive powers of language, Rousseau resorts to setting forth examples and begs the reader to imagine his portrait that he only indirectly is able to paint. It is in this spirit that Rousseau introduces his experience with a Venetian prostitute. He claims that this incident “portrays my nature in its true colors” and that if his readership aspires to “know a fellow-man” they need only “read, if you dare, the two or three pages that follow; you are about to know in full J.-J. Rousseau” (Cf. 311). In the following two or three pages, however, Rousseau draws no conclusions about his self or the true colors of his nature. He confesses with the assumption that he need not confess anything but the objective situation and that the reader will imagine from this the moral sentiments that betray the true colors of his nature. This pattern is repeated seemingly ad infinitum throughout the Confessions.79

Although this approach to confession would seem to relieve Rousseau of the responsibility for his work—it is a composite portrait, fashioned from Rousseau’s descriptions and the audience’s imagination—this dependence on the audience seems not to trouble Rousseau and, for the most part, not to threaten the accuracy of the portrait or his control over it. Although he does acknowledge the possibility that the reader might make an error and be deceived, this deception is unlikely provided that Rousseau provides sufficient details in his examples: “Now, if am to achieve [an accurate portrait],
it is not enough for my account to be faithful, it must also be precise. It is not for me to judge the importance of the facts, I must simply relate them and leave to him [“the reader”] the task of choosing among them” (Cf. 170). And, if Rousseau presents enough examples, and relates them “simply” enough, this ensures that the reader will draw the correct conclusions: “I cannot, except by design, lead [the reader] astray; and even if this were my design, I would not achieve it by these means” (Cf. 170). This dependence on the imagination of the reader, then, assures the authenticity of expressivism—it functions as a sort of structural guarantee of the capacities of expressivism. It is as if through the sheer accumulation of unedited examples Rousseau can reclaim control of his portrait by controlling the possibilities of his reader’s imaginations.

This approach to confession reveals an important aspect of expressivism: the endless generation of talk. Rousseau is scared that his portrait might be obscured because he might fail to provide enough examples. The “smallest detail,” after all, may play an “important role . . . in the exposition of facts whose secret causes one is seeking to uncover by induction” (Cf. 575). Rousseau concludes that the largest threat to expressivism is “not that I may say too much or tell lies, but that I might not say everything and so conceal some truths” (Cf. 171). The theoretical underpinnings of Rousseau’s Confessions, then, demands that Rousseau “say everything” and hide nothing. This conception of confession, theoretically speaking, demands an endless generation of expressive speech. Every episode in his life is a crucial step in the inductive portraiture Rousseau undertakes. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that Rousseau felt the need to add to his Confessions “the supplement I feel it so badly needs” (Cf. 316) and, following the completion of the Confessions, Rousseau spent his remaining years composing two
further autobiographical works. The primacy of the imagination in expressivism demanded that his work could never be finished: *copia verborum ad infinitum*.

**Expressivism Versus Speech**

As the two preceding sections suggest, Rousseauian expressivism is defined precisely against classical notions of speech. While expressivism has power to the degree that it shuns technique, classical notions of speech are considered precisely as techniques. Aristotle, for example, explains that rhetoric is an “art” (*techné*) and as such is fundamentally opposed to the simplicity of expression: “All art is concerned with coming into being and *contriving*.” For Aristotle, the decisive characteristic of speech is that it is *contrived*, it is not the simple effusion of the natural but, rather, it “is necessarily a matter of making.”

Moreover, Rousseau insists on the primacy of the imagination precisely because speech is insufficient to communicate the sublimity of the moral sentiments.

Yet we don’t need to classical notions of *techné* or the eighteenth-century concept of the sublime to argue that Rousseauian expressivism is defined against speech. It is enough to note Rousseau’s persistent privileging of communication without words. Starobinski explains that throughout his works Rousseau “imagines a utopia in which all communication is by means of natural signs and no other language is necessary.”

In a text ironically entitled *Dialogue* Rousseau explains this form of communication without language:

> The heavy, sequential nature of discourse is unbearable to them. They are vexed by its slow progress. Given the quickness of their feelings, they
think that whatever they feel should be as clear as day and penetrate the
heart of another without the cold ministry of speech. 

This is the goal of expressivism; this is Rousseau’s “fantasy of perfect communication”: feelings perfectly communicated without the assistance of the “cold ministry of speech.” Rousseau’s works are full of examples of communication without the aid of speech. When he is reunited with D’Alembert, for example, he communicates without speech: “I had eyes only for him: and with one bound, one cry, I was clasping him in my arms, with my face pressed against his, speechless except for the tears and sobs that spoke on my behalf” (Cf. 341; emphasis mine). The “tears and sobs” are the natural signs that render language unnecessary.

Or consider Rousseau’s assessment of the situation mentioned earlier in which he was caught gazing at Mme Basile. Rousseau was so caught off guard that he could not speak: “all I could do was exhale noiseless and awkward sighs into the silence.” But this does not mean that he did not communicate with Mme Basile. Quite the contrary, Rousseau describes his “awkward sighs” as “silent declarations” and considers the entire affair a “mute yet eloquent scene” (Cf. 76, 74). Another “mute yet eloquent” scene occurs between Rousseau and Mme de Larnage:

She broke the silence between us by abruptly putting her arm round my neck, and the next moment her lips were against mine and spoke too clearly to leave me in any doubt. . . . Never have my eyes, my senses, my heart, and my lips spoken with such eloquence. (Cf. 246)
Silence is broken, but not with speech. The lips communicate, but not by forming words. This is Rousseau’s utopia in which perfect communion is available without speech.

Or consider again Rousseau’s relationship with Mme de Warrens. Although Rousseau insists that there was a “sympathy between our souls,” this sympathy was not achieved via speech. His “tête-à-tête’s” with her “were not so much conversations as a ceaseless babbling, which ended only when interrupted” (Cf. 104). “Babbling” is the purest form of expressivism: it is the natural sign par excellence because it is pure voix. Babbling is the sounds of the voice unhindered by the artifice of speech and or the techniques of polite society. In Rousseau’s utopia, speech is not only useless for establishing intimacy and communicating moral sentiments, it is also counter-productive: speech precludes the communication of the moral sentiments. In his Letter to D’Alembert Rousseau explains that love cannot be communicated except through natural signs:

In the way that I conceive of [love], its perplexity, its frenzies, its palpitations, its transports, its burning expressions, its even more energetic silence, its inexpressible looks which [women’s] timidity renders reckless and which give evidence of desires through fear, it seems to me that, after such a language so vehement, if the lover only once brought himself to say, ‘I love you,’ the beloved, outraged, would say to him, ‘you do not love me anymore,’ and would never see him again in her life. 83

In Rousseau’s utopia, the moral sentiments speak for themselves and establish communion between two lovers. “Starts, cries, trembling, suffocation, palpitations, and so on”—these all bear more communicative power than speech; Starobinski explains that
Rousseau “abandons himself to them as to an ideal mode of expression.” Speech is not only incapable of the expressive power of the instinctual cries, it also interrupts the union established through expressive cries: once speech has been introduced into love, the lover “would never see him again in her life.”

From all of the foregoing examples, it is clear that the Rousseauian utopia is a speechless utopia in which the moral sentiments communicate themselves. At this point we must ask why, then, Rousseau is at pains to fashion a language of confession. If a speechless utopia is the goal, why is Rousseau interested in “inventing a language?” It seems that the invention and deployment of a language would simply defer his utopia rather than effect it. Starobinski is particularly helpful on this point. He explains that Rousseau understood that such speechless communication was a divine prerogative not available to humanity: “Man’s realm is not that of immediate intuition but that of discourse, language, sequence, and the concatenation of means.” Because of this, Rousseau fashions a language of confession and writes his *Confessions*, “but he writes only in the anticipation of a miraculous moment when words will cease to be necessary.” Although this miraculous moment may be forever deferred, it nonetheless the standard according to which expressivism is held accountable. Expressivism may be language and it may use words, but through the ideal of simplicity and through its reliance on the imagination, expressivism is designed precisely to deny its speechfulness. Expressivism denies articulateness and descriptiveness in order to approximate the speechless ideal—it minimizes everything that might suggest the language of confession is, after all, a language. Starobinski exquisitely captures the tensions behind Rousseau’s language use:
The humble posture, the embrace, the sobs tell the whole story without the aid of words. Not that words never play a part. But they are always superfluous, never needed to translate into clear language what first appeared outside language. Everything is said through emotion itself, of which words are never more than an uncertain echo. That is why Rousseau’s language, in describing such moments, is so unhinged: exclamatory, syntactically disorganized, uncoordinated. His words no longer need to be organized as discourse because they no longer play the role of intermediary; language has ceased to be an indispensable means of communication. Recall the “disorienting rapture” of the Third Letter to Malesherbes, in which Rousseau can only cry out: “O Great Being!” Remember, too, the prayer of the poor old woman who can only say: “Oh!”

Rousseau’s expressivism, in other words, is “unhinged, exclamatory, syntactically disorganized, [and] uncoordinated” precisely because the power of expressivism depends for its communicative power on its ability to deny that it is a language. Because his speechless utopia is a divine privilege Rousseau may need to fashion a language of confession, but he compensates for this need by fashioning a language in which eloquence is defined by disorganized exclamations and the “poor old woman who can only say: ‘Oh.’”
The “Melodious Language of Freedom” and the Politics of Expressivism

In the famous last chapter of the Essay Rousseau concludes that not all languages are “favorable to liberty.” Unsurprisingly, he concludes that the heavily articulated languages such as French preclude the possibility of political freedom: “[I]t is impossible for a people to remain free and speak that language” (Essay 332). The deployment of expressivism, then, is not simply an attempt to preserve the communicative power of speech, it is also the only form of speech that can serve as the foundation for a free people. It is for this reason that Scott refers to expressivism as Rousseau’s “melodious language of freedom.” It is the politics of expressivism, that I want to explore in this final section. Although I will ultimately argue against Rousseau and conclude that expressivism is politically disastrous, I begin by explaining why, precisely, Rousseau founds politics on expressivism.

Perhaps the most relevant text for assessing the politics of expressivism is Rousseau’s Letter to M. D’Alembert on the Theatre. This book-length letter, translated by Allan Bloom as Politics and the Arts, is certainly Rousseau’s most concise explanation of the relationship between particular kinds of speech and politics. The letter is a response to an article written by Jean le Rond D’Alembert at the behest of Voltaire and published in Denis Diderot’s l’Encyclopedia. l’Encyclopedia was a thirty-five volume philosophico-scientific dictionary of the arts, sciences, and music intended to provide wide access to the truths of the enlightenment. Although D’Alembert’s article is mostly a panegyric to Geneva, he does suggest that the “flourishing city” which is “rich” in both “liberty and
commerce” would be further benefited by the institution of a theatre. It is this suggestion that Rousseau responds to—and rejects—in his one-hundred and thirty-seven page letter.

Rousseau’s meticulous letter offers several overlapping and reinforcing arguments against the institution of a theatre, each arguing that the theatre would be bad for the citizenry and thus bad for politics. I focus here only on the most relevant argument. Rousseau suggests that the theatre has its own language: “The theatre has rules, principles, and a morality apart, just as it has a language a style that is its own.” The language of the theatre, however, is almost precisely the opposite of expressivism, which, as you will recall, is calibrated to display “every aberration of the heart.” It is geared towards transparency, it provides access to the natural self within and underneath the conventions of society. The language of confession, in short, is deployed against convention; it is a means of seeing beyond the duplicity of technique and artifice. The language of the theatre, by contrast, is particularly beholden to the mores of polite society. For Rousseau, this attachment of the theatre to the conventions of society is an economic fact; if the language of the theatre did not reflect back to the people their own values, it would sell no tickets.

The language of the theatre, moreover, is incapable of authenticity; it cannot, like the language of confession, function expressively. It veils human nature instead of expressing it. For Rousseau, the veiling of human nature is simply a product of the fact that theatre produces actors. And actors, in Rousseau’s logic, are the antithesis of the expressive ideal. “It is,” Rousseau writes, “the business of the actor to appear.” And the problem of appearances, of course, is precisely the problem that the language of confession was deployed to overcome. Like expressivism, the theatre is “a painting of the
human passions,” unlike expressivism, however, the theatre never paints man “to his measure.” It is this difference that is fundamental for Rousseau: the language of the theatre is a language of dissembling; it presents “modified man” and obscures the inner self which it is the duty of confession and the object of expressivism to display.89

It remains to be seen, however, why all this dissembling renders political freedom “impossible.” The reason it does so is that, for Rousseau, the possibility of political freedom inheres only in the state of nature and demands for its realization the expression of the natural goodness that lies latent in every person. In the famous opening to The Social Contract Rousseau writes, “Man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains.”90 Deneen sees in these words

the modest yet radical premise of democracy: democracy is based on a belief in human decency, even potential for individual and collective goodness, and needs only to achieve the realization of this inherent decency to bring about democracy in its most fully manifested, even ideal form.91

Democracy, on this score, entails the progressive realization of an inherent goodness. Political wisdom is here figured as a natural capacity asks only to be exercised. Within this logic, confession is politically essential because it is not only the expression of an authentic self, it is also the expression of a political freedom that, as Deneen puts it, is “inherent in our deepest origins.”92

It is precisely the assumption that political wisdom is a natural capacity that underwrites Rousseau’s conception of the “general will.” Rousseau reasons that if the
citizenry would through expressivism give “[themselves] up entirely . . . [and] without reserve,” they would find that the all agree with each other. This universal agreement is guaranteed by expressivism: because political wisdom is natural, its expression by all will result in the unanimous voice of the people. The artifice of speech is thus, from this perspective, rendered doubly pernicious; speech not only mutes the voice, it also modifies natural political wisdom and precludes any possibility of a “general will.” Rousseau believes that only when the entire citizenry “coalesces” into a single “common self” (le moi commun) through expressivism will “peace, union, and equality” reign. Peace and union will reign under these conditions because there will be no dissension, every citizen will alike see the good of the state made “plainly manifest”: “The first man to propose them only gives expression to what all have previously felt, and neither factions nor eloquence will be needed to pass into law what everyone has already resolved to do.” 93

Expressivism, in other words, has so tightly bound citizens to each other that there is no longer any need for deliberation; the common good has become manifest in the communion of citizens. And, without a need for deliberation, the babbling of expressivism serves just as sure a foundation for the body politic as speech. For Rousseau, expressivism renders deliberation neither necessary nor possible: the fundamental language of politics is babbling which has no capacity for deliberation. But this is unimportant because deliberation is not necessary when expressivism has the potential to demonstrate the fundamental unity of a diverse people to a unanimous general will.

It is perhaps not surprising that the political ideas of Rousseau have been widely criticized. 94 In an age which prizes difference and valorizes a “politics of recognition,” it
is perhaps not surprising that Rousseau’s notion of a general will which folds the individual into a “common self” has been interpreted as a form of “totalitarianism.” Hannah Arendt, criticizing Rousseau’s politics from a different angle, argues that le moi commun “abolishes the distance, the worldly space between men where political matters, the whole realm of human affairs, are located.” To Arendt’s mind political freedom requires deliberation and the idea of a politics without eloquence is, for her, a contradiction in terms. Most critiques, however, tend to focus on the absurdity of a “general will” and the problems of a “common self,” both of which function to ignore categories of difference. As important as it is to critique these notions, it is also important to remember that the “general will” is far less influential today than the ideal of expressive speech. Indeed, in his recent study of American confessions, Peter Brooks concluded that the ideals of expressivism, inaugurated by Rousseau, are decisive for the “modern confessional tradition.” In the remainder of this chapter, then, I want to suggest that expressivism undermines democracy by naturalizing transgressions and compromising the capacity for moral judgment.

The speech of Mme d’Houdetot was, Rousseau records, the example par excellence of expressivism. Her speech embodies the ideals expressivism, and it demonstrates with particular clarity how expressivism can naturalize transgressions and compromise judgment. Rousseau writes of Mme. d’Houdetot’s simple expressions: “she was above all so straightforward in her dealings. . .” (Cf. 429). These straightforward dealings, moreover, were spoken in the “impassioned tones” of the heart, and, upon hearing them, Rousseau quickly experienced “similar [feelings] of my own” (Cf. 430). Because her imagined confession, which Rousseau records in Book Nine of his
Confessions, is a microcosm of Rousseau’s entire approach to confession, it is worth attending to in some detail. Mme d’Houdetot was married against her will to a quarrelsome soldier whom she did not love; she loved M. de Saint-Lambert, to whom she was not married. This promiscuity, of course, offended the “morals prevailing in this age” and demanded a confession. The confession that Rousseau is “convinced” she made is a perfect illustration of expressivism:

She could never conceal what she was thinking from anyone nor suppress a single one of her feelings, and I am convinced that she talked about her lover even to her husband as she talked about him to her friends, her acquaintances, and to all the world alike. (Cf: 429-30).

Recall that the language of confession demands a simplicity of expression. The confession must be simply an effusion of the heart. In Mme d’Houdetot’s case, this effusion was unstoppable: she could never conceal the feelings of her heart even if it meant violating the “language of decency” and the rules of social decorum that would seek to suppress talk of adultery. Despite the fact that the promiscuity of Mme D’Houdetot’s speech stands in flagrant violation to the language of decency, what else could she do? The language of confession demands simply expression, effusion, effluence; any attempt to harness these outpourings compromises the confession by supplementing the expressions of nature with the artificial constraints of social decorum. The result is a likeness painted in profile, an apologia, a history—anything and everything but a confession. Therefore, to the extent that Mme d’Houdetot’s confession was authentic—in Rousseau’s sense of the term—it was perforce a confession that must
have been presented equally to her husband, her friends, her acquaintances, and to the whole world alike—for unhindered expression is the condition of confession.

The expressiveness of the language of confession entails the promiscuous broadcasting of Mme d’Houdetot’s confession. But—and this is my point—this promiscuity precludes judgment. Mme d’Houdetot would, after all, talk to her husband about her lover as she talked about him to her friends. As absurd as this seems, Mme d’Houdetot could not, under the aegis of expressivism, speak to her spouse differently than her friends. To do so would have required her to modify her speech according to the dictates of societal conventions, and this is precisely what expressivism precludes. To speak differently to her spouse would have required Mme d’Houdetot to acknowledge, as Rousseau does, that adultery runs counter to the morals prevailing in this age. The language of confession, however, precludes this recognition by insisting that the condition of transparency is an effusion of the heart unchecked by social decorum. The demand that confession be expressive, then, disjoins the act of confession from the act of political judgment that calls forth the confession in the first place. For the act of judgment that would treat adultery differently than platonic friendship—indeed, that would treat adultery as an act requiring confession—entails reflection, thoughtfulness, and a consideration of the conventional moral standards, all of which are excised from the language of confession in the name of expressivism.

Another way of putting it is this: expressivism precludes political judgment by making the self the ultimate arbiter of good and bad. With expressivism, the distinction between virtue and vice is aligned with the distinction between an authentic self and a corrupted society. There is no reference point outside the self against which the self may
be judged. Charles Taylor argues that Rousseau was the “crucial figure” in a “radical” subjectification of judgment. He explains that, with Rousseau, the expression of the voice of nature took on an entirely new importance: “Not just that I have, thanks be to God, sentiments which accord with what I see through other means to be universal good, but that the inner voice of my true sentiments define what is good: since the élan of nature in me is good, it is this which has to be consulted to discover it.” 99 This, of course, is a decisive rejection of the Augustinian understanding of confession. Although expressivism may be a powerful “language of confession” in that it is calibrated to disclose the innermost recesses of the self, it has absolutely no capacity to recognize deficiencies of the self. The self is rendered autonomous and declared good: the inner self has become its own standard such that Mme d’Houdetot may tell everyone about her promiscuity without recognizing its deleterious social consequences. Although, in the case of Mme d’Houdetot, the subjectification of political judgment may seem rather benign, the logical telos of expressivism is the terrifying figure of Nietzsche’s “nobleman.” The nobleman who, Nietzsche tells us, “spontaneously creates the notion of the good,” act as “wild animals”:

We can imagine them returning from an orgy of murder, arson, rape, and torture, jubilant and at peace with themselves as if they had committed a fraternity prank—convinced, moreover, that the poets for a long time to come will have something to sing about and to praise. 100

Nietzsche’s nobleman is perhaps an unparalleled example of the incompatibility of a subjectified conception of the good and a capacity for political judgment. And this is the
insidiousness of expressivism: by locating the good wholly within the self, expressivism rejects any standard that might discriminate between rape and torture on one hand, and a fraternity prank on the other hand. Under the aegis of expressivism political judgment is precluded.

Expressivism’s subjectification of the good has a second related political consequence: it not only precludes political judgment, it also suggests that the misdeeds of the self are natural rather than political acts. In the case Mme d’Houdetot, adultery is naturalized; it is explained as a natural, and inevitable part of who she is. In the case of the nobleman, rape and torture are attributed to the “unconscious instincts” of “wild animals.”101 Here the distinction between expressivism and classical notions of speech are particularly clear. While Isocrates insists that speech enables humanity to “escape the life of wild beasts,” expressivism renders humanity indistinguishable from wild beasts.102 This naturalization of misdeeds, of course, only further incapacitates judgment, for human nature can surely not be blamed. Expressivism, in short, obscures the fundamental political nature of Mme d’Houdetot’s tryst: is suggests that it was not a product of human choice or agency but rather a product of nature itself.

Rousseau’s Confessions are, in macrocosm, identical to the imagined confession of Mme d’Houdetot: they are broadcast promiscuously and involve little recognition of conventional norms that his actions offended. Rousseau routinely insists that he is unable to conceal the contours of his heart. Near the end of his Confessions Rousseau writes: “As we have seen, never throughout the whole of my life has my heart, as transparent as crystal, been able to hide for a single moment any feeling of intensity that has taken refuge there” (Cf. 436).103 Moreover, like Mme d’Houdetot, Rousseau’s confessions
exhibit no capacity for political judgment. The most prominent event that Rousseau confesses to in the entire *Confessions* is his choice to abandon each of his five children at a foundlings’ hospital. He writes:

> This arrangement seemed to me so good, so sensible that, if I did not boast of it openly, this was solely out of consideration for their mother; but I told everyone to whom I had declared the nature of our friendship; I told Diderot and Grimm; I later told Mme d’Epinay, and still later Mme de Luxembourg, and I did so openly, freely, and without any sense of compulsion. . . . In short, I made no secret of my conduct, not only because I have never been able to hide anything from my friends, but also because I truly saw no harm in it. (*Cf. 348*)

Like Mme d’Houdetot, Rousseau’s confessions here are the product of the expressivism of the language of confession. Rousseau spoke of his children’s neglect freely and openly, and he insists that there “was no harm in it.” Rousseau has absolutely no capacity to judge the events he confesses; they have been so naturalized that there is no reason not to talk about them. And this is the political downfall of expressivism: although it does, like Augustine’s *confessio* put transgressions into speech, it naturalizes the transgressions and precludes their judgment.
Notes


2 Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Confessions*, trans. Angela Scholar (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 5 (hereafter quotations from Rousseau’s *Confessions* will be cited parenthetically as *Cf.*).


4 Michel de Montaigne (1533-92) whose *Essays* were an attempt to “paint himself”—language that Rousseau would use repeatedly throughout his *Confessions*. Girolam Cardano (1501-76) wrote a six-volume autobiography. The thought of Montaigne was particularly influential; his work shows decisive influence not only in the *Confessions*, but also in *The Second Discourse*.

5 “I place Montaigne foremost among those dissemblers who mean to deceive by telling the truth” (*Cf.* 644).


8 Christopher Kelly, "Rousseau's *Confessions,*" 307.


10 Jean Starobinski, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: Transparency and Obstruction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 8. Starobinski argues that the pursuit of transparency is not “merely an intellectual superstructure.” It is, rather, the “real starting point [and] the original inspiration, of Rousseau’s philosophy” (Ibid., 6).

11 In the *Reveries* Rousseau even admits that in the *Confessions* he at times succumbed to the temptation to render himself “in profile.” Peter France, *Rousseau: Confessions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 90.

12 For other moments in which Rousseau admits to a selection of material see *Cf.* 362 and 373.

13 The *Confessions* were published posthumously and Rousseau read and re-read portions of the text. See Peter France for an in-depth study of Rousseau’s composition process (*Rousseau: Confessions* 23).

See, for example, the footnote on Cf. 388. Here Rousseau corrects a factual error by adding a footnote, but doesn’t bother to change text itself.


Ibid.

“[T]he human soul, altered in the bosom of society by a thousand continually renewed causes, by the acquisition of a mass of knowledge and errors, by changes that occurred in the constitution of bodies, and by the continual impact of the passions, has, so to speak, changed its appearance to the point of being nearly unrecognizable” (The First and Second Discourses 91; emphasis mine). The two exceptions would be the “love of one’s self” and “pity.” Both of these are “natural” affections (Ibid., 130, 222).

This does not indicate an inconsistency in Rousseau. In the Second Discourse, Rousseau is attempting to grasp the self as it exists in the “state of nature.” In the Confessions, he is trying to lay bare his own self. Although Rousseau might think that he is closer to the state of nature than all others, he is clear that the state of nature is forever lost and cannot be reclaimed. The self of the Confessions, then, must be different from the self of the Second Discourse. For the irretrievability of the self in the original state of nature, see The First and Second Discourse 160, 172.

Although the primacy of the affections may well be the common lot of humanity, Rousseau claims to experience the passions in an uncommon degree. Rousseau argues that the intensity of his emotions is “one of my more singular traits of character” (Cf. 35).
“Few men have groaned as much as I, few men in their lives have wept as much” (Cf. 101).

21 On the passions as an index to morality see the Rousseau’s footnote “o” to the Second Discourse (221-2). And, for Rousseau, moral truths “can be expressed by factual lies.” Christopher Kelly, Rousseau's Exemplary Life: The Confessions as Political Philosophy (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987).


23 “I can vouch only for the sentiment that had made me take up my pen” (587).

24 Rousseau, The First and Second Discourses, 130.

25 Ibid., 101 emphasis mine.

26 Ibid., 222, 130, 33, 96, 27.

27 “But I have never known how to preserve a happy medium in my attachments to other people” (Cf. 510).

28 “My passions, when roused, are intense, and, so long as I am activated by them, nothing equals my impetuosity. I no longer know moderation, respect, fear, propriety . . . .” (Cf. 35).

29 Ellrich, Rousseau and His Reader, 71.


The caveat “almost always” is probably a reference to *The Social Contract*, which Rousseau believed was his only work that was understandable as a philosophical treatise. Even in *The Social Contract*, however, Rousseau is still guided by his emotions: “I feel my heart murmuring and restraining my pen” (38).

“This was the source of my sudden eloquence, of that truly celestial flame which, setting me on fire, spread through all my early works, and of which not one single spark had escaped during the previous forty years, because it had not yet been kindled” (*Cf.* 407).

See also: “[I]t is impossible for me to introduce any order into the events of my narrative” (*Cf.* 586). “The further I advance into my narrative, the less order and sequence I am able to introduce into it” (*Cf.* 608).

Rousseau, *The First and Second Discourses*, 90.

Abizadeh argues that the “sonorous speech” that is praised in the *Essay* allows the speaker to “directly . . . intimate the passions in her transparent heart.” Arash Abizadeh, "Banishing the Particular: Rousseau on Rhetoric, *Patrie*, and the Passions" *Political Theory* 29, no. 4 (2001): 561. John T. Scott argues that the “main argument in the *Essay* is that language and music are originally and essentially the communication of the developing social or moral passions.” John T Scott, "Rousseau and the Melodious Language of Freedom" *The Journal of Politics* 59, no. 3 (1997): 807. In the *Confessions* Rousseau notes that this *Essay* is the most important of his unpublished works (*Cf.* 548).

Rousseau, "Essay on the Origin of Languages," 292 (hereafter, references to the Essay will be inserted parenthetically).


“Rousseau’s work seems to me to occupy, between Plato’s Phaedrus and Hegel’s Encyclopedia, a singular position.” Jacques Derrida, Of Grammatology trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 97. Also: “I now prepare myself to give special privilege, in a manner that some might consider exorbitant, to certain texts like the Essay on the Origin of Languages. . .” (Ibid., 161).


Derrida argues that language always produces a difference between minds and thus defers the communion which it seeks. It is this double production of difference and deferral that Derrida refers to as differance (23). Hart explains differance in such a way that foregrounds the incompatibility of the concept with Rousseau’s dream of perfect communion: differance is “the absence that always precedes and unsettles ‘presence,’ the immediacy of self or other, the true voice, the moment of undiluted consciousness, or any direct intuition of the real, authoritative, authentic.” David Bentley Hart, The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003), 54.

Derrida notes that it is Rousseau’s wholly original contribution to criticize writing as unstable because it “suspends the voice.” Derrida writes that in this condemnation of writing (and by extension all “articulations” that mute the voice) “can be read the most
energetic eighteenth-century reaction organizing the defense of phonologism and of logocentric metaphysics” (99; emphasis original).

44 “Rousseau is nevertheless more pressed to exorcise [differance] than to assume its necessity” (Derrida, 141).

45 Hart argues that Derrida consistently misreads texts insofar as he tends to read them in terms of the metaphysical binaries that allow him to see in every text “the same marks of a striving after immediate presence”: “The notion that behind every speculative, confessional, or mythic story lurks a single governing pathos, that onto-theo-logy rears its head wherever origins are invoked or presence is heralded, and that all Western . . . discourses of truth express the same yearning for presence, the true voice, the origin, the father (or some other copula of the definite article with an abstract noun) repeats the very gesture of ‘metaphysics’: it enacts a retreat from the bewildering world of difference to the secure simplicity of foundations” (Hart, 11).

46 Derrida: “The North is not simply the distanced other of the South, it is not the limit that one reaches if he starts out from the unique Southern origin. Rousseau is in a way compelled to admit that the North is also another origin” (224).

47 In the Second Discourse Rousseau marks the precise point of the triumph of civil society over the state of nature (The First and Second Discourses, 157).


49 Rousseau, The First and Second Discourses, 103.
Rousseau is not consistent on the remarkable power of gesture. In the *Second Discourse* he suggests that gesture is impractical because darkness or obstruction render it useless (*The First and Second Discourses*, 123).

The *Second Discourse* suggests that the origin of physical attraction to members of the opposite sex was not so tame. Like this account, physical attraction begins with mere togetherness. Togetherness, however, in turn leads to a “tender and gentle sentiment” that gradually becomes an “impetuous fury” (*The First and Second Discourses*, 148).

The relative origin of voice and gesture are difficult to determine. In the beginning of the *Essay*, gesture precedes the voice. By chapter IX, however, gesture seems to be no earlier than the “inarticulate sounds” of the voice (*Essay* 305). In the *Second Discourse*, the voice precedes gesture (*The First and Second Discourses*, 122). The important point is this: in every case the voice precedes speech.


John T. Scott, "Notes," in *Essay on the Origin of Languages and Writings Related to Music*, ed. Jean-Jacques Rousseau (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1998), 568 n21. In the *Second Discourse*, Rousseau refers to the instinctual cry of the voice as the “cry of nature.” It is “man’s first language, the most universal, most energetic” (*The First and Second Discourses*, 122). If however, in the *Essay*, Rousseau emphasizes the capacities of the voice of nature to communication the passions, in the *Second Discourse* he suggests that because the voice has “no perceptible object” it is hardly capable of “establishing intercourse between minds” (*The First and Second Discourses*, 122).
Derrida continues; he notes that the eventuation of articulation in writing is “the central thesis of the Essay” (226).

In the Second Discourse Rousseau notes instinct is diametrically opposed to cultivated reason” (The First and Second Discourses, 128).

Derrida, Of Grammatology, 315.

Ibid.

The naturalness of degeneration is not to be confused with the state of nature from which the voice springs. The latter represents “an essential innocence,” the former represents the “fact of historical change” by which nature yields to culture. On the two senses of natural see Starobinski, Rousseau, 21.

“The earth nourishes men, but when the first needs have dispersed them other needs bring them together, and is it only then that they speak” (Essay 310).

Langues always signifies for Rousseau a spoken language and should not be confused with Rousseau’s more general understanding of language as that which encompasses gesture, voice, articulation, speech, and writing.


Ibid., 311.

The relationship between the two binaries (north/south and melody/harmony) in the Essay is not clear. I follow Scott in my suggestion that melody relates to southern languages and harmony relates to northern languages (“Rousseau and the Melodious Language of Freedom”).
Rousseau mixes his metaphors provocatively but also inconsistently; he is here describing the hearer of melodious speech as a “reader.”


Derrida, *Grammatology*, 144.

Ibid.

Rousseau, *The First and Second Discourses*, 90.

Here Derrida’s discussion of articulation as a *supplement* is insightful and helpful. He argues that that which supplements nature’s voice also de-natures the voice of nature. The supplement is thus figured as the principle of *differance*, inherent in every language (141-164, especially 150). And, as a principle of *differance*, it must threaten a language whose telos is the intimate communion of minds.


Rousseau also praises unreflectivity in the *Second Discourse*: “I almost dare to affirm that the state of reflection is a state contrary to nature and that the man who meditates is a depraved animal” (*The First and Second Discourses*, 110). “All knowledge that requires reflection all knowledge acquired only by the linking of ideas and perfected only successively, seems to be altogether beyond the reach of savage man for want of communication with his fellow men” (Ibid., 188).

“At last I arrived; I saw Mme de Warens. This was the period of my life that decided my character” (*Cf*. 47). Rousseau spends far more time describing his intoxication with
Mme de Warens then he does with any other woman in the Confessions, including his wife Therese.

74 This emphasis on the expressive power of simplicity can also be seen in Rousseau’s preference for women in déshabille—casual dress. “Nothing in the world intimidates me so much as a pretty woman in déshabille; I would fear her a hundred times less arrayed in all her finery” (Cf. 185).


76 Rousseau was quite confident of his success: “This is the only portrait of a man, painted exactly according to nature and in all its truth, that exists and will probably ever exist” (Cf. 3).

77 Rousseau repeatedly emphasizes his own inability to describe emotional transport. Here are a few examples: “Such a state cannot be described, and few men can even imagine it” (Cf. 86). “I can hardly find words to describe the state” (Cf. 190). “As I have always said and always felt, true pleasure cannot be described” (Cf. 345). “Inexpressible rapture” (Cf. 105).

78 The Book Five episode in which Jean-Jacques has sex for the first time is a particularly clear example of this method. Rousseau first notes that “words cannot describe the state I was in.” He then begs the reader “reflect” on the circumstances that he lays out in great detail (Cf. 190-1).

79 For recurrences in this pattern see Cf. 221, 435, 455, 479, 516, 549, 625, and 631.


82 Ibid., 152.


85 Ibid., 137.

86 Scott, "Rousseau and the Melodious Language of Freedom."


88 “Let no one then attribute to the theatre the power to change sentiments or morals [manners], which it can only follow and embellish” (*Politics and the Arts: Letter to D'alembert on the Theatre*, 19).


92 Ibid.

It is far more surprising, to me at least, that Rousseau’s thought is taken seriously. So seriously, in fact, that it serves as the foundation for John Rawls’ extremely influential theory of justice-as-fairness.


Brooks, Troubling Confessions, 19.

Rousseau, Emile, 345.

Charles Taylor, Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989), 362. After demonstrating this view of the good in the famous confessions of the Savoyard Vicar, Taylor comments: “This is a rather startling statement in a declaration of religious faith; and highly significant in a writer who stands in other respects in an Augustinian tradition, and whose autobiography contains so many echoes of that of the Bishop of Hippo, beginning with the title. The source of unity and wholeness which Augustine found only in God is now to be discovered within the self” (Ibid.).


Ibid.

103 “I find it impossible to hide my own feelings” (*Cf.*, 483). Also: “My heart is incapable of concealing the least of its movements” (*Cf.*, 433).
Chapter Three

Michel Foucault: Politics, Genealogy, and Confession

“What I mean by ‘confession’ . . . is all those procedures by which the subject is incited to produce a discourse of truth about his sexuality which is capable of having effects on the subject himself.”

--Michel Foucault

In what is perhaps an unparalleled testimony to the range of Foucault’s influence, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick begins her influential *Epistemology of the Closet* with the remarkable assertion that she takes Foucault’s conclusions about sexuality as “axiomatic.” Foucault’s conclusions about sexuality are these: sexuality is neither a natural nor essential category; it is produced through confession. Further, the production of sexuality through confession is also the production of subjectivity. It is through confession, Foucault reasons, that individuals constitute themselves as subjects whose decisive characteristic is their vulnerability to a subtle but oppressive regime of power. For this reason, Hubert Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow conclude that, for Foucault, confession is a “central component in the expanding technologies for the discipline and control of bodies, populations, and society itself.” All this is, for Sedgwick, axiomatic.

Foucault is remarkably consistent about why, exactly, he believes confession to be such an ominous a political technology, and I will explore his logic at length below. For the moment, however, I want to question the methodological soundness of Sedgwick’s stated intention to treat these (by no means self-evident) conclusions as “axiomatic.” It would seem that the sheer breadth of Foucault’s claim (that confession is
invested in the construction of oppressive power relations) demands interrogation rather than assumption. Indeed, Foucault’s conclusions about confession and sexuality are highly counterintuitive: by what logic, one might ask, is confession invested in the control of society? Is confession always complicit in the production of a controlled society? Does it matter what is being confessed? What about the context the confession takes place in? It would seem, for example, that a courtroom confession would operate according to a different political logic than a confession housed in the sacred space of a Catholic confessional. And the Catholic confession, in turn, would differ from the seemingly ubiquitous public confessions of politicians and celebrities. These, in turn, would seem to have little in common with the mass-distributed confessions of daytime television. By what logic, then, can Foucault suggest that confession simpliciter is an oppressive political technology?

For those of us invested in the political consequences of public discourse, these are important questions. And they are questions that Foucault does have answers to. But, because they are questions that are not being asked, there are few resources available to help us understand why, and in what contexts, Foucault believes that confession functions as a technology of social control. The seeming unwillingness to ask these questions manifests itself in the sheer diversity of discursive events that the Foucauldian confession is invoked to explain: the politics of “coming out,” the social dynamics of the television talk show, the contradictions inherent in the so-called Miranda rights, the aesthetics of erotic film, and practices of high school pedagogy. On a certain level, the ability to marshal Foucault’s work on confession for such divergent purposes is a good thing; John Muckelbauer has convinced me that reading Foucault generously means not getting
caught up in questions of accuracy—Did I get Foucault “correct”?—and instead focusing on questions of usefulness—How can Foucault help me think new thoughts? On another level, however, and I think Muckelbauer would agree with me, a focus on usefulness cannot serve as a license for refusing to critically engage Foucault’s arguments. It cannot, in other words, serve as a license to treat Foucault’s work on confession as “axiomatic.”

Foucault’s conclusions regarding the politics of confession demand interrogation because the refusal to properly circumscribe his work on confession leads to the un-Foucault-like conclusion that confession is everywhere, for all people and in all contexts, an unambiguously bad thing. This conclusion was reached by Cultural Studies scholar Jeremy Tambling, who asserts that, for Foucault, “the history of confession is that of power at the centre inducing people at the margins to internalize what is said about them—to accept that discourse and to live it, and thereby to live their oppression.”

Moreover, once this conclusion is reached, it is nearly self-evident that, as a society, we would be better off without confession. This is Peter Brooks’ conclusion. After reading Foucault, Brooks concludes that confession should be excised from the American legal system and confined “in the closed and protected space of the confessional.”

Clearly, a nuanced understanding of Foucault’s work on confession is needed. In this chapter, then, I aim to place parameters on his notion of confession: to explain why, precisely, he understands it as a technology of political oppression. This sort of precision enables us to trace the outlines of a project that Foucault hinted at in the later volumes of The History of Sexuality but never developed: a confessive practice that is not complicit in the production of an oppressive society. My argument then is this: Foucault is not indicting confession simpliciter as a technology of social control; he is not indicting
confession at all. The real target of Foucault’s polemics is not confession but what he calls the “hermeneutics of the self,” a rigorous evaluation of the inner self and the construction of an essential identity. To be sure, Foucault demonstrates beyond doubt that the “hermeneutics of the self” are, historically speaking, inextricable from some particular practices of confession, but this is not an essential connection. And, even when confession does involve a hermeneutics of the self, Foucault is careful to narrow his criticism such that its target is not confession per se, but rather the interpretation of the self that sometimes accompanies it. Moreover, Foucault also implies (and ‘implies’ is the strongest word possible here) that there may be confessive practices that do not depend on a “hermeneutics of the self” and which may not function as technologies of social control.

My claim that Foucault is criticizing only the politics of self-interpretation rather than the politics of confession is, of course, grounds for the larger claim with which I started my dissertation: that the Foucauldian critique of confession as a technology of social control is possible only because Rousseau first troped the confession and turned it into a discourse of self-expression. Indeed, I suggest that we can productively read Foucault’s critique of the hermeneutics of the self as a critique of expressivism. It is only when confession is understood as expressivism that it becomes, for Foucault, an instrument of political domination.

By arguing that Foucault’s critique of confession is directed solely against confession-as-expressivism, I also hope to suggest that Foucault would understand the Augustinian confession, as I described it in Chapter One, as a technique of resistance. Resistance is, for Foucault, a God-term; because he avoids the utopic language of
freedom and emancipation, resistance to power is the political act *par excellence*. But if the Augustinian confession can count as a Foucauldian technique of resistance (as I will argue it can), this will involve bracketing Foucault’s reading of Augustine. Foucault hardly ever mentions Augustine. But when he does mention him, Foucault reads Augustine as an originary force in the deployment of the expressivism which he is arguing against. This is, simply put, a bad reading of Augustine; my hunch is that after such close and meticulous attention to the confessive manuals of the medieval Catholic Church, Foucault glanced at Augustine and read him through the expressivist lenses he had developed elsewhere. By the end of this chapter, I hope it is clear that, despite what Foucault says about Augustine, the Foucauldian ideal of confession aligns nicely with the Augustinian *confessio*.

In order to read Foucault against expressivism, it is first necessary to remember that Foucault is not concerned with confession, strictly speaking. He is not concerned with confession in the same way that he is not concerned with prisons, hospitals, asylums, or sexuality—all these things are, for Foucault, so many sites where the operation of a new, and peculiarly modern, form of power is exercised. And it is this new form of power, rather than the particular sites in which he studies it, which interests him. To understand his work on confession, then, we must first understand Foucault’s general thesis on power.
Throughout the 1970s, Foucault argued that political theory had fundamentally misinterpreted the nature and operations of political power by thinking of it only in terms of the classical categories of the State, domination, subjection, and law. Foucault does not doubt that these pre-modern categories of thought explain some forms of contemporary political domination, but he insists that modern operations of power cannot be wholly explained in these terms. According to the pre-modern, or “juridico-discursive” model of power, power originates in a single sovereign source—the state, the legislator, the father, the prince—and operates exclusively in terms of prohibitions. Because it originates in a unified sovereign source, juridical power is necessarily a power that is exercised by the powerful against the marginal. It is a power that comes from “above” and demands, above all, obedience to the external sovereign. Foucault writes that, in the juridical conception of power, the sovereign “operates according to the simple and endlessly reproduced mechanisms of law, taboo, and censorship.” Dreyfus and Rabinow summarize Foucault’s conception of juridical power in a way that foregrounds the limitations of such a concept:

Power is domination. All it can do is forbid, and all it can command is obedience. Power, ultimately, is repression; repression, ultimately is the imposition of law; the law, ultimately, demands submission.

Modern power, Foucault insists, can do far more than simply forbid, deny, and repress, and for this reason Foucault insists that pre-modern juridical notions of power must be thought of as a counter-part to a uniquely modern conception of power.
This modern conception of power, which Foucault refers to as “bio-power,”
stands in the starkest of contrasts with juridical power. The decisive characteristic of bio-
power is its productivity. Unlike juridical power, which is “incapable of invention,” \(^\text{18}\) bio-power is “a power bent on generating forces, making them grow, and ordering them,
rather than one dedicated to impeding them, making them submit, or destroying them.” \(^\text{19}\)
Nancy Fraser explains that bio-power is productive because it utilizes the forces it would
subdue, rather than negating them. \(^\text{20}\) In other words, rather than proscriptions which
demand obedience and thereby negate the desires of the governed, bio-power produces
the very desires of those it would govern. The governed, whom Foucault refers to as
“subjects of power,” have thus internalized the power that was once, on the juridical
model, exercised from above. Bio-power, Foucault reasons, operates “within the social
body, rather than from above it.” \(^\text{21}\)

Foucault’s example *par excellence* of bio-power is Jeremy Bentham’s Panopticon.
I explore here Foucault’s reflections on the Panopitcon as exemplary of bio-power
because there is widespread agreement among Foucauldian scholars that confession
operates according to a similar logic as the political technology of the Panopticon. \(^\text{22}\)
The Panopticon, of course, was Bentham’s never-built prison. Architecturally, the prison was
defined by rows of backlit cells encircling a central observation tower. Given this
architecture, “all that is needed, then, is to place a supervisor in a central tower and to
shut up in each cell a madman, a patient, a condemned man, a worker or a schoolboy.”
The cells, Foucault reasons, are like “so many small theatres” in which the confined
remain always visible. \(^\text{23}\) Although the confined remain always visible, they are also
deprived of the power of sight; they cannot see other inmates, and, more importantly,
Bentham took pains to assure that inmates could not see if there was actually a guard in
the observation tower.\textsuperscript{24} The technology of power that Foucault claims is operative in the
Panopticon resides in the perpetual visibility of the inmates and invisibility of the guards;
because the inmates never know when they are or are not being observed, they will, in
theory, always behave. Foucault writes:

\begin{quote}
Hence the major effect of the Panopticon: to induce in the inmate a state of
conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning
of power. So to arrange things that the surveillance is permanent in its
effects, even if it is discontinuous in its action; that the perfection of power
should tend to render its actual exercise unnecessary; that this architectural
apparatus should be a machine for creating and sustaining a power relation
independent of the person who exercises it; in short, that the inmates
should be caught up in a power situation of which they are themselves the
bearers.\textsuperscript{25}
\end{quote}

Power has been internalized. Although there is a central observation tower in which, in
theory, a sovereign power is located, the ability of the prison to hold inmates in
subjection is unrelated to the presence or absence of a sovereign power. The power of the
prison depends not on the strength of the sovereign power, but on the fact that the
prisoners will police themselves. \textquoteleft\textquoteleft Power,\textquoteright\textquoteright\ Foucault writes, \textquoteleft\textquoteleft has its principle not so much
in a person as in a certain concerted distribution of bodies.\textquoteright\textquoteright\ Moreover, Foucault insists
that it doesn\textquotesingle t even matter who occupies the tower; because the power of the prison does
not depend on the strength of the sovereign, “any individual, taken almost at random, can operate the machine.”

Foucault insists that we understand the Panopticon not as a specific prison, but rather as an example of bio-power, a “diagram of a mechanism of power reduced to its ideal form.” What, then, can we learn about bio-power from this “diagram?” We learn, first, that bio-power is “capillary;” it emanates not from a central and sovereign power but resides rather in the minds of the inmates. Thus we learn, second, that bio-power has far more resources than juridical power. Unlike juridical power, which because it depends on a sovereign is “poor in resources, sparing of its methods, monotonous in the tactics it utilizes, incapable of invention, and seemingly doomed always to repeat itself,” bio-power is far more efficient, utilizing the bodies of the governed against themselves. In fact, Foucault insists that bio-power “reaches into the very grain of individuals, touches their bodies and inserts itself into their actions and attitudes, their discourses, learning processes and everyday lives.” Bio-power, then, appears to work from the inside; rather than rely on external guards like other prisons, the Panopticon, Muckelbauer explains, “produced the prisoner’s consciousness.” By producing a consciousness in which the prisoner “knows himself to be observed . . . [so that] he has no need in fact of being so,” bio-power eliminated the need for external guards and stringent prohibitions. This is what Foucault means when he claims that bio-power is productive: instead of outlawing disruptive practices, it produces subjects not given to disruption; bio-power informs the very attitudes and inclinations of those under its sway. In the case of the Panopticon, Foucault argues that bio-power produces “docile bodies”—inmates who are, in their inmost constitution, amenable to being ruled. Of course, this inmost constitution is
hardly interior; it is produced, a product of a specific mechanism of power (the Panopticon). Muckelbauer is particularly good on this point; he argues that, for Foucault, “the subject is an effect.” What he means is this: the Panopticon in particular and biopower in general operate by producing an illusion of inwardness and essential identity. This inwardness is an illusion because it is produced by external forces of power (the external architecture of the Panopticon, for example, produced prisoners who were, inwardly, docile).

Like the Panopticon, confession is a specific site in which bio-power is exercised. Confession, recall, is a “technology of the self,” it is a means of self-modification. But this self-modification is hardly innocent. Like the architecture of the Panopticon, the confession is a specific site in which power “inserts itself” into the actions, attitudes, and discourses of the subjects of power, creates an effect of inwardness, and renders them docile. Through confession, Foucault argues, confessants constitute themselves as subjects of power. To understand how this works, we must investigate in more detail what Foucault refers to as the “technology of confession.”

**Foucault on Confession**

Confession, for Foucault, is a fundamentally hermeneutic activity in which a person interprets him- or herself. This act of self-interpretation is *the* decisive characteristic of confession; it is because confession is a “hermeneutics of the self” that confession is, for Foucault, a site of bio-power and a “type of domination.” The object of interpretation is not one’s activities, but rather one’s internal “movements, senses,
pleasures, thoughts, and desires.” These internal thoughts and movements are elusive; Foucault describes them variously as the “nearly imperceptible movements of the thoughts,” the “mysteries of the heart” or the “barely discernable traces of desire [which need] to be read and interpreted.” It is the elusiveness of these inner movements that requires confession as an interpretive practice:

[How is it possible to perform continuously this necessary self-examination, this necessary self-control of the tiniest movements in the thoughts. How is it possible to perform this necessary hermeneutics of our own thoughts . . . . [W]ell, you interpret your thoughts by telling them to the master or to your spiritual father. You interpret your thoughts by conferring not of course your acts, not confessing your faults, but in confessing continuously the movement you can notice in your thought.]

The obligation to confess the elusive and mysterious movements of desire rather than particular and lucid actions is exemplified, for Foucault, by Augustine’s *Confessions*:

When Saint Augustine in his *Confessions* recalls the friendships of his youth, the intensity of his affections, the pleasures of the days spent together, the conversations, the enthusiasms of the good times, he wonders if, underneath its seeming innocence, all that did not pertain to the flesh, to that ‘glue’ which attaches us to the flesh.

Confession is thus for Foucault rooted in a deep suspicion of the self, a suspicion so deep that it questions even the “seeming innocence” of youth and searches for evidence of
hidden desires or inarticulate motivations. Confession, Foucault writes, involves a
“meticulous passage through the body, a sort of anatomy of the pleasures of the flesh.”40

By virtue of their inarticulateness, these hidden movements, senses, and pleasures
are, as a matter of course, without intrinsic meaning and without order. In order to
confess these movements, then, one must first interpret them in a particular way. One
must, by an act of the will, read the inarticulate movements of the soul as evidence of a
deeper truth about oneself. It is precisely because confession refuses to allow these
inarticulate urgings to remain inarticulate, because it enacts a rigorous interpretation and
forces the “prediscursive” movements of the soul into speech, that Foucault argues that
confession is a site of bio-power and a type of domination. The reason is this: by
churning inarticulate bodily impulses through the “mills of speech,” confession is forced
to interpret these impulses as evidence of a unified self. But a unified self is for Foucault,
of course, a fiction, a product of an arbitrary interpretive act. Like most of Foucault’s
arguments, this one is easiest to understand through his examples.

For Foucault, recall, Augustine interprets his inarticulate desires as evidence that
he is, at bottom, controlled by the flesh. Because confession is a hermeneutics of the self,
Augustine has, through confession, discovered the essential truth of his own identity. The
important thing to note is this: the interpretation is arbitrary, it is simply an interpretation.
Thus where Foucault’s Augustine claims that confession is invested in the discovery of
an essential self, Foucault counters that confession is invested in the creation of an
essential self. For, according to Foucault’s logic, Augustine could just as easily have
interpreted his inarticulate desires as evidence of any inner disposition; it was only an
arbitrary act of the will by which Augustine interpreted inarticulate movements as
evidence of “the flesh.” Paul Veyne captures the arbitrariness of this interpretation in his discussion of “madness,” which, like “the flesh,” is the result of an arbitrary hermeneutic act of power:

[A]t most, there are neural molecules arranged in a certain way, sentences or gestures that an observer from Sirius might see as different from those of other humans . . . . But what exist here are nothing but natural forms, trajectories in space, molecular structures or behaviors; these are material for a madness that does not yet exist at this stage.42

If molecules, sentences, and gestures are the material for madness, madness itself depends on an interpretive practice that would read them as such. Veyne captures the necessary arbitrariness of this interpretation by noting that foreign observers might not reach the same conclusions given the same materials.

Returning to Foucault’s Augustine example, then, we can say that the inarticulate movements of the soul are the materials of “the flesh,” and it is only in the act of confession that these materials are constituted as “the flesh.” Confession, then, like the Panopticon, produces an effect of inwardness; it reads inarticulate urgings as evidence of deeply personal truths. In Foucault’s terms: in the act of confession meaningless sensations are arbitrarily “group[ed] together in an artificial unity” and this “fictitious unity” is then interpreted as a “causal principle,” as the essential truth of who a person is.43

Foucault provides the birth of homosexuality as an example of how inwardness is produced through arbitrary interpretations. He reasons that the notion of “homosexuality”
requires an interpretive practice that would read particular urges, practices, and disturbances as evidence of a particular inner disposition—a “fictitious unity”—from which they all arose. He writes, “Homosexuality appeared as one of the forms of sexuality when it was transposed from the practice of sodomy onto a kind of interior androgyny, a hermaphrodisism of the soul.” In other (more lucid) words, Foucault argues that the advent of homosexuality was effected by a confessive practice which arbitrarily interpreted inarticulate desires as evidence of an essential self. Dreyfus and Rabinow summarize, arguing that confession works on the conviction that “the body and its desires, seen through a prism of interpretation, is the deepest form of truth about a particular individual.” However, because the “the body and its desires” are inarticulate and thus yield the truth of the self only through the interpretive practice of confession, the “deepest form of truth” will always be arbitrary, an abstraction, the effect of a particular hermeneutic act of the will. It is then not surprising that Foucault subtitled the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*—the text in which he most directly addresses confession—*The Will to Knowledge*. In this explicit act of homage to Nietzsche, Foucault is emphasizing that the knowledge of the self produced by confession is neither natural nor essential; it is political, the product of a will to knowledge.

The interpretation of various urges and practices as an indication of an inner essence capable of being labeled “homosexual” is only one example of the confessive process. Although Nancy Fraser has suggested that consistency is not one Foucault’s virtues, he is, regarding the process of confession, remarkably consistent. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault reasons that scaffold confessions were an interpretive practice that would read inner urges and twinges of guilt as evidence of a “soul.” Like
“homosexuality,” the “soul” is a fictitious grouping of otherwise meaningless urges that functions as the “deepest form of truth about a particular individual.” In Abnormal, Foucault argues that auricular confessions in the Roman Catholic tradition create “the flesh.” Same logic: confession interprets inner urges, arbitrarily identifies them as “the flesh,” and then interprets this fictitious unity as the site of the truest and most inner self. Finally, in The History of Sexuality, confession is invested in the production of “sexuality.” Like the “soul,” “homosexuality,” and “the flesh,” “sexuality” is neither natural nor biological: it “must not be thought of as a kind of natural given which power tries to hold in check, or as an obscure domain which knowledge tries gradually to uncover. It is the name that can be given to a historical construct.”

Sexuality, then, is the product of a “will to knowledge” that would read particular biological urges as evidence of an interior disposition.

Although the process of confession is never articulated apart from the particular examples provided above, it is possible to trace, apart from the examples, the decisive steps in the process. For Foucault, Confession is committed to the idea that there exists something other than bodies, organs, somatic localizations, functions, anatomo-physiological systems, sensations, and pleasures; something else and something more, with intrinsic properties and laws of its own.

Through a process of rigorous self-interpretation, the confessant interprets various somatic localizations and sensations and concludes that there is something that might be called an essential self behind the physicality of body. The sensations of the body are thus
arbitrarily grouped together in what Foucault, in various places, calls a “fictitious unity,” a “field of truth,” a “domain of knowledge,” or a “field of reference.”\textsuperscript{50} This “domain of knowledge”—whether it be “homosexuality,” “the soul” or something else—is then treated as “the deepest truth about the self.” This is why confession is a “technology of the self.” It is “a process in which the individual delimits that part of himself that will form the object of his moral practice . . . and decides on a certain mode of being.”\textsuperscript{51}

Through confession, the confessant creates and names a domain of knowledge which then becomes decisive for his or her sense of selfhood. Confession, in other words, is invested in the creation of inwardness (of the soul) from the materials of the body. Foucault concludes that, through confession, we have come to demand “our identity from what was perceived as an obscure and nameless urge.”\textsuperscript{52}

\textbf{The Politics of Confession}

Thus far I have argued that confession is a practice through which bio-power invests the body and creates a sense of inwardness that functions as the essential identity of an individual. It remains unclear why this process is so ominous. Unlike the Panopticon, which by its very design produced hyper-self-conscious and docile prisoners, it would seem that confession is a less determined site of power. If confession produces individuals through the arbitrary interpretation of inarticulate urges, why couldn’t it produce individuals particularly resistant to power? Moreover, in Foucault’s description of confession as a “technology of the self” he writes that confession is a technique whereby individuals
effect, by their own means, a certain number of operations on their own bodies, their own souls, their own thoughts, their own conduct, and this in a manner so as to transform themselves, modify themselves, and to attain a certain state of perfection, happiness, purity, supernatural power. Let’s call these techniques technologies of the self.\textsuperscript{53}

At first glance this would seem to be a potentially liberating practice. After all, it is a practice in which an individual may modify, by his or her own means, his or her own constitution. Although Foucault never addresses the question directly, I believe there are two reasons for arguing that, so long as confession is understood as a hermeneutic of the self, it will remain, for Foucault, an oppressive political practice. First, the hermeneutics of the self are diametrically opposed to both “archeology” and “genealogy,” two practices that Foucault associates with “progressive politics.”\textsuperscript{54} And second, the hermeneutics of the self is complicit in the normalization of society.

\textbf{Confession, Archeology, and Genealogy}

Foucault suggests that because the inwardness and sense of identity created through confession is an abstraction it is, as a matter of course, a type of domination. On this score it is important to note that the abstraction from inarticulate movements of the soul to an essential identity involves a false stabilization of dynamic and incommensurable urges. The inarticulate and prediscursive movements of the soul do not, Foucault insists, lend themselves to being grouped under a single coherent label as if they each contributed, without dissent, to a stable and unified identity. To pretend that the
materials of inwardness each proclaim a single identity, that the movements of the soul each bespeak “the flesh,” is to underestimate the fundamental heterogeneity of what is given. In the words of Carole Blair and Martha Cooper, it is to “confuse data with presuppositions.” In the words of Paul Veyne, it is to “[mistake] the object of a practice for a natural, well-known, unchanging, virtually material object.” What Foucault, Blair and Cooper, and Veyne are getting at is this: the self disclosed in confession is not a given, it is a presupposition, a product of a will to knowledge that runs roughshod over the irreducibly incommensurate data of the body.

With this background, the significance of Foucault’s twin methods of archaeology and genealogy comes to the fore. In Foucault’s world, archaeology and genealogy are both, in a sense, a means of working backwards from the falsely naturalized presuppositions and “fictitious unities” that are the result of confession to the incommensurable data from which they arose. In this sense, archeology and genealogy represent Foucault’s explicit methodological commitment to exposing the falsity and fundamental heterogeneity of “objects” that purport to be single, unified, and natural.

Foucault begins *The Archeology of Knowledge* by claiming that “we must rid ourselves of a whole mass of notions, each of which . . . diversifies the theme of continuity.” A notion that “diversifies the theme of continuity” is any notion that veils heterogeneities behind the guise of a unified system. Tradition, for example, is just such a notion; it reduces the vagaries of history to a series of repetitions: “[I]t makes it possible to rethink the dispersion of history in the form of the same.” Foucault lists several other notions (influence, evolution, author, *oeuvre*), but the decisive characteristic of each of these notions is this: each elides the irreducibility of differences by placing differences
within a system that purports to explain them, commensurate them, and unify them. Moreover, because these notions are “ready-made” and unexamined syntheses, they not only mask differences, but they mask the fact of their masking. They purport to be natural categories, self-evident groupings, and universally recognizable categories. Foucault insists that they are not and takes as his own task the methodological exposure of categories that masquerade as natural. He writes,

[A]ll these syntheses that are accepted without question, must remain in suspense. They must not be rejected definitively of course, but the tranquility with which they are accepted must be disturbed; we must show that they do not come about of themselves, but are always the result of a construction.  

The “domains of knowledge” or “fields of reference” constituted by confession are precisely the unquestioned syntheses that Foucault is after. Whether the field is “sexuality” or “the soul” or something else, it is, Foucault claims, a “ready-made synthesis . . . that we normally accept before any examination.” This acceptance is dangerous, according to Foucault, because it masks the extent to which the syntheses are themselves politically constituted, “the result of a construction.” And, because the synthesis masks its own construction, it also masks “the material with which one is dealing . . . in its raw, neutral state.” Recalling that the materials from which confession constitutes fields of reference are the movements of the body itself, Foucault concludes that confession, far from disclosing the self, or making it known, actually hides the self, obscures it behind a false unity called the self, sexuality, the soul. By producing fields of
reference, in other words, Foucault insists that confession ensures that people will never actually know themselves; they will know only the fictitious field of reference forced on them through a violent and arbitrary interpretation. Confession, we might conclude, amounts to a “complete denial of the body.”

This denial of the body has very real political consequences. Foucault suggests that we must do away with false syntheses so that we are not beholden to them, so that we can imagine other ways of being-in-the-world apart from the fictitious identities imposed on us through confession. Foucault claims that his deconstructive project makes it possible to “play different games,” or, as he puts it in volume two of *The History of Sexuality*, to “free thought from what it silently thinks, and so enable it to think differently.”

Foucault, then, believes that confession restrains thoughtfulness, it ensures continuity and sameness by denying the body, or, more accurately, by subjecting the body to the violence of arbitrary interpretation. In other words, Foucault argues that because confession produces a falsely naturalized and essentialized self, it makes it impossible to think differently and instead “legitmat[es] what is already known.”

The politics of “thinking differently” have a rich American history. Emerson, Dewey, and Rorty each in their own way argue that American democracy depends on an ability to think and act outside the bounds of tradition. Emerson’s “American Scholar,” for example, is distinguished by his (his) penchant for burning books. Dewey argues that American democracy depends on importing from the realm of technical sciences an “experimental method” designed to escape the confines of habitude and tradition. Rorty, perhaps, puts it most succinctly (and in the most Foucauldian terms) when he states that the role of a democratic government is to produce a “new sort of individual”
capable of “ever more novel, ever richer, forms of human happiness.” Although Foucault is by no means invested in American democracy, his point is the same. Muckelbauer explains that Foucault aims to “[provoke] reactions to normalized thought.” Such provocation shatters calcified and normative categories and, Muckelbauer explains, by doing so enables the production of “different ideas” rather than “reproducing a preexisting program.” Nancy Fraser agrees, arguing that, for Foucault, a politically emancipatory vocabulary must be future-oriented: “Foucault seems to assume that an adequate critique of discipline must await the appearance of an entirely new political rhetoric.” Foucault then, like Rorty, is invested in the production of productive individuals, individuals capable of producing ever more novel forms of human happiness. Foucault, however, insists that confession precludes this sort of individual: it creates individuals who are precisely incapable of thinking differently, of producing “ever more novel, ever richer, forms of human happiness.” Confession produces individuals who can think only in terms of the fictitious unities derived from a violent hermeneutics of the self.

In “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History” Foucault is more explicit about the ominous ramifications of false syntheses. In this influential essay, Foucault argues that every synthesis produced by confession must be a false synthesis because there is “nothing in man—not even his body—that is sufficiently stable to serve as the basis for self-recognition.” Applied to Foucault’s understanding of confession, this underscores the point made above that every synthesis is a false synthesis. The movements of the soul, in other words, are “unable to be mastered by the powers of synthesis.” And, because every synthesis is a false synthesis, Foucault concludes that the act of interpretation on
which the practice of confession depends is a violent exercise of the will to knowledge. Dilip Gaonkar summarizes succinctly: “Foucault is against interpretation.” Although Gaonkar no doubt exaggerates, his point is that Foucault recognizes that every act of interpretation is an act of violence—interpretation forces the insufficiently stable and irreducibly heterogeneous materials of the body to function in the service of a stabilized identity.

The operation is bound to failure. And the result, Foucault teaches us, is a “denial of the body” (in favor of the false synthesis) and the fact that “Europeans no longer know themselves.” How could they? They are blinded from their own bodies by the fictitious unities that confession produces. The need, then, is for a self-knowledge that is attentive to the heterogeneities of the body. For Foucault, this sort of self-knowledge is the product of “genealogy.” He argues that genealogy must “record the singularity of events outside of any monotonous finality.” By recording the singularity of events, genealogy reverses the logic of confession. While confession collapses singular events into false syntheses, genealogy is a form of “descent” from these syntheses to a consideration of the raw materials from which they were built.

Where the soul pretends unification or the self fabricates a coherent identity, the genealogist sets out to study the beginning—numberless beginnings whose faint traces and hints of color are readily seen by an historical eye. The analysis of descent permits the disassociation of the self, its recognition and displacement as an empty synthesis, in liberating a profusion of lost events.
While confession is a false association, genealogy is a *disassociation*. While confession ignores the specificity of the body; genealogy “attaches itself to the body.” While confession treats the syntheses it creates as evidence of an essential identity, genealogy recognizes that “truth or being do not lie at the root of what we know and what we are.” Finally, while confession is premised on the disclosure of inwardness, genealogy exposes inwardness as an effect of external powers. In short, the inescapable conclusion of “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History” is that confession-as-expressivism is diametrically opposed to genealogy.

Genealogy, moreover, is, for Foucault, a political practice as much an intellectual method. Near the end of the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault argues that “the rallying point for the counterattack against the deployment of sexuality ought not to be sex-desire, but bodies and pleasures.” In other words, Foucault is arguing that political resistance depends on *genealogy*, on being able to “descend” from the fictitious unity of sexuality to the heterogeneity of “bodies and pleasures.” We must, Foucault writes, “counter the grips of power with the claims of bodies, pleasures, and knowledges, *in their multiplicity* and their possibilities of resistance.” The possibility of resistance to bio-power, in other words, hinges on doing away with any “notions of continuity” that would veil multiplicity in fictitious unities. In “History, Discourse, and Discontinuity,” Foucault puts it this way: a “progressive politics” rejects false abstractions and “univocal determinations” in order to recover the possibility of thinking differently.

Given this fundamental opposition between the functions of confession and genealogy, then, it begins to become clear why confession is, for Foucault, an instrument of domination. By denying the body and clinging instead to false syntheses, confession
tends to obscure the operations of power. Confession falsely naturalizes the self; confession misleads us by making us believe in natural selves. Genealogy is emancipatory because it reveals that these syntheses are “always constructions.” Genealogy is, in this sense, more honest: it exposes “the self” as a product of power and, by doing so, reminds us that the body may be constructed otherwise.

Confession and the Normalization of Society

It is not only because confession counters the resistances of archeology and genealogy that Foucault believes that it is a technology of social control. The second reason that Foucault believes confession is a technology of discipline is that the “hermeneutics of the self” is complicit in the normalization of society. Unlike juridical notions of power which operate via prohibitions, bio-power operates by producing normalized subjects—subjects who “qualify, measure, appraise, and hierarchize” themselves against standards of normalcy. There are, however, preconditions for all this qualification and measurement. The pleasures of the body, for example, resist such qualification until they are organized into fictitious unities or “general categories” that lend themselves to comparison. That is why confession is complicit in the production of a normalizing society; it produces the categories that can be measured and compared against a norm.

Normalization, then, depends on a particular sequence of activities: examination, objectification, and arrangement. The order is important: bio-power cannot arrange what
is not an object and, in *Discipline and Punish* at least, the technology of objectification *par excellence* is the examination. Foucault writes:

> And the examination is the technique by which power, instead of emitting the signs of its potency, instead of imposing its mark on its subjects, holds them in a mechanism of objectification. In this space of domination, disciplinary power manifests its potency, essentially, by arranging objects.  

Note again the order of bio-power: it first examines, second objectifies, third arranges. And, this space of arrangement is a space of domination. Let’s consider this sequence in detail.

First, bio-power cannot arrange what is not an object. Although this may seem trivial, it must be remembered that it is a Foucauldian truism that objectification is the condition of existence. Through processes of objectification, new things come into existence; things such as “souls,” “sexuality,” “the self,” “the flesh,” etc. These “objects” should be familiar; they are the fictitious unities that are created—objectified, made into objects that can be talked about—through practices of confession. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault argues that objectification occurs through the *examination*. The meticulous examination of prisoners—through constant visibility, through ritualized interviews, and through regular tests—created a new “domain of knowledge,” a new science of the prisoner. This new science “individualized” the prisoner; he was no longer prisoner *simpliciter*, he was “dangerous,” “delinquent,” “intellectual,” “vicious,” “inept,” “incapable,” etc. etc. This relentless “individualization” of the prisoners through
examination is also an “objectification” because it creates new objects (the dangerous prisoner, for example) that can then be categorized and arranged. The examination, Foucault claims, marks “the problem of the entry of the individual into the field of knowledge.”

This entry of the “individual” and highly specified prisoner into the field of knowledge is what enables bio-power to operate via normalization. In ways that a prisoner simpliciter could never be, the individualized prisoner could be “described, judged, measured, compared with others.” His “progress” and “rehabilitation” could now be measured against standards of normality, his punishment could be uniquely calibrated to his aptitudes, and his individuality rather than his actions could be the object of punishment. In short, the examination turned the prisoner into a “describable, analyzable object” and “made this description a means of control and a method of domination.”

It is not incidental that Foucault insists on calling fictitious unities (“individuals,” “souls,” etc.) “objects.” He is trying to emphasize that although these unities or syntheses may be in some sense fictitious—because they are only the product of arbitrary interpretations or meticulous examinations—they are, in another sense, as real as can be. He writes of “the soul,” for example:

It would be wrong to say that the soul is an illusion, or an ideological effect. On the contrary, it exists, it has a reality, it is produced permanently around, on, within the body by the functioning of a power that is exercised on those punished . . . . This is the historical reality of this soul, which, unlike the soul represented by Christian theology, is not born in sin and
subject to punishment, but is born rather out of methods of punishment, supervision and constraint.86

This emphasis on the objectivity—and thus the reality—of the false syntheses produced by confession is important: it is what enables bio-power to dominate by means of normalization. It is the reality of these constructions that provide “a hold for a branch of power.”87 If these fictitious unities had no objective reality, bio-power would have no point of purchase, for it could not organize the body as such. For the pleasures of the body are multiple and diffuse, they resist organization because “there is nothing stable in them.” The pleasures of the body must first be objectified and turned into “general categories” for bio-power to act. Foucault is insistent on this: it is objectification that provides for normalization. For example, it was the “soul of the criminal” that “the very apparatus of punishment fabricated as a point of application of the power to punish.” In other words, bio-power first creates “the soul” through objectification and then uses it as a point of critical purchase against which it acts. “The soul,” Foucault writes, “is the prison of the body.”88

Confession, then, according to Foucault, is a technology of social control because it objectifies the body and thus constitutes the confessant as a “describable object” which may then be hierarchized according to standards of normality. The significance of confession comes through clearly in the example of “the delinquent”—yet another Foucauldian false synthesis or fictitious unity. Unlike “the offender,” Foucault explains, who is defined by his (his) acts and thus exists as sort of given, “the delinquent” requires objectification through discursive practices to exist. The offender, we might say, is the
material from which the delinquent is produced. The process of objectifying the
delinquent is a rigorous process of examination that identifies (creates) “the criminal”
(another false synthesis) behind the crime: “The observation of the delinquent should go
back not only to the circumstances, but also to the causes of his crime; they must be
sought in the story of his life . . . [his] instincts, drives, tendencies, character.” Just as
Foucault’s Augustine produced “the flesh” by searching for hidden motivations,
techniques of examination produce “the delinquent” in the same manner: “Behind the
offender, to whom the investigation of the facts may attribute responsibility for an
offence, stands the delinquent whose slow formation is shown in a biographical
investigation.”89 And, just as in the above example in which the soul, once objectified,
became the prison of the body, here delinquency became an object to be “known,
assessed, measured, diagnosed, [and] treated” by the sentencing of criminals.90

In this example, the process of objectification is a process of interpreting the body
as evidence of an inner disposition that produced a criminal. This is exactly the same
process as confession: in both cases, the materials of the body are subjected to an
arbitrary interpretation in order to constitute a false synthesis which is then treated as an
essential identity. The examination, which is so prevalent in Discipline and Punish, then,
operates according to the same logic as confession. It is, after all, not incidental that, in
Abnormal, Foucault identifies confession as a particular technology of examination.91
Moreover, Nancy Fraser explains that confession works on the same principles as the
panopticon: it objectifies through “an asymmetrical, unidirectional visibility, or perhaps
one should say audibility.”92 Confession, then, is a technology of social control because it
constitutes confessants as subjects of bio-power.
To clarify how confession constitutes subjects of bio-power, I return to *The History of Sexuality*, the text in which Foucault directly addresses confession. As I discussed above, confession is a “hermeneutics of the self” which reads the materials of the body as evidence of an internal “sexuality” which then functions as an essential identity. What I wish to focus on now is the ways in which “sexuality,” once constituted, functions not only as the site of one’s truest identity, but also as “a hold” against which bio-power acts. Foucault writes, “sex became a crucial target of power organized around the management of life rather than the menace of death.” After confession “codified the flesh” and turned the sexual impulses of the body into describable and analyzable units, various strategies emerged through which bio-power latched onto these units (fictitious unities) in order dominate those who would confess. Women’s bodies were hystericized and integrated with medical practices designed to observe and control female sexuality; pedagogical practices reoriented themselves to the control of children’s sexualities; a proliferation of laws emerged surrounding contraceptives and who could use them; and, finally, psychiatric practices developed in order to record, compare, and correct anomalous sexual practices. In sum, by codifying the sensations of body, confession enabled and “gave rise to infinitesimal surveillances, permanent controls, extremely meticulous orderings of space, indeterminate medical or psychological examinations, to an entire micro-power concerned with the body.”
Conclusion

By situating Foucault’s work on confession in the larger contexts of his general thesis on power, I hope to have shown that Foucault is not attacking confession *simpliciter* as a technology of social control. Confession, like the Panopticon, is only a site of bio-power—a “diagram of a mechanism of power”—and, just as one might imagine prisons that do not work on a panoptic principle, one might also imagine a confessive practice not invested in the reification of social norms. What Foucault is decrying in both *Discipline and Punish* and *The History of Sexuality* are the mechanisms in contemporary society through which bio-power invests human life and introduces a gentle yet vicious form of domination into human affairs. Foucault is no more decrying the act of confession than he is the necessity of prisons. He is concerned with far larger game: the confession and the prison serve only as examples of a new and insidious form of power which is, and always has been, his main preoccupation.96 This new type of power operates “by means of surveillance,”97 and for this reason, and this reason only, practices of confession and Bentham’s Panopticon are relevant: they render the human body visible in new ways and, as such, provide new routes for disciplinary power.

It is a mistake to say that Foucault believes that confession *simpliciter* is a technology of social control. Rather, for Foucault, confession is a technology of social control only to the extent that it objectifies the human body and renders it vulnerable to disciplinary power through a hermeneutics of the self. In a sense, Foucault is not concerned with confession at all, he is concerned with any social practice that tropes the body by turning it into an object that can be disciplined. He writes, “What I mean by
‘confession,’ even though I can well see that the term may be a little annoying, is all those procedures by which the subject is incited to produce a discourse of truth about his sexuality which is capable of having effects on the subject himself.” What Foucault, for the most part, fails to notice is this: some practices of confession incite the confessant to produce a discourse about himself through a rigorous hermeneutics of the self; some do not. It is, in other words, only by improperly conflating the hermeneutics of the self with practices of confession that Foucault is able to decry confession as a technology of social control without qualification.

As I have shown, the decisive characteristic of those confessions which do incite the confessant to produce “a discourse of truth” about himself is the interpretation of the body as “the self.” Foucault notes, however, that there are, or could be, practices of confession that do not depend on a hermeneutics of the self. These practices of confession would focus on talking about trangressive acts, rather than the always-fictitious self from which they sprang. Indeed, in every place that Foucault talks about confession, he is clear that he is not talking about a disclosure of acts, but rather the constitution of a “self” by which those acts could be rationalized or explained. In Abnormal Foucault writes that confession is an “internal jurisdiction that had had to judge the individual himself, rather than an external jurisdiction concerned with the examination of actions.” This distinction between the confession of the self and the confession of actions is, for Foucault, decisive. It is only when confession is understood as a speaking of the self rather than a disclosure of actions that it becomes a technology of social control. For Foucault, the objectification of the body is effected “by confessing not of course your acts, not confessing your faults, but in confessing
continuously the movement you can notice in your thought.” It is the constitution of
the sinner behind the sin, the delinquent behind the offender, or the homosexual behind
the acts and desires that Foucault finds so insidious.

In fact, if confession were oriented to acts rather than thoughts, there is some
(meager) evidence to suggest that Foucault might understand confession as an act of
resistance, rather than a disciplinary mechanism. Near the end of volume one of The
History of Sexuality Foucault writes:

We must not think that by saying yes to sex, one says no to power; on the
contrary, one tracks along the course laid out by the general deployment of
sexuality. It is the agency of sex that we must break away from if we aim .
. . to counter the grips of power with the claims of bodies, pleasures, and
knowledges, in their multiplicity and their possibility of resistance. The
rallying point for the counterattack against the deployment of sexuality
ought not to be sex-desire, but bodies and pleasures.

Sexuality cannot be a mechanism of resistance for the simple reason that it is a fictitious
unity that is disciplined by power. Foucault suggests, however, that we may counter the
disciplinary effects of sexuality by a “descent” to the material of sexuality—the acts and
pleasures themselves. Volumes two and three of The History of Sexuality seem to be an
attempt to do just this. In these volumes Foucault describes in careful detail the sexual
practices of the ancient Greeks and Romans respectively. He explains that he does so in
order to cultivate an “art of existence” or a “technology of the self” focused on acts and
practices rather than the search for a self behind the practices. In ancient times, Foucault
writes, sexual activity was understood “not as an expression of, or commentary on, deep and essential prohibitions, but as the elaboration and stylization of an activity in the exercise of its power and the practice of its liberty.” Foucault, in other words, is trying to recover the *materials* of sexuality as a foundation for practices of resistance. He returns to Athens and Rome because the rigorous focus on the body which he finds there serves to displace our contemporary denial of the body in favor of such false syntheses as “sexuality,” “homosexuality,” “the sinner,” etc.

To the extent that Foucault is, in these later works, trying to recover a confessive practice calibrated according to acts or practices rather than self-expression, it seems that he would find an ally in the Augustinian *confessio*. Augustine’s insistence that the self is an unknowable “riddle” (*quaestio mihi factus sum*) is highly consonant with Foucault’s insistence that there is “nothing in man . . . sufficiently stable to serve as the basis for self-recognition.” For both thinkers, confession must fail if it is understood as self-expression. Further, Augustine’s insistence that confession is a speaking-of-transgression is an approach to confession that Foucault could condone.

This is not to suggest that Augustine and Foucault do not have their differences. Foucault would be appalled by confession as a discourse of dependence. Foucault’s “aesthetics of existence” are to be employed in the service of “thinking differently,” and the emphasis of Augustine on the dependency of the self would no doubt strike Foucault as a force that would limit the possibilities of thinking differently. Likewise, Foucault’s folding of confession into an “aesthetics of existence” which helps people think differently, would doubtless strike Augustine as a denial of the basic dependencies of the self and as a form of pride. Augustine would accuse Foucault of turning confession
against its purpose—the cultivation of dependency. For all these differences, however, Augustine and Foucault agree in their critique of expressivism: for both thinkers expressivism undermines the politics of confession.
Notes


“I would say that we should direct our researches on the nature of power not towards the juridical edifice of sovereignty, the State apparatuses and the ideologies which accompany them, but towards domination and the material operations of power, towards forms of subjections and the inflections and utilizations of their localized systems, and toward strategic apparatuses. We must eschew the model of the Leviathon in the study of power. We must escape from the limited field of juridical sovereignty and State institutions, and instead base our analysis of power on the study of the techniques and tactics of domination.” Michel Foucault, “Two Lectures,” in Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 102.

12 The precise dating of the emergence of modern operations of power is not clear. In some places Foucault suggests that modern power emerged in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Ibid., 119), while in other places he suggests that modern power emerged in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Michel Foucault, "Prison Talk," in Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 38.


15 “Confronted by a power that is law, the subject who is constituted as subject—who is “subjected”—is he who obeys” (Sexuality 1:85).

16 Foucault, Sexuality, 1:84.
17 Dreyfus and Rabinow, *Michel Foucault*, 130.


19 Ibid., 1:136.


24 Foucault explains that Bentham insisted that the windows of the observation tower be equipped with Venetian blinds and that the inner architecture of the observation be constructed as a series of “zig-zag openings” which would prevent the “slightest noise, a gleam of light, a brightness in a half-opened door would portray the presence of the guardian” (*Discipline and Punish* 201).


26 Ibid., 202.

27 Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 205.


Muckelbauer, "On Reading Differently," 77.

Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 201.

“A body is docile that may be subjected, used, transformed and improved” (*Discipline and Punish*, 136).

Muckelbauer, "On Reading Differently," 77.

“In *Discipline and Punish* and *The History of Sexuality* Foucault will identify specific sites in which rituals of power take place—the Panopticon of Bentham and the confessional. He will use these to localize and specify how power works, what it does and how it does it” (Dreyfus and Rabinow, *Michel Foucault*, 110).


Foucault notes that these internal movements “have an inapparent origin, obscure roots, secret parts, and the role of verbalization is to excavate these origins and those secret parts” (“About the Beginning,” 220).

Foucault, "About the Beginning," 219.

Foucault, *Abnormal*, 186.

To the best of my knowledge, Foucault never uses the word “prediscursive” to describe the inner movements of the soul that confession interprets. The word was significant much earlier in Foucault’s career; in *The Archeology of Knowledge*, Foucault uses it as part of his argument that “madness” is produced. He argues that the designation of a particular person as “mad” requires a particular interpretation of “prediscursive experiences.” *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982), 47.


Ibid., 1:43.

Dreyfus and Rabinow, *Michel Foucault*, 175 (emphasis mine).


Ibid., 1:152-3.
This field of reference, Foucault insists, must not be thought of as “an illusion, or an ideological effect. On the contrary, it exists, it has a reality, it is produced permanently around, on, with in the body by the function of a power that is exercised on those punished” (Discipline and Punish, 29).


Foucault, Sexuality, 1:156.

Foucault and Sennett, "Sexuality and Solitude," 5.


Veyne, "Foucault Revolutionizes History," 160.

Foucault, The Archaeology of Knowledge, 21.

Ibid., 25.

Ibid., 22.

Ibid., 27.

Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," in Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews, ed. Donald F. Bouchard (Ithica: Cornell University Press, 1977), 156. See also: “[Y]ou will become the subject of the
manifestation of truth when and only when you disappear or you destroy yourself as a real body or as a real existence” (Foucault, “About the Beginning” 221).


64 Ibid.


68 Muckelbauer, "On Reading Differently," 74.

69 Fraser, "Foucault's Body Language," 61.

70 Foucault, "Nietzsche," 153.

71 Ibid., 161.


73 Foucault, "Nietzsche," 159.

74 Ibid., 139.

75 Ibid., 145-6.

76 Ibid., 147, 146.

78 Ibid., 1:157 (emphasis mine).


80 Foucault, Sexuality, 1:144. See also: “[W]hereas the juridical systems define juridical subjects according to universal norms, the disciplines characterize, classify, specialize; they distribute along a scale, around a norm, hierarchize individuals in relation to one another and, if necessary, disqualify and invalidate” (Foucault, Discipline and Punish, 223). Again: “The disciplines may well be carriers of a discourse that speaks of a rule, but this is not the juridical rule deriving from sovereignty, but a natural rule, a norm. The code they come to define is not that of law but that of normalization” (Foucault, “Two Lectures,” 106).

81 Foucault, Discipline and Punish, 183.

82 Ibid., 187.

83 “What, in short, we wish to do is dispense with ‘things’. . . . To substitute for the enigmatic treasure of ‘things’ anterior to discourse, the regular formation of objects that emerge only in discourse. To define these objects without reference to the ground, the foundation of things, but by relating them to the body of rules that enable them to form as objects of a discourse and thus constitute the conditions of their historical appearance” (Archeology, 47-8).

84 Foucault, Discipline and Punish, 253-4, 191. Also: “The individual is an effect of power, and at the same time, or precisely to the extent to which it is that effect, it is the element of its articulation. The individual which power has constituted is at the same time its vehicle” (“Two Lectures,” 98).
85 Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 190-191.

86 Ibid., 29.

87 Ibid., 191.

88 Ibid., 255, 30.

89 Ibid., 252-3.

90 Ibid., 255.

91 In this work, Foucault emphasizes that the examination is, historically speaking, the central component of confession: “[The priest] prods [the confessant], questions him, clarifies his confession by a technique of examination of conscience” (*Abnormal*, 175).

92 Fraser, *Unruly Practices*, 23.


94 Ibid., 1:104-5.

95 Ibid., 145-6.

96 “I ask myself what else it was that I was talking about, in *Madness and Civilization* or *The Birth of the Clinic*, but power? Yet I’m perfectly aware that I scarcely ever used the word . . .” (Truth and Power,” 115).

97 Foucault, "Two Lectures," 104.


Talking about confession, Foucault writes that “the primary material for scrutiny and for the examination of the self is an area anterior to actions . . . the nearly imperceptible movements of his thoughts, the permanent mobility of soul” (“About the Beginning” 217).


103 Ibid., 2:23.

104 For more on the body as a source of resistance see Barbara Biesecker, "Michel Foucault and the Question of Rhetoric," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 25, no. 4 (1992); and Fraser, "Foucault's Body Language."
Chapter Four

The “Shocking Story” of Emmett Till and the Politics of Public Confession

On August 20, 1955, a black fourteen-year old boy with a speech impediment, known to his friends as “Bobo” and to history as Emmett Till, boarded a Chicago train bound for the Mississippi Delta. Although nearly every detail of Till’s Delta visit is contested, what has become the standard story runs as follows: Four days after his arrival in the town of Money, Mississippi, Bobo entered Bryant’s Grocery and Meat Market on a dare from his friends. Bobo, the story goes, had been bragging about his bi-racial sexual prowess when one of his friends challenged him to prove it: “You talkin’ mighty big, Bo. There’s a pretty white woman in there in the sto’. Since you Chicago cats know so much about white girls, let’s see you go in there and get a date with her.”¹ Bobo went in and, depending on which account you trust, did at least one of the following: bought bubble-gum, talked to the “pretty white woman,” asked her for a date, used obscene language, squeezed her hand, put his arm around her waist and pulled her body tight against his, or—what has become the most widely accepted version of the story—simply whistled at her.

The pretty white woman in question was Carolyn Bryant. In the early morning of August 28 Carolyn’s husband, Roy Bryant, along with his half-brother J.W. Milam, showed up at the house where the young Till was staying, forced him to dress, and took him away in Milam’s 1955 Chevrolet pickup. Depending on which account you trust, Bryant and Milam then did at least one of the following: interrogated the boy and let him
go, “whacked” him a few times with a colt .45, beat him so severely that neighbors heard screams for mercy and mother, castrated him and stuffed his penis in his mouth, drilled completely though his head with a brace and bit such that his mother could later claim that she could gaze into a hole in his temple and see light out the other side, or—what has become the most widely accepted version of the story—beat him, stripped him, shot him in the head, attached his naked and lifeless body to a cotton-gin fan with a length of barbed wire, and sank him in the Tallahatchie river. One thing we know for sure: the river wouldn’t hold him. Three days after his abduction a local fisherman spotted Till’s feet protruding from water. When the authorities arrived, they pulled the corpse from the water and, because the body had been beaten beyond recognition, Till’s uncle was forced to identify his nephew by the Till-family ring still clinging to his finger.

If the muddy waters of the Tallahatchie could not hold Till’s body, neither could the Mississippi Delta hold the *corpus delicti*. Thousands of Chicagoans filled the streets outside Robert’s Temple Church of God to see the beaten body of Emmett Till. *Jet* magazine famously published photos of the boy’s face, and within days the lynching of Emmett Till was a world-wide news event.  

For the first time in history, the northern press descended on a Mississippi trial and, as journalist David Halberstam would later put it, turned the Till affair into “the first great media event of the civil rights movement.”

When, on September 23, an all-white jury needed only sixty-seven minutes to acquit J.W. Milam and Roy Bryant, protests erupted in Chicago, Baltimore, and Los Angeles, and papers from across Europe denounced the “unworthy and shameful verdict.”

As I will demonstrate, the world-wide news coverage and the nation-wide protests were a small part of a widespread but short-lived phenomenon: the public debate over
justice in Mississippi. For a few short months it seemed as though everyone was talking about Emmett Till and debating the facts of the case. What is interesting to me, however, is this: when the public confession finally came some five months after the murder, people stopped talking. And they stopped talking for a long time; it was not until some twenty-four months ago when, in the spring of 2004, the Justice Department re-opened the case and put Emmett Till back into the news, that people started to once again debate the facts of the case. In this chapter, I narrate not the story of Emmett Till’s murder, but rather the story of the explosion of discourse that followed the murder, and the subsequent contraction of discourse that followed the public confession. It is the contraction of discourse that interests me: why is five months of vigorous debate followed by fifty years of relative silence. I suggest that we can explain this curious contraction of discourse by explaining the politics of confession. In particular, I suggest that expressivism is to blame; the expressive confession naturalized the murder by suggesting that the murder was not a product of speech, action, or human agency, but it was rather simply a product of the way things are in the pre-civil-rights South. And, insofar as the murder was naturalized, it was by definition not something to be redressed through speech.

This chapter is the first of three chapters dedicated to demonstrating through case-studies the insidiousness of expressivism. In this case, the confession-as-expressivism naturalized the murder and contributed to an elision of justice.
Discursive Contexts for the Public Confession

The immensely popular writer for the black press Olive Arnold Adams summarized the reaction to the murder and subsequent acquittal:

It was a story with the impact of Pearl Harbor. In fact it was even more stunning, for it was difficult to fathom the kind of brutality displayed in this murder of a 14-year-old boy. . . . This was a cold-blooded, ruthless, base, utterly senseless sacrifice of human life, and you wanted to see what kind of atmosphere could breed such hatred. You agreed with the millions who said somebody ought to do something about Money, but you knew that in order to do something about it, you had to understand the who—the what—the why.  

Adams was right on both counts; the beating was brutal and people did want to understand. Perhaps because of this palpable need to comprehend the extent of the brutality, there were, within months of the trial, dozens of exposes each claiming to tell the true story of Emmett Till. The first was the “Inside Story” written by the renowned African-American journalist James L. Hicks. The “Inside Story” began:

Here for the first time is the true story of what happened in the hectic five-day trial of two white men in Mississippi, for the murder of 14-year-old Emmett Till of Chicago. This story has never been written before. . . .

In the months that followed the publication of the “Inside Story,” Hick’s boasts of originality, authenticity, and truthfulness would be repeated ad infinitum by journalists.
selling competing versions of Till’s story. Ernest C. Withers, for example, promised the “first and only complete, factual photo story of the Till case . . . designed to meet public demand.”\(^{10}\) Olive Arnold Adams wrote *Time Bomb: Mississippi Exposed and the Full Story of Emmett Till* in which she promised to tell the “real story” that was “told in whispers” and not circulated in the mainstream press.\(^{11}\) Finally, the award-winning journalist Ethel Payne published “Mamie Bradley’s Untold Story” in the *Chicago Defender* in which Mamie claimed “to tell the story [of her son’s murder] so that the truth will arouse men’s consciences and right can at last prevail.”\(^{12}\)

In addition to the various printed exposes claiming to tell the truth of Emmett Till, there was, within weeks of the trial, a vibrant celebrity-driven lecture circuit committed to providing the public with a “comprehensive” and “detailed account of the recent murder of Emmett Till.”\(^{13}\) Speakers included the Honorable Charles C. Diggs Jr., the first African-American Congressman, Dr. T.R.M. Howard, President of the Regional Council of Negro Leadership, NAACP leaders Ruby Hurley, Roy Wilkins, and Medgar Evers, and Till’s mother, Mamie Bradley. This Till lecture circuit was a resounding success: 2,500 people in Baltimore’s Sharp Methodist Church, 16,000 people crowded into New York’s Williams Church, 15,000 in Detroit, and Cleveland’s Antioch Baptist Church turned away more than 600 people who were then willing to stand in the streets in order to hear Till’s story told.\(^{14}\)

In sum, despite a *Commonweal* editorial which asked what one could possibly say in the face of such unspeakable horror, and despite Christine Harold and Kevin DeLuca’s claim that the “ineffable” story of Emmett Till overmatched the powers of “eloquence,” the entire Till affair was characterized by an uncommon loquacity.\(^{15}\) From Milam’s
announcement upon the abduction of the young Till that he was “looking for the boy who’d done the talking,” to the myriad of exposes and the vibrant lecture circuit, the story of Emmett Till is so laden with discordant voices that rhetorician Davis Houck can claim that the affair happened not so much in the Mississippi Delta as in the scores of articles and speeches that continually retold Till’s story.\(^16\)

Speech, however, is a fragile thing, and the story of Emmett Till is, in many ways, the story of speech eclipsed by silence. As literary scholar Christopher Metress put it, because the boy who’d done the talking “wouldn’t shut up” he had to be “silenced in the most extreme way.”\(^17\) Although the brutal silencing of Till is certainly the most tragic, it is only the first instance of what would become a repeated pattern in the discursive constructions of Emmett Till: speech giving way to, and indeed producing, silence. On January 24, 1956—nearly five months after Till’s murder—the market for the lecture circuit and the cultural conditions underpinning what had become a veritable industry dedicated to the production of Emmett Till’s truth evaporated. On this day the seventh-generation Alabama journalist William Bradford Huie entered “The Shocking Story of Approved Killing in Mississippi” into the truth-saturated market of Emmett Till exposes. Published in \textit{Look} magazine, his shocking story began with the rather commonplace claim that he was presenting “here, for the first time, the real story of [the Emmett Till] killing.”\(^18\) Yet, despite the generic beginning, Huie’s telling of the story enjoyed such an unrivaled success that it was quickly translated into eight different languages.\(^19\)

More than any other telling, Huie’s “Shocking Story” has controlled the collective memory of Till’s murder. James Baldwin entered Huie’s story into the world of American prose, Audre Lorde lodged the story in American poetry, Bob Dylan assured
the story a place in American rock and roll, and a recent issue of *Rhetoric & Public Affairs*—a “special issue” dedicated to the memory of Emmett Till, Rosa Parks, and Martin Luther King Jr.—conferred a legitimacy on Huie’s story by telling it again within its own refereed pages.²⁰ Despite the fact that dozens of exposes disagreed on dozens of points, historians correctly argue that Huie’s telling so “thoroughly dominated the discourse” surrounding the death of Emmett Till that it effectively “pushed aside” all competing accounts “for decades to come.”²¹ The power of the “Shocking Story” marked the demise of further debate; as an advertisement in the *Chicago Defender* put it, the truth of Emmett Till was now “exclusively in Look Magazine.”²²

It is almost a given that the power of the text stems from its authorial ambiguity. To be sure, the byline listed William Bradford Huie as the author, but the second half of the text contains so many quotations from J.W. Milam, and such a detailed account of Milam’s changing motives at every stage in the crime, that it is hard not to agree with Congressman Diggs’ assessment: The “stunning revelations are so detailed and stated so positively . . . [that] there is no doubt in my mind that the information came directly from the killers themselves.”²³ Indeed, although Huie narrates most of the story, at the climax of the story, immediately before Till is killed, Milam’s purported words eclipse Huie’s own and it does seem as though Milam has taken over the telling of the “Shocking Story.” Given this fundamental ambiguity, the NAACP’s Roy Wilkins posed exactly the right question: “Who stands behind these ‘facts,’ Mr. Huie?”²⁴ If Mr. Huie alone stands behind the “Shocking Story” then it is difficult to explain the immediate and enduring power of the article. If, however Milam also stands behind the words printed in *Look*, then the “Shocking Story” is not just a story, it is also a confession, that form of discourse
that boasts a privileged relationship to truth and, as Peter Brooks put it, “bears a special
stamp of authenticity.”

Although a careful reading of the “Shocking Story” lends credence to James
Baldwin’s objection that “one cannot refer to [Milam’s] performance as a confession,”
history has followed the judgment of Hicks who, writing for The Afro-American, claimed
that “in the magazine article [Milam and Bryant] simply confess that they killed Emmett
Till.” That the “Shocking Story” exists in the American imagination as a confession is
indisputable: John Edgar Wideman, Bob Dylan, Stokely Carmichael, Christopher
Metress, historians Stephen Whitaker and David Beito, rhetoricians Christine Harold and
Kevin DeLuca—in short, all the influential accounts of Till’s murder, both popular and
academic, save James Baldwin, remember the “Shocking Story” as a confession.
Correctly or not, the “Shocking Story” has functioned for a long time and for lots of
people as a confession and as such it represents an ideal opportunity to explore the
politics of public confession: the ways in which this seemingly ubiquitous form of speech
functions to undermine or sustain the always-fragile arrangements of democracy.

In this case I argue that the confession to the murder of Emmett Till, as it
appeared in the pages of Look magazine, was politically disastrous because it contributed
to the production of a particular silence surrounding the murder of Emmett Till from
which we are only emerging in recent years. The silence with which I take issue, and
which I suggest was produced by the “Shocking Story,” is not the simple effect of
displacement: the authority of the better argument displacing less convincing accounts.
Rather, I argue that public confession, not historically, but as it has come to be
understood and practiced from the eighteenth century on, as it lives in what Brooks has
called the “American confessional imagination,” and as it is enacted in the “Shocking Story,” produces silence by naturalizing transgression and thus exporting it from the realm of contingent human affairs in which speech matters. This was not always the case; public confession was once a robustly political form of discourse because it was committed, above all, to bringing the powers of speech against the disruptive potential of transgression. Thus before turning directly to the “Shocking Story,” I briefly identify the markers of the anti-political turn in the history of public confession.

**The Politics of Confession**

What stands out immediately in the history of public confession is that its two most important practitioners, Augustine and Rousseau, both understood public confession to be a political form of speech precisely because it was a form of speech that would not degenerate into silence.

*The Confessions* of Augustine should not be read simply, or even primarily, as a devotional text or the performance of Christian ritual. To read it as such ignores the fact that, from start to finish, *The Confessions* make a systematic and coherent argument against the rhetorical practices of the Manicheans. The Manicheans, Augustine writes, “Profess themselves.” Augustine’s indictment of profession as a rhetorical practice is so radical that it is difficult to overstate: he argues that profession tends to lose its speechful character, in an important sense it ceases to be speech at all because it eventuates in silence. Writing in Book Seven, Augustine records that the Manicheans were “dumb, yet talking much.”

The Manicheans were, in Latin, *loquaces mutos*, silent talkers: their
professions, Augustine insisted time and again, resulted always and only in silence. The Manicheans, then, had no way to talk about their sin, and thus no way to conquer transgression. To Augustine’s mind, the significance of confession derives from its opposition to the silent and self-defeating rhetorical practices of profession. The confession, Augustine tells us, is not prone to silence and thus it perdures in the world and, as he puts it in *The City of God*, “runs between men.” The *confessio*, then, is not simply a religious form of speech in which sinners acknowledge their transgressions. It is also a political form of speech whose decisive characteristic was its power to render transgression in speech and thus bring transgression into the realm of politics proper—the realm of human affairs in which it can be discussed, debated, and thereby disarmed. This, then, is the political promise of public confession: it refuses to allow transgression the protections of silence which, in both classical and Manichean thought, had always been its prerogative.

Rousseau, for his part, was reading Augustine’s *Confessions* immediately prior to the composition of his own and, perhaps not surprisingly, he too understands confession as a means of preserving speech against silence. Rousseau’s famous expositor Jean Starobinski explains that Rousseau is motivated by his conviction that “the civilized world is invaded by idle talk, boastfulness, and gossip.” This invasion of degenerate rhetorical practices had, Starobinski explains, rendered language “all but inaudible.” It is precisely because the rhetorical practices of civil society were fundamentally silent that Rousseau tethered his confession not to society, but to that counterfactual yet normative creation of seventeenth-century political theory: the state of nature. Indeed, Rousseau insists that only insofar as confession remains an expression of the voice of nature—that
is, an expression of the inner self which, for Rousseau, functions as a preserve of natural
goodness against the corruption of civil society—that it will remain audible above the
invasive, idle, and muted performances of civil society.

It is not, then, incidental that Rousseau shifts the purpose of confession: it is no
longer about the speaking of a once silent transgression, but rather about the expression
of the inner self. “The particular object of my confessions is to make known my inner
self.”31 The important point is this: Confession is here subsumed under what Charles
Taylor calls expressivism—the moral and epistemic obligation to express one’s inner self
grounded in the conviction that one’s inner self is the source of nature and knowledge.32
When this happens, and confession is the voicing of the self rather than the speaking of
transgression, the transgression itself is naturalized because it functions only as an
expression of, and an index to, the natural self within. The confession, so figured, tropes
transgression by turning it into one more way of saying, “this is who I am”—a refrain
that recurs throughout the pages of Rousseau’s tedious work.

It is the argument of this chapter, and of my dissertation as a whole, that the
political promise of public confession is undermined by the logic of expressivism that
dominates Rousseau’s work and has come to inhabit the American confessional
imagination. The reason is this: expressivism is what Richard Rorty might call a
conversation stopper.33 What, after all, can one say to Rousseau, given that his catalogue
of transgressions and political missteps is punctuated at every turn with some variation on
the phrase: “this is who I am.” It seems that Rousseau might have known this. On the first
page of his Confessions he predicts the response of “the numberless host of my fellow
men”: “let them hear my confessions, let them groan at my unworthiness, let them blush
at my wretchedness.” He was not far off; on the last page of his *Confessions* he records the actual response a few people to whom he read portions of his text: “With this I ended my reading. No one spoke. Mme d’Egmont was the only one who appeared to me to be moved; she was trembling visibly; but she recovered quickly and, like the rest of the company, remained silent.”

Groaning, blushing, trembling; these are the silent and, as it were, natural responses to expressivism. The insidiousness of expressivism is just this: it has, against all odds, turned the confession into a means of removing transgression from the world of speech, or, as Arendt might put it, from the political realm in which speech matters.

**The Politics of Expressivism at Work**

Although expressivism is politically disastrous, this does not mean that it is never politically expedient. Indeed, what I suggest in the remainder of this chapter is that the confession to the murder of Emmett Till is a form of expressivism. Although the “Shocking Story” is not, like Rousseau’s *Confessions*, primarily calibrated to express the self, it nonetheless naturalizes the transgression by casting it as the expression of the ways things are in the South. Moreover, in November of 1956 when William Bradford Huie arrived in Money, a politically inept confession was precisely what was needed. For this reason: by the time Huie’s “Shocking Story” hit the newsstands in January of 1956, the murder was five months in the past and, as you will recall, there was no shortage of media coverage. Huie knew that he needed the authority of confession to set his own story apart from the others. There was, it seems, no doubt in Huie’s mind that it was the
confession of Milam and Bryant that would set his expose apart from the rest. Within hours of hearing the men describe the murder of Till, Huie immediately wrote his editor at Look, Dan Mich. With seemingly unbounded excitement, Huie explained that it was the confession of Milam and Bryant that would make a fabulous story:

I have just returned from Sumner where I spent an almost unbelievable day in Whitten’s office—with Bryant and Milam. We have reached a verbal agreement on all points; and they have told me the story of the abduction and murder. This was really amazing, for it was the first time they have told the story. . . . Perhaps I am too close to appraise it—but I can’t see how it can miss being one of the most sensational stories ever published. . . . I know every step that was taken—can verify most every word of it—and the manner in which these men operated for five hours before they finally shot this boy and threw him in the river—will make your readers gasp. Particularly, their stark explanation of their motives.35

It is important to note that Huie’s excitement stems as much from the story itself as from the manner in which he obtained the story: he had heard the story of Till’s murder told for the very first time by the killers themselves. He had heard a confession and it was this fact alone that led to Huie’s belief that his would be “one of the most sensational stories ever published.” Huie believed that the story would be, not only shocking, but also “more explosive than UNCLE TOM’S CABIN—and a damn site more honest.”36

Huie, however, was promising more honesty than he could possibly deliver. For Huie had not simply heard the men’s confession; he had purchased it for $4000 and a
promise that he would not publish it as such. Bryant and Milam’s lawyers, John Whitten and Jesse Breland, wrote to Huie and insisted that he “avoid any statement that ‘you sat down with J.W. Milam and he told you so and so.’ . . . Surely you can write your story without so bold an assertion.”37 In a letter to Roy Wilkins, in which Huie was soliciting the NAACP to foot the bill for the confession, he wrote:

I would have to give my personal word to Breland and Whitten that I would not claim that Milam and Bryant had ‘confessed;’ that I would . . . leave the defendants in a position . . . where they could deny having talked with me—and where the book would not further ‘jeopardize’ them.”38

This refusal to write the story as a “confession” is a recurrent theme throughout the letters that Huie exchanged with potential publishers and financiers. In a letter to Mich, Huie reiterated his commitment not to publish the story as a “confession.”

I will agree that I will not claim that anyone has ‘confessed’ to me; and that while I may quote directly the words of the murderers at any point in the action, I will not quote them as having said anything to me. In short, the story will be my version of exactly what happened; exactly what was said; exactly what was done at exactly what date and hour; but I will not state, declare or claim that I had the assistance of any particular person.”39

In a letter to two Chicago newspapermen to whom he was trying to sell the story, Huie wrote:

One point I may not have made clear: this story cannot be published as a ‘confession.’ It can be presented as my version and your version of the
facts. I expect to include the most minute details—details which could have been gotten only from a participant in the crime. I’ll quote what was said at every stage of the crime. But I will not declare that any participant ‘told’ me anything.40

This, then, is Huie’s bind: the law of the market demanded that his story be a confession, for only a confession could provide the sensationalism necessary to, in his words, “make crime pay”; the law of the land, to the contrary, demanded that his story must leave the killers the option of denying that they had even talked at all.41 The rhetorical task on Huie, then, is a momentous one: he must turn confession against its own history; he must remake it and refashion it such that it produces the one thing, historically speaking, to which it has always been opposed: silence. Huie, in other words, needs an expressive confession that removes the murder from the realm of speech.

Toward this end, I argue that Huie places Milam’s confession within a story that emphasizes the inconsequentiality and ineffectiveness of speech itself. Indeed, the “Shocking Story” recounts the victory of the fundamentally silent, or at best, the merely talkative Milam over a young boy whose decisive characteristic was neither his race nor his sexual prowess, but rather his unrelenting speech. Against this speech, which Huie explains was Till’s greatest asset, stands neither reason, nor argument, nor hate, nor bigotry, nor racism, nor J.W. Milam, nor anything that speech might stand up to. In Huie’s telling, speech is silenced by its classical antithesis, violence, and thwarted by the one thing against which it must always be powerless: the unrelenting course of nature itself.
Huie goes to great lengths to ensure that the decisive characteristics of Emmett Till are his habits of speech. Before Till even whistled at Carolyn Bryant, Huie reminds us, his first offense was simply to speak to her: “How about a date, Baby.” Lest his readers miss the significance of the men’s decision to come after the “talker,” Huie made the point explicit: “They had come to chastise him, not for grabbing, but only for what he had said: for asking her ‘for a date.’” When the “Shocking Story” is read according to these thematics, the incessant speech of Till and Milam’s repeated attempts to silence him, it becomes clear that the “Shocking Story” is not simply one more recounting of Till’s untimely death, it is also a treatise about the role of speech in Delta violence. The regrettable, and I think incorrect, lesson of the “Shocking Story” is that the violence of the Mississippi Delta is a natural and inevitable product of bi-racial society rather than a contingent result of human speech. For by emphasizing the inconsequentiality of speech, the “Shocking Story” naturalizes the murder and exports it from the contingent realm of politics in which speech operates to the realm of nature, in which speech is powerless.

In the “Shocking Story,” Huie records that when Milam entered the boys’ room he shone his flashlight in Till’s eyes and asked: “You the nigger who did the talking?” “Yeah,’ Bobo replied.” “Milam: ‘Don’t say, ‘Yeah’ to me: I’ll blow your head off.” This initial exchange between Till and Milam is paradigmatic of the entire “Shocking Story” and it is important because it demonstrates the distinction I am trying to make between the mere talkativeness of Milam and the speech of Till. When Milam came to silence the “Chicago talker” he was not seeking quietude, but rather a form of discourse that respected and reinforced the assumed status differential that, according to the still-operative Jim Crow logic, separated him from this, black, promiscuous, boy. Milam
wanted, in other words, a form of discourse that was reducible to, and indistinguishable from, prevailing societal conventions. For Milam knew as well as Foucault that speech that is reducible without remainder to standards of normality might as well be silence. The saying of “sir,” in other words, would be for Till not simply a change in idiom, but a retreat from the powers of speech.

Till’s refusal to speak respectfully to Milam and Bryant reached its climax several hours later, in Milam’s shed. Milam recalls that they “marched the nigger into the tool house and I whacked him a few times over the head with the gun.” Apart from the fact that “whacking” severely understates the brutality of what they did to Till in that shed, it is important to understand that Milam understood this “whacking” as a means of disciplining Till’s speech, or more accurately, a means of extracting a particular form of speech, a form marked by “Yes Sirs” and a deference which recognized Milam’s superior social station. Huie records that, between blows, Milam stopped beating Till just long enough to ask: “You still as good as I am?”

The “whacking” didn’t work. Till responded to Milam’s question with a defiant “yeah” and the violence of the entire episode is punctuated only by Till’s refusal to stop speaking. Huie would later explain:

With each blow Bobo is on the verge of collapsing and begging for mercy—which would save his life. But he can’t do it. He has not only survived to this point, but he has tasted the satisfaction of striking back—with his taunts. With each taunt he gains strength, determination. Big [Milam] throws the light on Bobo’s face. Bobo remains on his knees; his head is battered; but he decides to strike another blow—with a taunt.
Till would simply not retreat from the powers of speech. Huie records Milam’s shock at the inefficacy of the torture: “And now this is hard to believe . . . I never thought I’d see it . . . but that black bastard never even whimpered. He just stood there and poison run out of his mouth.” Milam here distinguishes between two modes of speech: whimpered speech and poisoned speech. The whimper is what Milam expected, it is marked by “sirs” instead of “yeahs,” and, because it is reducible to societal norms, it is, politically speaking, silent. Poisoned speech, by contrast, is what Milam received, it is the taunt, it is, politically, a powerful form of speech precisely because it refuses to take cues from the society in which it sounds, and it is, as Huie wrote in the “Shocking Story,” the “perfect speech to ensure [Till’s] martyrdom.” More than four hours after his abduction, Till’s poisoned speech culminates in this declaration:

You bastards, I’m not afraid of you. I’m as good as you are. I’ve ‘had’
white women. My grandmother was a white woman.

Immediately following this defiant announcement, which Huie explicitly frames as an example of poisoned speech, Huie provides Milam’s “confession”—the paragraph-length quotation in which Milam reflects on the murder in the past tense and in which he admits that he was “likely to kill” any black boy who “mentioned” sex with a white woman. Here is the confession:

Well, what else could we do? He was hopeless. I’m no bully; I never hurt a nigger in my life. I like niggers—in their place—I know how to work ‘em. But I just decided it was time a few people got put on notice. As long as I live and can do anything about it, niggers are gonna stay in their place.
By his own standards, Milam’s confession must be judged a success, for he did indeed demonstrate the brutal stance of the Jim Crow south. Politically, however, the confession must be judged a failure. Indeed, Milam’s confession demonstrates the anti-politics of expressivism. It certainly does shed light on Milam’s inner self—we now know how “he stands”—but it naturalizes the transgression by folding it into the unspoken nature of things—“what else could we do?” The murder here serves only as an example of the rights of white veterans in the Jim Crow south, only as an index to the way things are.

Moreover, further naturalizing the murder, is the fact that Milam confesses to murdering Till for “mentioning” a cultural taboo—sex with a white woman. The killing of Till is Milam’s final and finally-successful attempt to silence the “Chicago talker.” In the “Shocking Story,” then, the powers of speech die with Till, for although Milam is always talking, his words ring hollow and sound empty precisely because he is simply giving voice to the status quo, because his words are only the audible equivalent of the
violence to which he eventually resorts, and, finally, because that violence is not a product of either speech or action; it is carried out under the banner of silence and marks the victory of the inevitable over the political.

It is, then, perhaps not surprising that Huie would later describe the tragedy of Emmett Till as “inherent in bi-racial society.” When, in 1960, Huie rewrote his “Shocking Story” as a screenplay for a United Artists picture in which Gregory Peck was to star, he went to great lengths to establish the inevitability of the tragedy. Huie explains the significance of the screenplay’s opening scene:

This whole scene must make clear how, though heredity and experience, these white men are equipped for violence. . . . They are born with guns in their hands . . . . They are capable of violence with each other, and particularly with what they call ‘nigger trouble-makers.’

Moreover, Huie explains that the opening scenes must also “demonstrate that Delta Negroes, in poverty, are as prone to violence as are the [white people].” In Huie’s staging of Emmett Till, then, the violence is inevitable; the murder is the result of blood lines, poverty, and the sheer experience of a biracial society. Gregory Peck and his colleagues remain the only relevant actors, for the force of history has turned the actors of the “Shocking Story”—J.W. Milam no less than Emmett Till—into subjects, subjects of their own experience and blood. To emphasize the extent to which the would-be actors in the story are subject to the inevitability of historical necessity, Huie insists that Milam and Bryant be presented as “spectators” in the tragedy of Emmett Till.
Given the extent to which the “Shocking Story” naturalized the murder of Emmett Till, what are we to make of the confession? It seems that Huie, at least, recognized the confession for what it was: political silence. Throughout the entire affair, Huie always emphasized the utter unremarkableness of Milam’s confession. In a follow-up piece he wrote for *Look* one year after the “Shocking Story” he argued that the *only* reason that the confession hadn’t come out earlier was that no one had asked for it: “Their ‘enemies’ had assumed that they wouldn’t talk; their ‘friends’ had preferred that they say nothing.”  

Whitten was in the latter category:

I don’t know what happened. We [the legal counsel] never asked them.

We defended them . . . you know why. But we didn’t question them. I personally didn’t ask them because . . . well, my wife was disturbed about it. She kept asking me every day if they had killed the Negro boy. To make it easier for her I kept telling her no. So I didn’t want to hear the truth. They were entitled to defense; I defended them; but I didn’t have to listen to them.  

In sharp distinction to this willed silence, Huie claims that he arrived in Mississippi with the commonplace assumption that Milam and Bryant had murdered Till, and the quite remarkable assumption that they would tell him as much: “I knew enough to assume that Big Milam and Roy Bryant would tell me everything they knew and felt.” What Huie knew was this: the reason Milam and Bryant would not be reluctant to talk is that their talk was insignificant because the murder was simply an “inherent” product of their culture. The proof of this, Huie suggests, was the outpouring of support the two men
received, the fundraisers across the Delta that paid their legal fees, the fact that they were not now, if they had ever been, in legal jeopardy, and, above all, the sheer facticity of their acquittal before a jury of their peers. Huie writes,

> At their trial Milam and Bryant assumed that every person in the courtroom—judges, jurors, lawyers, spectators—*knew* that they had killed Bobo Till. So Milam and Bryant assumed that the murder was *approved* by their relatives, their neighbors, their community leaders, their newspapers, their state—by every institution which they respect. So why wouldn’t they tell me everything?53

The normality and naturalness of the murder rendered speech inconsequential. Milam and Bryant, Huie tells us, would confess because they had nothing for which to feel guilty; they would speak because there was nothing to talk about. More precisely, Milam and Bryant would confess without impunity in the “Shocking Story” because the murder was there naturalized and wholly disconnected from their speech and their actions. Huie was so convinced that there was nothing to talk about that he claimed that Milam and Bryant “were the last persons in the courtroom the world would have called to testify.” For what could *they* have to say in a trial in which they were “spectators, not defendants.” And even if they did testify and even if they did bear witness against themselves and confess in front of a jury, Huie reports that “the jury would still say not guilty.”54 It is as if the jury too recognized the sheer meaninglessness of speech in a murder that is inherent in bi-racial society. It is as if the jury too recognized the political emptiness and fundamental silence of a confession that naturalizes the transgression it discloses.
Conclusion: Alternatives to Expressivism?

I want to conclude by returning to James Baldwin, who, recall, stands nearly alone in his insistence that the “Shocking Story” doesn’t count as a confession. Although Baldwin never explains this disqualification, I think it may be politically grounded. In the introduction to his “Blues for Mister Charlie”—a play that is loosely based on Huie’s “Shocking Story”—Baldwin explains that the “really almost hopeless” aspect of the racial situation is that it has become “unspeakable.” The hopelessness stems from the unspeakableness: because the human being cannot speak he “closes his eyes, compulsively repeats his crimes, and enters a spiritual darkness which no one can describe.”55 The need, then, is for speech, and The Blues for Mister Charlie provides it. In his words, the play is “one man’s attempt to bear witness to the reality and the power of light.” And, since darkness is born of silence, we might rephrase Baldwin to say that play is an attempt to bear witness to the power of speech, to the uniquely political power of public confession. To be sure, Baldwin’s Milam is no monster; Baldwin presents Milam with some measure of compassion—the blues are, after all, for Mister Charlie, for white people. Milam is still, for Baldwin as for Huie, in some senses a victim of cultural forces. The decisive difference is this: Baldwin’s Milam, although he may be a victim, is in no sense a spectator—he is responsible for his culture as much as he is a victim of it. When, in The Fire Next Time, Baldwin wrote that color is a “political” rather than a human reality, I think he meant that the stories of race relations, even the shocking ones, must be told in political rather than natural terms.56 And, when he claimed that Milam’s disclosures don’t count as confessions, I think he meant that public confessions, if they
are to be viable in a democratic society, must not naturalize the transgressions they disclose. And this is the significance of the “Blues for Mister Charlie”: it restores the story of Emmett Till to the realm of the political, in which the outcome, although no less tragic—Till is still killed and Milam still unrepentant—but the tragedy is here the contingent result of speech and action, rather than, as Huie would have it, inherent in bi-racial society.
Notes


The wide ranging impact of *Jet*’s decision to publish the photographs of the beaten Emmett Till was the subject of a report by Noah Adams on NPR’s *Morning Edition*.


7 John Edgar Wideman recalls his own experience seeing the pictures of Emmett Till in Jet and experiencing the same compulsion to know what happened: “I certainly hadn’t been searching for Emmett Till’s face when it found me. I peeked quickly, focused my eyes just enough to ascertain something awful on the page, a mottled, grayish something resembling an aerial shot of a landscape cratered by bombs or ravaged by a natural disaster—something I registered with a sort of simultaneous glance at and glance away. Refusing to look, lacking the power to look, to this day, shames me. . . . Emmett Till had died instead of me and I needed to know how, why” (Quoted in Metress, ed., *The Lynching of Emmett Till*, 279).

8 Metress notes that Hicks was “one of the premier investigative journalists of his generation.” He was, among other things, the “first black reporter cleared to cover the United Nations” (Metress, ed., *The Lynching of Emmett Till*, 154).

9 James L. Hicks, "Sheriff Kept Key Witness Hid in Jail During Trial," *Cleveland Call and Post*, 8 October 1955.

10 Ernest C. Whithers, *Complete Photo Story of the Emmett Till Murder Case* (Memphis, TN: Withers Photographers, 1955). An advertisement for Withers pamphlet appeared on page D5 of the October 8, 1955 issue of the *Cleveland Call and Post*. It claimed that that
pamphlet contained “on-the-spot, authentic pictures” of how the “Chicago boy was
cought up in a whirlpool of ‘Jungle Fury’ in the ‘Congo’ Delta of Mississippi.”


12 Ethel Payne, "Mamie Bradley's Untold Story: Installment VIII," *Chicago Defender*, 8
June 1956.


14 It seems that America has not outlived its need for exposes of the Till case. Keith
Beauchamp’s documentary, “The Untold Story of Emmett Louis Till,” was released in
August of 2005. This film was previewed for law enforcement officials and influential in
the decision of the Justice Department to re-open the case.

15 "Death in Mississippi," *Commonweal*, 23 September 1955; Christine Harold and Kevin
DeLuca, "Behold the Corpse: Violent Images and the Case of Emmett Till," *Rhetoric and


18 William Bradford Huie, "The Shocking Story of Approved Killing in Mississippi,"


20 “50 Years Later: Emmett Till, Rosa Parks, and Martin Luther King Jr.,” ed. Davis W.

21 Beito and Beito, *Why It's Unlikely the Emmett Till Mystery Will Ever Be Solved.*

22 *The Chicago Defender*, 14 January 1956 (emphasis original).


34 Rousseau, *Confessions*, 5, 642.


40 Huie to Walters, 18 October 1955.

41 Huie to Walters, 18 October 1955.


47 Huie, "Shocking," 49.

48 Ibid.


51 Huie, *Wolf*, 33-34.

52 Ibid., 32.

53 Ibid., 32-33.

54 Ibid., 28-29.


Chapter Five

The Confession of Jimmy Swaggart: Expressivism, Speech, and Politics

“Just because Jimmy Swaggart believes in God doesn’t mean that God does not exist.”
--Walker Percy

“[O]ne willingly gives up language for the sake of the pure exclamatory sound that is the substratum of language. This reaching beyond verbal means can be a liberation in sexual or aesthetic matters. But in the ethical life it is an imprisonment.”
--Andrew Delbanco

On February 21, 1988, Jimmy Swaggart publicly confessed his sin to the more than 8000 people crowded into his Baton Rouge Family Worship Center. The confession was, by all accounts, quite a spectacle. Swaggart delivered it with “an agonized look on his face, and tears streaming down his cheeks.” Indeed, the Houston Chronicle reports that Swaggart wept throughout the entirety of his nearly thirty-minute confession during which he was interrupted ten times for a standing ovation. Between ovations, Swaggart’s confession apparently mesmerized the thousands of onlookers. The Washington Post recorded that a “hush fell over the sanctuary as stunned onlookers, some speaking in tongues, wept and then shouted support. Men bowed their heads and cried, and women dabbed at running mascara with tissues from boxes thoughtfully scattered about.” When it was over, Swaggart’s wife, Frances, members of his Board, and hundreds of congregants gathered on the stage in what the San Francisco Chronicle termed a “giant huddle of hugging” that lasted almost 20 minutes. Long after Swaggart
was gone and the huggers dispersed, many congregants remained, kneeling at their pews praying, or laying prostrate on the floor crying.⁷

Beyond the Family Worship Center, the confession aired on television for an estimated 100 million additional viewers worldwide.⁸ *Time* magazine called it “without question, the most dramatic sermon ever aired on television.”⁹ Rhetorician Quentin J. Schultze labeled it “one of the most masterful programs of all time, perhaps even the single most effective televisual performance of any American evangelist.” It was, Schultze continues, “fabulous television”—“one of the most emotionally moving religious broadcasts of all time.”¹⁰ Schultze’s sentiments were not universally shared; religious scholar Martin E. Marty, for example, claims that Swaggart’s performance constitutes “an impulse to throw up.”¹¹ This impulse apparently resonated with one Los Angeles viewer, who, after watching the confession, concluded that Swaggart was a “disgusting, sobbing, whimpering excuse for a human being.”¹²

Whether Swaggart’s confession was “fabulous television” or whether it was an inducement to vomit is debatable; what is not debatable is this: the confession was, unquestionably, one of the most *publicized* confessions theretofore in American history. Some estimates suggest that Swaggart had a regular following of 300-500 million people world-wide and rhetorician Michael J. Giuliano concludes that it was “probably the most watched television sermon in history.”¹³ The sermon provided immediate fodder for scores of newspaper articles across the nation, and the now-infamous video clip of a teary-eyed Swaggart choking out the words “I have sinned” was played and replayed on newscasts *ad nauseum*. As one of the “co-pastors” at the Baton Rouge Family Worship Center put it, Jimmy Swaggart “confessed to the world.”¹⁴ And the world, in turn, had no
trouble identifying Swaggart’s performance as a confession—the sermon was routinely (and almost unanimously) referred to as a confession.

Although the entire world may have known that Swaggart confessed, precious few knew what he confessed to. Indeed, perhaps the single most important fact about Swaggart’s confession—a fact that was widely noted—is that he did not specify what he was confessing to. Despite the fact that Swaggart began his confession with a promise to face the issue “head-on,” and despite his further insistence that he has never “sidestepped or skirted unpleasantries,” Swaggart never disclosed the particular unpleasantry that had him confessing in the first place. To be sure, stories circulated in the media about a meticulous, detailed, ten-hour private confession delivered earlier in the week to the governing board of the Assemblies of God denomination (the Executive Presbytery). Moreover, the content of this private confession was eventually leaked, and the media had no problem constructing a detailed ledger of Swaggart’s sins. But despite his promised candor, Swaggart never said a damn thing about the sins that had him crying in front of millions.

How is it that Swaggart’s sermon can be both widely acknowledged as a confession while it confesses nothing? The answer, I suggest, is in the first sentence of the sermon: “Everything that I will attempt to say to you this morning will be from my heart.” Swaggart promised that his sermon would be a speaking of his heart, an articulation of his inner self. The sermon counts as a confession, not because he recounts his sinful acts (he doesn’t), but because it is an act of self disclosure. Swaggart told the millions of viewers about the pain in his heart, the anguish of his soul, and his love for his family; in short, Swaggart confessed, not his deeds, but rather his emotions and his
feelings. Although Swaggart finished his confession by quoting the entirety of Psalm 51 (what *Time* called “David’s masterpiece of poetic contrition”\(^{16}\)) and thus situated himself in a tradition of Christian confession, the sermon itself is constructed according to the protocols of Rousseauian expressivism. Indeed, Swaggart’s relentless focus on his own emotions and his assiduous effort to avoid the slightest mention of his misdeeds suggests that Swaggart’s confession is a remarkably pure specimen of Rousseauian expressivism. In many ways, Swaggart out-Rousseaus Rousseau; he takes the Rousseauian insistence that confession is self-expression to its logical end in which the speaking of transgression is no longer an obligatory part of confession. Not even Rousseau was so purely expressive; although he claimed that the “particular object of my confessions is to make known my inner self,” Rousseau nonetheless recorded stealing ribbons and other particular sins. Swaggart, on the other hand, recorded nothing but his emotions. And it is precisely because Swaggart’s sermon was widely interpreted as a confession despite the fact that he did not mention a single misdeed that I suggest that his confession is a remarkably pure specimen of expressivism.

Swaggart’s confession, then, merits careful attention because it displays with uncommon clarity the rhetorical and political assumptions that drive expressivism. After providing some background information and rhetorical contexts, I consider the rhetorical assumptions of expressivism. In this section I argue that the rhetoric of expressivism is diametrically opposed to the classical ideal of speech and I conclude that, from the perspective of speech, expressivism is fundamentally silent. These conclusions fuel my investigation, in the next section, of the political assumptions of expressivism. Drawing on Swaggart’s confession, I argue that expressivism *naturalizes* transgression and
insodoing undermines the possibilities of democracy. I reach conclusions similar to those Delbanco reaches in the epigraph to this chapter. While Delbanco insists that expressivism is an ethical imprisonment, I suggest that it is a rhetorical and political imprisonment.

**Background: Feuding Evangelicals and Covert Operations**

The second half of the 1980s was a particularly rough period for Evangelical televangelists. From Oral Roberts’ controversial assertion that God would “call him home” unless his (mostly elderly) viewership donated $4.5 million, to Jimmy and Tammy Faye Bakker’s adultery/hush-money/extortion scandal, evangelical televangelists suffered so many high-profile scandals that a year before the Swaggart scandal broke, *Time* magazine had already labeled televangelists “TV’s Unholy Row.” The televangelists’ problems were aggravated by severe infighting. Bakker accused Swaggart of designing a “diabolical plot” to take over his church, his cable network, and his theme park, Heritage USA. Swaggart, in turn, responded by calling Bakker a “cancer that need[s] to be excised from the body of Christ” and ensuring that Bakker’s tryst with his secretary, Jessica Hahn, was widely publicized. After Swaggart ensured Bakker’s demise, Bakker arranged that the Moral Majority’s founder Jerry Falwell—and not Swaggart—would assume control of his empire when he was forced to resign. This arrangement was not long to Bakker’s liking, however, and he quickly claimed that “the Virginia Fundamentalist [Falwell] had duped him in order to grab his empire.” The only high-
profile evangelicals to emerge from 1987 unscathed by scandal were Billy Graham and
Robert Schuller.

At the most concrete level, it was precisely Swaggart’s penchant for feuding with
fellow televangelists that led to his 1988 confession. Throughout the early 1980s, Jimmy
Swaggart Ministries competed with the Reverend Marvin Gorman’s First Assembly
Church of God for New Orleans parishioners and their pocketbooks. Located on the
outskirts of New Orleans, the First Assembly Church of God was drawing five-thousand
worshippers each week, operating on a budget of $4.5 million a year, and producing a
five-day-a-week TV show that aired in all fifty states—all under the dynamic leadership
of the rising televangelist star, Marvin Gorman. In July of 1986, however, when
Swaggart got news that Gorman had sinned, he nearly single-handedly orchestrated not
only the resignation of Gorman, but also the dismantling of the entire ministry of the First
Assembly Church of God. Following Swaggart’s accusations, Gorman resigned his
pulpit. This was not enough for Swaggart, however, who helped to write a lengthy
statement accusing Gorman of “numerous adulterous and illicit affairs” to be read in front
of Gorman’s five-thousand member congregation. Three weeks after this letter was read,
Swaggart personally wrote Louisiana District Superintendent Cecil Janway and
demanded that Gorman not be given special treatment because of his large operating
budget or TV show. In the letter Swaggart made his position clear: “I want it to be clearly
understood that I will take whatever steps I feel are necessary to see that this situation is
not covered up and that Marvin is not treated differently than any other minister.”
Immediately following Janway’s receipt of this letter, Gorman was permanently
dismissed from the denomination.
It was a little over one year later that a private investigator, hired by Gorman, took several pictures of Jimmy Swaggart entering and leaving a hotel room on the seedy Airline Highway not far from Gorman’s now-defunct church. After capturing Swaggart on film, the private investigator called Gorman and then—to give Gorman time—let the air out of the right front tire of Swaggart’s Lincoln Town Car. When Gorman arrived, the two preachers sat in Gorman’s car and talked for two hours. *The Washington Post* reports that during this conversation Swaggart wept throughout, confessed an enduring problem with prostitutes, and begged Gorman to show mercy. In fact, if Gorman is to be believed, Swaggart did more than beg. According to Gorman, Swaggart offered him and his family jobs with Jimmy Swaggart Ministries if Gorman would agree to forget the incident. Swaggart, in other words, attempted to bribe Gorman and thereby buy the silence of the televangelist whom he had so forcibly silenced just a few years earlier. Gorman refused. He demanded that Swaggart confess and speak openly about his sexual addiction to ecclesiastical authorities. Swaggart agreed, but did not keep his promise. After four months of inactivity, Gorman expedited Swaggart’s confession by sending the incriminating photos to the Executive Presbytery of the Assemblies of God. The following Sunday, Swaggart delivered the now-famous “I Have Sinned” sermon in which he claimed that although his “sin was done in secret” the Lord desired that it be revealed before the “whole world.”

Although the Lord may have desired that Swaggart’s sin be revealed before the “whole world,” Swaggart and the Assemblies of God were decidedly against the idea of disclosure. Indeed, the Assemblies of God combined with the various branches of Jimmy Swaggart Ministries in the orchestration and execution of what the *Boston Globe* would
later call a protracted “silence campaign.” Despite the fact that Jimmy Swaggart staged one of the most highly publicized confessions in American history, the Assemblies of God was, with the cooperation of Jimmy Swaggart Ministries, determined to keep the details of Swaggart’s sin under wraps.

Consider, for example, the five-minute introduction of Jimmy Swaggart given by Forest Hall immediately preceding Swaggart’s confession. Hall, the secretary-treasurer of the Louisiana District of Assemblies of God, explained that Swaggart had given a “detailed” but private confession of “specific incidents of moral failure” to the Executive Presbyters of the Assemblies of God. Hall emphasized that Swaggart had shown true humility in his willingness to speak (privately) of his sins, but the congregation should not expect to hear him speak publicly about transgressive details:

[N]o spiritual purpose would be served by answering questions about details. There has been a detailed confession to those wronged and to established church authority . . . . No doubt much speculation will naturally find its way into the secular media. But for the church, the body of Christ, such speculation and rumor has no place.

Hall thus prefigured the public confession with an introduction that provided ecclesiastical justifications for silence. Those who would seek to know the details, he suggested, are not fit for membership in the “body of Christ,” wherein such speculation, rumor, and detailed speech have no place. This functioned as an argument that the confession could be successful even if Jimmy Swaggart did not talk about the details of his moral failures—indeed the confession could be marked successful precisely because
Swaggart did not succumb to the temptation to fuel rumors with the admittance of specific moral failures.

Despite the inevitability of speculation in the “secular media,” Hall emphasized that the church would do its best to stop it there too. He said that he was urging Swaggart to “resist the urgings of those outside the church to respond to questions.”\textsuperscript{25} It quickly became the official policy of the Louisiana Assemblies of God that there was “no need for any details to be released.”\textsuperscript{26}

Hall’s introduction mirrored a statement by the Louisiana District of the Assemblies of God issued on the same day. That statement, according to the \textit{Chicago Tribune}, announced that there would be no public disclosure of the detailed confession and, accordingly, urged church members to “refrain from speculation and imagination about this matter.”\textsuperscript{27} \textit{The New York Times} reported that parishioners were instructed not simply not avoid imagination and speculation, but also were “admonished not to discuss the matter.”\textsuperscript{28} Talking about Swaggart’s sin was thus constructed as a moral matter; silence was turned into evidence of spiritual maturity; and talking about Swaggart’s sin was itself constructed as a sin. In this way, the church not only concealed Swaggart’s misdeeds, they constructed that concealment as a matter of spiritual necessity.

The church followed these prescriptions of silence resolutely. One day after Swaggart’s confession, the Louisiana District Supervisor for the Assemblies of God, Cecil Janway, announced that Swaggart would not talk to the secular media and he refused to answer any questions about the developing story.\textsuperscript{29} In short, the church resolutely refused to disclose the slightest details of Swaggart’s sin.
Church members apparently took the silence campaign quite seriously. William Treeby, Swaggart’s attorney, parishioner, friend, and member of the Louisiana District of the Assemblies of God, refused to talk to reporters claiming “The Louisiana District has asked us not to say anything.” Likewise, a “Swaggart confidant,” said this: “You’d love to let people know the real story, but I have to abide by church orders not to comment.”

Even students at Swaggart’s Bible College abided by the mandate. *People Weekly* reported that “no comment” was the standard and expected response of students to reporters. After a few days of the “no comment” response, students and faculty at the Bible College took an even harsher stance, asking journalists to leave the premises.

Finally, even the informant and accuser himself, Marvin Gorman, the one who delivered the seedy Swaggart photo’s to the Assemblies of God leadership in the first place, now refused to break the silence. The *New York Times* reported that Gorman would make no comments about the specific details of Swaggart’s mistakes.

Given the fact of this meticulously followed “silence campaign,” how are we to understand Swaggart’s highly publicized confession? Is the confession an exception in the otherwise thorough silence campaign? Or, is the confession simply one more technique—albeit a counterintuitive one—of enforcing silence. By this point it should be no surprise that I argue in favor of the latter. In the following section I explain how Swaggart’s Rousseauian expressivism allows us to understand the public confession as part and parcel of the silence campaign.
Expressivism and Speech

Given Swaggart’s failure to mention the particularities of his misdeeds, it is not surprising that the authenticity of his confession was widely questioned. The Washington Post’s R. Emmett Tyrell Jr., to cite only one example, argued that the confession was simply “a new phase in [Swaggart’s] charlatanry, a phase of phoniness.” It is far more surprising that some people—indeed many people—both within and beyond Swaggart’s immediate cohort found the confession to be authentic, truthful, plainspoken, and honest. Despite Swaggart’s relentless refusal to talk about his sin, he was still praised in the pages of the Los Angeles Times by the now-popular writer for the Emergent Church, Donald Miller, for his “candor.” Swaggart, Miller wrote, “came before 7,000 worshipers in his church last Sunday with candor; there was no pretense, no cover-up, no self-serving excuses, no scapegoating.” There was also, as Miller fails to note, no mention of any sin worth covering up or excusing. Despite this peculiar silence, Miller’s conclusions were not exceptional; a contributor to the Toronto Star, for example, opined that Swaggart “had the courage and decency to stand up and confess his sin in front of thousands of church members, no denials, no excuses, just the plain truth, and I respect him for that.” The not-uncommon appraisals of Miller and the Toronto Star are perplexing: how is that Swaggart could be praised for, of all things, candor, when the one thing that the “I Have Sinned” sermon did not do was tell the “plain truth” about his sins?

The answer to this riddle, of course, is expressivism: the expressivist confession allowed Swaggart to speak with “candor” without admitting anything. To accomplish this task, however, Swaggart had to provide his audience with guidelines for listening. In a
sense, Swaggart had to insist on very particular protocols of authenticity before his own confession could be interpreted as authentic. Because Swaggart intended to admit nothing, he had to reprogram his audience, as it were, such that they would interpret a sermon in which he said nothing as “authentic” and the “plain truth.” It is only to the extent that Swaggart’s protocols of authenticity were accepted that his sermon was received as the example par excellence of plain-spoken truth. I suggest, then, that we must read the “I Have Sinned” sermon, as well as Swaggart’s “Comeback Sermon” (the first sermon he preached following his confession) not simply as confessions, but as rhetorical treatises from which we may learn the protocols of authenticity.

All this, of course, is premised on the fact that authenticity is not an attribute of a particular form of speech. As I discussed in the introduction, authenticity is granted by the audience rather than inherent in discourses labeled “confessions.” Joseph Harris explains that although expressivism’s appeal lies in its capacities for authenticity, it functions only by dignifying particular textual markers (and not others) as indicative of the “authentic.” He writes, “It makes little sense to me to try to imagine one discursive genre . . . as being somehow more authentic than another.” It is only arbitrary and reversible power relations, Harris argues, that would accord the “personal letter,” say, more expressive power than a “business letter,” or “scholarly article.” Harris is reminding us that authenticity is not an equally available resource; it does not inhere in any particular genre but rather in cultural codes that would authenticate some discourses and not others. 37 Let us then turn to the discourses of Swaggart to find the cultural codes that would enable Swaggart’s audience to reach the unlikely conclusion that his confession was “plain-spoken truth.” The thesis I shall be advancing is this: Swaggart taught his
audience that the ineffable or unsayable was, in its very unsayableness, more authentic and true than speech could ever be. In what must count as a reversion to the half-baked theories of Rousseau, Swaggart suggests that inarticulate noises are more authentic than reasoned speech. Consider.

The first thing to note is that Swaggart is pre-occupied with the capacities of language, or, more accurately, the incapacities of language. In both his public confession and his “Comeback Sermon,” Swaggart suggests that speech is not able to communicate as powerfully and as truthfully as the situation demands. But this does not put it quite strongly enough: Swaggart suggests, over and over again, that speech is incapable of communicating authenticity. If his confession is to be successful, it will be in spite of speech instead of through speech. The task Swaggart sets for himself is a momentous one, rhetorically speaking: he must sidestep speech so that he can, in his words, face issues “head-on.” Consider the first paragraph of the confession:

Everything that I attempt to say to you this morning will be from my heart.
I will not speak from a prepared script. Knowing the consequences of what I will say and that much of it will be taken around the world, as it should be, I am positive that all that I want to say I will not be able to articulate as I would desire. But I would pray that you will somehow feel the anguish, the pain, and the love of my heart. I have always—every single time that I have stood before a congregation and a television camera—I have met and faced the issues head-on. I have never sidestepped or skirted unpleasantries. I have tried to be like a man and to
preach this gospel exactly as I have seen it without fear or reservation or compromise. I can do no less this morning. (119)

The final words of this paragraph assure the listeners that Swaggart will neither sidestep nor skirt the pertinent issues—he will address the unpleasantries head-on. Yet, this assurance of authenticity comes only after the first words of the sermon qualified and defined that assurance: “Everything that I will attempt to say to you this morning will be from my heart.” The assurance of authenticity is directly tied to Swaggart’s deployment of a form of speech that comes from the heart. Unlike scripted speech, heart-generated speech bears the stamp of authenticity and, as such, will allow Swaggart to “face the issues head-on.”

This is all, of course, highly Rousseauian. The anxiety about the communicative power of speech, the insistence that speech must be authorized by the emotions, the dismissal of “articulation,” and the fear that scripted speech bespeaks too much calculation, self-interest, and maneuvering to disclose an authentic self. What I am getting at is this: in the opening paragraph of his confession, Swaggart provides his audience with a lesson on the rhetorical principles of expressivism: if speech is to communicate, it must be understood as simple effusion, an uncontrollable overflow of one’s inner self; scripted or articulate speech indicates the manipulation of the inner self and a consequent loss of authenticity; and, finally, the expression of authenticity stands in an inverse relationship to the faculty of speech. According to the rhetoric of expressivism, then, Swaggart’s confession was authentic precisely because he did not spell out in words what he had done.
At this point it seems reasonable to ask how, precisely, Swaggart-styled expressivism communicates feelings any better than scripted or articulate speech. It would seem, after all, that giving up articulation is giving up communication itself; if Swaggart can not “articulate” what he wants to “say,” it would seem that he is at a loss, for what other options might he have? Swaggart seems to recognize the problem, but he resorts to prayer and to mysticism in order to communicate what he wants to say but cannot articulate: “I am positive that I will not be able to articulate as I would desire. But I pray that you would somehow feel the anguish, the pain, and the love of my heart.” Speech fails as it attempts to articulate his heart, but nonetheless Swaggart hopes that the audience will somehow feel anguish, pain, and love. Swaggart’s rhetoric of expressivism is, clearly, an odd rhetoric: its principles are both counterintuitive and mystical. This being the case, it will perhaps be helpful to share a number of examples in which Swaggart invokes or explains expressivism; these examples will help to clarify Swaggart’s convictions and demonstrate that the excerpt given above drawn from Swaggart’s confession is not exceptional.

In Swaggart’s “Comeback Sermon,” three months after his confession, he was still talking about the incapacities of speech and the near-mystical powers of expressivism. Swaggart began the sermon like this: “It is so good to see you today. And I don’t have to tell you how happy I am to be here” (124). Ordinarily, such a beginning could be ascribed to the conventions of introductions, but in this instance, given Swaggart’s previous rhetorical theorizing, it is possible that Swaggart really believed that he didn’t have to “tell” his congregants anything, particularly things related to his “happiness,” or his feelings more generally. His previous sermon, after all, had
established that feelings could not be articulated and that they must be “somehow felt” by the audience. Moreover, the very next sentence is a classic example of the rhetoric of expressivism: “And I don’t have to tell you how happy I am to be here. Not me but Jesus, Jesus, Jesus, Jesus, Jesus, Jesus, Jesus” (124). This last sentence defies the normal prescriptions for speech. It is only a succession of nouns strung together without a verb or direct object that might lend these nouns significance. It is unclear in what sense “Jesus” substitutes for “me.” The sentence, in short, makes no sense. In the place of logical coherence Swaggart substitutes an eight-fold repetition of the name “Jesus.” It could be, of course, that Swaggart was simply overly-excitable and, in the spur of the moment, forgot the normal conventions of the English language and was, before he knew it, simply repeating the same word over and over. But I don’t think so. I think Swaggart genuinely thinks that this nonsense (literally) is fundamentally more communicative than scripted speech. Why? Because by virtue of its non-sensicalness it proclaims an allegiance to authenticity over calculative reasoning, by virtue of it inarticulateness it suggests that it is not the product of a carefully reasoned argument but rather the pure effusion of the unscripted heart. The rhetorical principles of expressivism, we might say, are diametrically opposed to the rhetorical principles of speech; expressivism tropes the incapacities of Swaggart’s speaking and turns them into first order evidence of authenticity.

Following this outburst of expressive eloquence, Swaggart thanked those friends and family who had helped him through the last three months. His gratitude is worth quoting at length because it nicely captures Swaggart’s distrust of speech:
I could say an awful lot and I want to about so many of the people who have helped us and stood with us and the pastors of this church and the ministers in the ministry itself. But I would invariably leave out someone if I were to do that and that would be someone I would not want to leave out; so I will let discretion be the better part of valor on that. But I will ask Frances and Donnie and Debbie to step out here. And you can’t know the load and the burden that these have had to bear the past months and I have leaned on them second only to the Lord. And to say that I love them would be the classic understatement of my life. They mean more to me than words could ever begin to say. (124)

Again, it is possible to read these words as evidence of particular conventions of gratitude. Or, one could read these words as simply an example of the rhetorical trope of adynaton by which a speaker declares the impossibility of expression as a means of making a point. In this instance I believe that such readings would be a mistake. Swaggart is so consistent in his devaluations of speech that I think he genuinely believes that his congregation could literally “not know” how his family has helped him because speech was not up to the task. Theoretically speaking, Swaggart could have elaborated on how, exactly, his family had helped him, but he didn’t and he believed that he couldn’t. He couldn’t elaborate because such an elaboration would have compromised the rhetorical principles of expressivism which dictate that authenticity depends on inarticulateness.

Moreover, I believe that Swaggart truly believes that his family is more important than “words could ever begin to say.” This is, on one level, a respectable sentiment for which I, as a recent father, have a certain sympathy. But this is the kicker: to Swaggart’s
mind, the fact that his family is more important than words has nothing to do with his family, it has to do speech. His family means more than “words could ever begin to say” precisely because saying words is, for Swaggart, profoundly uncommunicative. He has insisted time and again that words and speech only compromise the authenticity for which he strives.

After thanking his family, Swaggart made a request for financial contributions. He began this request by again trying to vouch for the authenticity of his speech. After admitting that Jimmy Swaggart Ministries had suffered financial setbacks in the preceding three months he said: “And to be frank and plain and honest with you I would not blame you, I do not blame you, for not sending us one dime or dollar. And I want that to sink in because I mean it from my heart” (128). By this point the pattern should be clear. Frank, plain, and honest speech is insufficient unless it is verified by his heart. The appeal that follows this introduction can be called speech only because it is composed with words. Other than that, it is another effort to communicate without words, or, better, to communicate in spite of the necessity of words. Swaggart appeals:

I feel that what is done in these days matters more than what I feel or you feel. I believe that many many souls are hanging in the balance and that is what hurts so much because I know what Jesus can do in a heart and a life. I know what he can do. I know how he changes a life. I know He is the only one that really can. (129)

The first thing to note here is the source of the authority by which Swaggart appeals for funds. He claims that the possibility of souls going unreached because faithful Christians stopped cutting their checks to the Jimmy Swaggart Ministries hurts. It hurts because Swaggart knows something about the relation between Jesus and a sinner’s life,
something which he refuses to—or can’t—explain. Swaggart asserts that he has this knowledge four different ways without ever articulating what, precisely, it is that he knows. We are left simply with a four-fold assertion of knowledge. These claims to knowledge without explanation suggest that whatever it is that Swaggart knows, it is one more thing that cannot be spoken about. It is a knowledge that eludes speech and Swaggart is reduced to the insistence that he knows something to be true, even though he cannot explain it. It is then, not the content of the knowledge, but merely the knowing Swaggart that serves as the authority by which Swaggart appeals for funds. Moreover, in accordance with the rhetorical principles of expressivism, Swaggart deploys no arguments or reasoning, just the repeated assertion of knowledge. Finally, the rhetoric of expressivism is the only way of explaining the odd first sentence in which Swaggart claims to feel that what he feels doesn’t matter. Swaggart here probably meant that he thinks that financial contributions should not depend on emotions such as anger or sadness that might follow the news of his sin. This would be (for some) a logical argument and, as such, it could easily be put into words. But Swaggart here is not making a logical argument; he is not making an argument at all. He offers us only the circular and self-refuting statement that he feels that feelings don’t matter. Yet, circular though it may be, it remains effective within an expressivist paradigm.

Swaggart concludes his appeal for donations thus: “And so I guess I am saying: If you can dig down and help me, you will in effect be helping them” (129). Finally, in the final sentence of his appeal, Swaggart does the rhetorical work of putting his feelings into words; he finally makes an argument. However, it should be noted that this argument seems secondary and far less important than the expressivist eloquence above. His
argument takes only one line, it receives no amplification, and constitutes, for Swaggart, a sort of after-thought: I guess I am saying.

Following the lengthy introductory statements of gratitude and the appeal for funds, Swaggart finally began the sermon itself. In the middle of the sermon Swaggart claims that this “thing”—the long unnamed but widely known sin—has, over the past few months, “come close to killing Frances, Donnie, and me” (132). He then, in his standard adynatonic fashion, proceeded to explain how difficult it would be to forget the entire ordeal: “You will never know, you will never know the pain. The hurt. Words could never describe it and I am saying God, how can I forget” (132)? This, of course, is standard Swaggart fare. I suggest that the sheer accumulation of examples in which Swaggart disclaims the power of speech suggests that expressions such as these are not simply rhetorical devices used to convey magnitude. To the contrary, they constitute the rhetorical premises from which Swaggart-styled expressivism operates. In other words, when Swaggart claims that words could never describe the pain he has experienced, this is not a comment only on the magnitude of the pain. It is also, and more importantly, a comment on the power of speech: it is not the severity of the pain that defies the words; it is the very constitution of the words themselves. *Words* and *speech* are intrinsically unsuited for the description of inner-feelings. Thus, when Swaggart talks about his guilt, he insists that “vocabulary cannot describe it” (133).

By this point I hope it is clear that, time and again, Swaggart denounces the power of speech and articulation as a medium of communication. In place of speech, Swaggart offers the Rousseauian ideal of pure effusive expressivism. Practically speaking, this manifests itself in a devaluation of what might be called the ethics of speech:
grammatical sensibilities and logical coherence. Consider, for example, this representative, but tangled and nonsensical exposition of some verses in Philippians:

When we pertain to the past [Paul] said, first of all in the 13th verse, ‘Brethren, I count not myself to have apprehended’ and then he said, ‘but this one thing I do’ the scripture related to us singleness of heart. Paul writes to us, or it is Luke? Paul does, I think, and then the Master related singleness of eye. This one thing I do. I don’t know in reading this of Paul’s struggles. I have no idea. Paul to me is a giant of giants. I do not know when he wrote this, if he wrote it from his own experience, or he wrote it guided by the Holy Spirit. Either way, of course, for all of mankind that would name the name of Jesus. (131)

Notice all the things that are explicitly unimportant to Swaggart. Questions of who wrote the passage, how and when it was written, and even what it means in its context are unimportant to Swaggart. Perhaps more importantly, notice what is implicitly not important to Swaggart. Sentence structure and logical coherence are not valued. Consider the jumbled first sentence in which the subject of the sentence changes, unannounced, from Paul to “the scripture.” Consider the inexplicable “I don’t know in reading this of Paul’s struggles.” I have read this passage over and over again and can make sense of neither this sentence nor the next: “I have no idea.” Swaggart never explains what, precisely, he doesn’t know. But, and this is the point, within the rhetoric of expressivism, this failure to achieve coherence and explain what it is that he doesn’t know is not a
failure at all. Expressivism precisely reverses the operating premises of speech and turns Swaggart’s very inarticulateness into first-order evidence of authenticity.

The expressivist connection between inarticulateness and authenticity reaches its apex near the end of Swaggart’s sermon when he begins speaking in tongues. Speaking in tongues, or glossolalia, Giuliano explains, is a “form of nondiscursive prayer in an unintelligible language, which from a linguistic viewpoint, is meaningless but phonologically structured.”38 There could hardly be a more apt description of the expressivism: it depends for its force on unintelligible sounds. In Rousseauian terms, glossolalia is the pure expression of the voix, it is a glorification of sound simpliciter, and it is premised on the conviction that the unintelligible noise that comes out of the human mouth is the index par excellence of authenticity. Swaggart’s glossolalia is Rousseau’s dream: it is a form of language that is wholly unarticulated, a pure sounding of the vocal chords. And, in the very purity of its sounding, in its phonic unintelligibility, glossolalia marks the rotten perfection of Rousseau’s Confessions.

Swaggart’s rhetorical lesson is this: expressivism reverses the protocols of speech and reads inarticulacy as evidence of authenticity. This explains why Swaggart could be heard as “plainspoken” and honest when he admitted of no wrong-doing. For those who bought into his expressivist conceptions of language, the fact that he did not specify his sin in scripted or articulate speech served as evidence of authenticity.
Expressivism and Politics

It should be clear by this point that expressivism functions, for Swaggart, as a set of rhetorical principles that allow him to be perceived as authentic and honest without actually talking about his sin. At this point I want to reflect on the political consequences of expressivism. How does expressivism ask us to think differently about politics? I argue that expressivism is politically harmful because naturalizes Swaggart’s sin. In other words, expressivism suggests that Swaggart’s tryst with a prostitute in a seedy pay-by-the-hour motel was simply an expression of his human nature rather than an agential choice. And, as an expression of human nature, the tryst was perforce not something that could justify excluding, punishing, or seeking redress against Swaggart. The tryst only proved that he was, like those who would accuse him, human. This, then, is the political insidiousness of expressivism: by folding sin—or any transgression—into the unspoken nature of things, by framing sin as an expression of human nature, expressivism allows the transgressor, in this case Jimmy Swaggart, to elide the claims of justice.

In his “I Have Sinned” sermon, Swaggart explicitly naturalizes his misdeeds by referring to them only as sin. Less than two minutes into the confession, Swaggart offers the most quoted lines of the confession: “I do not plan in any way to whitewash my sin. I do not call it a mistake, a mendacity; I call it sin” (119). Swaggart was insistent on this; he referred to his deeds fourteen times in the public confession, each time with a cognate of the word “sin,” and Giuliano notes that in the three months following the confession, neither Swaggart nor the Assemblies of God ever referred to the events in question as anything but sin. Despite Swaggart’s insistence, it must be noted that this naming is a
mismarking: his sexual escapades were mistakes and they were mendacious. But it is an important mismarking; Swaggart could not label his actions mistakes or mendacities for the simple reason that expressivism can only communicate the natural. The first lesson of Rousseau, of course, is that the accents and groans of the voice are valuable precisely because they communicate the voice of nature. And it is, then, important to note that the decisive difference between mistakes and mendacities on the one hand and sin on the other hand is this: while mistakes and mendacities are political acts because they are committed by and against other people, sin—at least in the Pentecostal tradition—is a natural condition because it afflicts everyone indiscriminately. In other words, it is important that Swaggart names his misdeeds “sins” because expressivism has no way to confess mistakes or mendacities. To confess mistakes Swaggart would have needed the resources of articulation or scripted speech, and these resources would have compromised his authenticity.

The labeling of misdeeds as sin, then, naturalizes the misdeeds and renders them fit for expression. This naturalization, however, comes at a high political cost for the simple reason that the natural does not lend itself to discussion or debate. The natural carries its own self-justifying authority. In other words, by casting his misdeeds as a sin, Swaggart was implicitly suggesting that his misdeeds were not something to be talked about because they were as unexceptional as human nature. This has not escaped the notice of Giuliano, who argues that the rhetorical success of Swaggart’s public confession stemmed in large part from his willingness to adopt the subject position of a sinner. “In this simple act of naming his deed a sin,” Giuliano writes, “Swaggart was invoking an entire systematized approach to wrongdoing that could only help him in his
To understand this logic, one must first understand that Swaggart’s audience “was convinced that sin was a universal experience” that does not admit of degrees. As such, sin is a peculiar affliction which, because it inflicts all in equal measure, leaves nobody guilty. In other words, sin is a part of the human condition and it is equally deplorable regardless of whether it manifests itself in the sexual forays of Jimmy Swaggart or the less visible but equally inevitable sins of Swaggart’s congregation.

It is precisely the equation of Swaggart’s tryst with human nature accomplished through the category of “sin” that is politically paralyzing. For according to this logic, Swaggart’s auditors would have seen in the self-proclaimed sinful Swaggart nothing more than exposed, and possibly magnified, versions of their own sinful selves. They would see no violation of justice, but only the natural effects of the sinful human condition. It is, then, perhaps not surprising that Swaggart twice explicitly connected his misdeeds to his humanness. Near the end of his confession he addressed the question of why he sinned. His answer: “I have asked myself that 10,000 times through 10,000 tears. Maybe Jimmy Swaggart has tried to live his entire life as though he were not human” (122). His sexual failures function here as a reminder of his humanity, and humanity, in its indiscriminateness, is not a political category. If Swaggart called his deeds mistakes, they could have reminded him that he was unfaithful and had hurt other people; if he called his deeds mendacities they could have reminded him that he was duplicitous and deceptive; as sins, however, his deeds reminded him only that he, like everyone else, is simply human.
Swaggart ended his confession with the lengthy recitation of Psalm 51 which reaffirms that his sin was simply a natural expression of his humanity. “Behold I was shapen in iniquity,” Swaggart, quoting the Psalms, claims, “in sin did my mother conceive me.” Swaggart’s sin is literally in his blood; he is a sinner by virtue of being born; and he suffers, not from guiltiness, but from “bloodguiltiness” (123). Sin here is not the province of the evil-doing monster, it is rather part and parcel of the human condition—one is sinful on account of being born. Within this logic Swaggart was just as sinful—for he was just as born—as anyone else and thus, as Giuliano insists, he could not be punished for being sinful any more than he could be punished for being born. This logic of the blameless sinner would have been very familiar to followers of the 1988 Republican primaries. In a public debate just two months before Swaggart’s public confession, Gary Hart amended his response to accusations of marital infidelity by labeling himself a sinner: “I probably should have said . . . I’m a sinner. My religion tells me all of us are sinners.” Indeed, Swaggart’s son, Donny, made this logic explicit soon after his father’s public confession: “If there’s no forgiveness for Jimmy Swaggart, there’s no forgiveness for you either.”

The political insidiousness of Swaggart’s expressivism, then, is just this: folding his misdeeds into the natural category of sin precluded the sorts of discriminations needed for political judgment. Indeed, to the extent that politics is concerned with the affairs and relationships between people—Burke’s “barnyard”—then expressivism is perforce an apolitical form of speech. For expressivism can only communicate what is natural and what is human; it can communicate sin but it can’t communicate mistakes. Expressivism is, by its very constitution, unfit for politics.
This is not a strictly theoretical argument. It understates the insidiousness of expressivism simply to state that it is unfit for politics because it can only communicate the natural. Expressivism has very concrete political consequences. In this instance, expressivism helped Jimmy Swaggart evade justice. After all, Giuliano notes, Swaggart returned to the pulpit after a mere three month probation and found there a congregation waiting with open arms. Unlike the precedents of Jim Bakker and Marvin Gorman, both televangelists whose recent sexual scandals had led to their defrocking, Swaggart emerged from the scandal relatively unscathed. And, Giuliano concludes, until three years later when a California policeman pulled Swaggart over only to find him accompanied by a local prostitute and volumes of pornography, Swaggart was “clearly headed back to the top of the religious television ratings.”44 Significantly, Giuliano argues that Swaggart’s “success” was tied to a rhetorical campaign to label his deeds sin. Although it is difficult to know how things would have turned out if Swaggart had confessed to “mistakes” rather than “sins,” one thing is certain: by casting his deeds as sins, Swaggart rendered them fit for expression and unfit for politics.

Conclusion

It is tempting to write off Jimmy Swaggart. His virulently anti-intellectual and financially lucrative version of Christianity that preys on the pocketbooks of an elderly and uniformed viewership is, to say the least, distasteful. Unlike so many in American religious traditions, his sermons and writings do not reward careful criticism. His work has no carefully nuanced arguments, no thoughtful engagement with culture, and no
careful replies to his critics. His sermons are, in many ways, simply an enumeration of *non-sequiturs* disguised by the magnitude of his performance. His rhetorical techniques seem to be reducible to a two-fold strategy of assertion and noise. As the *Chicago Tribune* put it, Swaggart is simply a “disguised game-show host” enacting a “sweaty performance art” consisting of a “prowling, growling manipulation of the stage and camera.”45 Perhaps these are among the legitimate reasons that he has received little attention from rhetorical critics.

Yet I believe it is a mistake to dismiss Jimmy Swaggart too quickly. *Nightline’s* Ted Koppel has, after all, called Swaggart a “master of communication.”46 Koppel’s judgment is only possible in a culture that values expressivism over speech and, as such, I believe Koppel’s judgment reveals just how much Swaggart’s rhetorical style—however much we might dislike the man and his theology—is firmly embraced in contemporary America. Although we may hope that Swaggart is theologically exceptional, he is, rhetorically speaking, mainstream. Swaggart, in this sense, is simply a particularly clairvoyant lens through which we might see the rhetorical habits of contemporary America. He takes expressivism to its logical—and logically absurd—end and, in so doing, casts in bold relief the deleterious rhetorical and political consequences of expressivism.
Notes


14 Harris, "Swaggart Steps Down."

15 Jimmy Swaggart, “I Have Sinned” (sermon, Baton Rouge Family Worship Center, Baton Rouge, LA, 21 February 1988). Swaggart’s “I Have Sinned Sermon” and his “Comeback Sermon” (sermon, Baton Rouge Family Worship Center, Baton Rouge, LA, 22 May 1988) are appendicized in Giuliano’s *Thrice Born*. Hereafter all quotations from these sermons will be given parenthetically, the page numbers referring to the appendixes of *Thrice Born*.

16 Ostling, "Now," 46.


18 Ibid., 60-64.

19 Ostling, "Now," 47.


21 Ibid.

22 The most complete account of the Gorman/Swaggart rendezvous is given by Seaman, 11-12.


24 Duin, "Swaggart Admits Sin, begs Forgiveness as He Leaves Pulpit."


30 Harris, "Swaggart Steps Down."


32 Muro, "Jimmy."


38 Giuliano, Thrice Born: The Rhetorical Comeback of Jimmy Swaggart, 66.
39 Ibid., 61.

40 Ibid.

41 Ibid., 61-2.


Chapter Six

Confessing Citizenship: James McGreevey and the Politics of Expressivism

“[McGreevey] laid open his soul and his sexuality on camera. His speech was so personal and revealing, at one point I found myself wishing he would stop. It was as if he was giving us too much information, even for a society and media that crave such intimate details about our leaders and our celebrities.”

–Dave Boyer, The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel

On August 12, 2004 James McGreevey shocked the nation by disclosing his homosexuality and resigning his post as the Governor of New Jersey. By all accounts, his speech was a remarkable work of eloquence. The New York Times called it an “extraordinary spectacle,” a speech of “uncommon grace and dignity.” In the days that followed, journalists from across the country clamored to find appropriate words to capture the sheer pathos of the “confessional announcement.” The speech was described as “beautiful,” “palpable,” “wrenching,” “stunningly direct,” “amazing” and “moving,” “touchingly dignified,” “unspeakably sad, stunning and brave,” “indelibly eloquent and defiant,” “lyrical, philosophical” and even “Shakespearean.” McGreevey’s address, however, was not simply an example of heartfelt eloquence; it was also widely recognized as a significant moment in American political history. New Jersey’s Star-Ledger reported that it was “unrivaled, as political addresses go, at least in New Jersey.” The New York Times dropped the regional qualification and predicted that the speech would soon join other “watershed televised moments in political history.” Comparing McGreevey’s announcement to Nixon’s famous “Checkers” speech, The New York Times
went on to suggest that McGreevey’s resignation would “come to be regarded as one of the most remarkable [speeches] in American political history.”

Nearly three months later, on November 8, 2004, McGreevey confessed to the same “mistakes” again, this time in slightly more detail and in the context of his farewell address. Although this speech received far less media attention, it too was praised. The New York Times, for example, called it “reflective and impassioned,” “tinged with soul searching and regret.”

Neither McGreevey nor his office described either speech as a confession—the first was a “resignation speech,” the second a “farewell address”—and my only justification for reading them as such is that the media, apparently against McGreevey’s designs, consistently referred to both performances as confessions. New York’s Daily News even suggested in one highly critical article that McGreevey’s second speech was misnamed: “Heroic generals like Douglass MacArthur and popular presidents like Dwight Eisenhower give stirring, important farewell addresses. Disgraced governors skipping town one step ahead of federal investigators do not.” This was not, the Daily News insisted a “farewell address;” it was, rather, a “forced confession.” These conclusions were not exceptional; time and again the news media referred to both performances as “confessions.” I read McGreevey’s speeches as confessions, then, because, McGreevey’s wishes notwithstanding, the two speeches were constituted by the media as public confessions.

The decisive characteristic of both confessions is that they resist classification in terms of the confessive traditions of Augustine and Rousseau. Unlike Swaggart’s “I Have Sinned” sermon, which I argued was a “pure specimen” of the Rousseauian tradition, I
argue that both of McGreevey’s confessions are *conflations* of the two traditions: both confessions draw on the Augustinian tradition of confession-as-a-speaking-of-transgression and the Rousseauian tradition of confession-as-expressivism. This is important for two reasons. First, Peter Brooks has argued that when most Americans think of confession, they think of it in terms of conflated traditions. McGreevey’s confessions then, precisely because they are conspicuous amalgams of competing traditions, promise to set in bold relief what Brooks refers to as the “American confessional imagination.” Second, and more importantly for my purposes, I argue that it is precisely the conflation of confessive traditions that compromised the political potential of McGreevey’s confessions. The conflation of traditions in the August 12 confession was widely decried. Journalists from across the political spectrum noticed the conflation and argued that it undermined the otherwise prodigious political potential of a United States Governor’s coming out publicly as a homosexual. It was widely suggested that if McGreevey would have stuck to one tradition, if the whole of his confession had been explicable in the Rousseauian tradition of confession-as-expressivism, then his confession would have retained the political potential it lost in the conflation of traditions. Although the conflation of traditions in the November 8 confession was not so widely noticed, I argue that it nonetheless undermined the political potential of McGreevey’s confession.

In this chapter, then, I chart the influence of both traditions in both of McGreevey’s confessions and argue that McGreevey’s indiscriminate confessions teach us three things about the politics of public confession. First, the August 12 confession teaches us that the two traditions of public confession resist conflation. The two traditions
are, I suggest, mutually exclusive; they operate according to fundamentally different political logics and McGreevey’s first confession suggests that they can be combined only to ill effect. To make this argument I rely heavily on media accounts of the August 12 confession, for with surprising univocality, media outlets from across the political spectrum disclaimed McGreevey’s conflation of two traditions and argued instead for a purely expressive confession. Second, I suggest that while the media were right to disclaim the conflation of the two traditions, they were wrong to advocate for a purely expressive confession. Indeed, McGreevey’s August 12 confession is a particularly clear example of Foucault’s thesis that expressivism contributes to the normalization of society. Third, I argue that the November 8 confession teaches us one final thing about the politics of public confession: the conflation of the two traditions fictionalizes and naturalizes citizenship.

The Incommensurable Traditions of Public Confession

As McGreevey resigned the governorship on August 12, 2004 he confessed his lifelong struggle against, and final acceptance of, homosexuality. These disclosures made McGreevey the highest ranking U.S. official to publicly come out to date and therefore his resignation was, as New York’s Daily News put it, an “explosive moment in gay history.” McGreevey’s coming out may have been an “explosive moment for gay history,” but, for the simple reason that homosexuality constituted no reason to resign the governorship, his coming out was certainly not the decisive portion of his resignation speech. After narrating his life story, McGreevey went on to confess to an “adult
consensual affair with another man.” It was “circumstances surrounding the affair,” McGreevey claimed, and not his sexuality, that necessitated his resignation.\textsuperscript{13}

In this section I argue that McGreevey’s narration of his lifelong struggle with sexuality is explicable with recourse to the Rousseauian tradition of confession-as-expressivism, while his admissions to an “adult consensual affair” are explicable with recourse to an Augustinian confession-as-a-speaking-of-transgression tradition. Drawing on a wide array of journalistic accounts, I will suggest that this conflation of two traditions comprises the political potential of each tradition. I begin, however, by providing some background information on the affair, and the material circumstances that led to the confession.

Although McGreevey never specified which “circumstances surrounding the affair” compromised his ability to govern, they are not difficult to discern. The purported affair was with Golan Cipel. McGreevey met Cipel in Israel in March of 2000, soon brought him to New Jersey to serve as an aid in his gubernatorial campaign, and would go on to provide him a number of high-paying and high-profile jobs for which Cipel was sorely and consistently unqualified. The most egregious appointment was Cipel’s $110,000-a-year post as McGreevey’s homeland security advisor. Given that Cipel is a foreign-national lacking proper security clearances, and given that the FBI thus refused to share homeland security information with him, Cipel could not possibly carry out the duties of his appointment.\textsuperscript{14} When it came to Cipel, in other words, McGreevey consistently chose to follow his romantic interests, and the financial interests of his partner, even if it meant that he put an unqualified person in charge of New Jersey’s homeland security. Yet these compromising appointments cannot be the “circumstances”
to which McGreevey referred, for Cipel had been forced out of office by exposes in the *Star-Ledger* in March of 2002. By August of 2004, the misqualifications of Cipel were hardly news, and definitely not something that would force McGreevey’s resignation or inspire his heart-felt confessions.

The real impetus of the confession and resignation was that the fact that Cipel, who denied any affair with McGreevey, was demanding five-million dollars to stay quiet about McGreevey’s unwanted sexual advances. The confession, then, was a handy way to for McGreevey to save some money; as William F. Buckley explains in his commentary on McGreevey’s confession, the “classic” means of escaping blackmail is “to reveal yourself what the blackmailer holds over you.”

Interestingly, McGreevey and his aids made seemingly little effort to keep these “circumstances” secret. Although the details of Cipel’s threats are conspicuously absent from the confession itself, McGreevey’s aids readily admitted the compromising situation. Thus, from the very first newspaper articles, there was a widespread insistence that the confession was one more calculated political maneuver in a career that has been dogged by ethical lapses. In some cases, the same papers that praised that eloquence of McGreevey’s confession and placed it in the pantheon of immortal American oratory, also questioned the authenticity of McGreevey’s motives. The *New York Times*, for example, suggested that the confession was “incomplete,” “politically expedient,” and designed to “draw attention away from a lapse in professional judgment that [McGreevey] fears will be exposed.”

*Time* declared that the speech was not only “lyrical” and “philosophical,” but also “evasive.” And the Pulitzer prize-winning coverage of the *Star-Ledger* reported, *on the very same day*, that
McGreevey’s confession was politically calculated to escape Cipel’s demands and that the confession was “unrivaled” in the history of New Jersey oratory.

Rhetorically speaking, there is a twofold significance to these events. First, the confession immediately praised as eloquent and powerful despite the fact that the first listeners were confused regarding the substantive content of the confession. If people didn’t know why, precisely, McGreevey was confessing, this did not prevent the near-unanimous judgment that this was a damn good confession. It is as if the ambiguities of confessional content were unrelated to the successful execution of the form. Second, even when the “circumstances surrounding the affair” were disclosed by McGreevey’s aides, this did not necessarily impact the rhetorical judgments of the speech. To be sure, once the news of Cipel’s extortionary scheme broke, many people disclaimed McGreevey’s confession as a “dishonest performance.” But, and this is the point, the recognized dishonesty of the performance did not, for many, take away from the fact that this was an important and powerful political address. Daniel Zingale, a former director for the Human Rights Campaign, a gay advocacy group, put it this way, “No matter what else is revealed, [McGreevey’s confession] stands as an historic moment in the history of lesbian and gay Americans.” Zingale was right on; in the hours and days that followed, a lot of incriminating evidence was revealed, but none of it seemed to matter. In spite of the fact that McGreevey’s confession was increasingly recognized as “evasive,” “distracting,” “calculated,” “expedient,” and “incomplete,” this did nothing to temper the praise the confession received. Even after these charges, the speech was nonetheless “extraordinary,” “dramatic,” “amazing,” “touchingly dignified,” etc. etc. The significance of the confession stood, and remained unaffected by the various revelations,
precisely because it was the first time in history that the norms of public sexuality been
challenged by such a high-ranking American public official.

The peculiar ability of the media to consistently and simultaneously note the
evasesiveness and the dignity of McGreevey’s confession is telling; it suggests the presence
of two distinct criteria by which the confession was to be judged. On the one hand, the
media judged the confession in terms of an Augustinian understanding of confession: did
McGreevey speak about his transgressions? Insofar as these standards were used,
McGreevey’s confession was found wanting and labeled as evasive, expedient, “a
political lie,” etc. And, it must be said, that nearly every column in every newspaper
reached these sorts of conclusions. On the other hand, the fact that nearly every
newspaper also lavished intemperate praise on McGreevey’s confession suggests the
presence of a second standard. This second standard, of course, is a Rousseauian standard
that would judge the confession in terms of its expressiveness: did McGreevey bare his
soul? Insofar as this standard was used, McGreevey’s confession stands as a “watershed
moment” in the history of American political oratory. The praise that was piled onto
McGreevey’s confession, then, seems to be relatively unrelated to his infidelity, the
repeated mismanagement of his political and personal relationship with Golan Cipel, or
even the widespread suspicion that the confession was one more political ploy in a career
beset with ethical lapses. Rather the praise stemmed from the fact that, as McGreevey put
it, the content of his speech was “not one typically for the public domain.”

A close reading of the confession and the journalistic coverage lends credence to
this interpretation. For although only the first half McGreevey’s speech makes sense
within a confession-as-expressivism paradigm, it was this portion of his speech—and this
portion only—that drew unbounded praise. McGreevey begins his speech by noting his consistent inability to come to terms with his identity, and the confusion and ambivalence that have always attended his attempts at self-definition. It is this confusion and precarious instability of identity that will, McGreevey tells us, structure the rest of his life. McGreevey’s first response to this instability was simply to “work hard” at being “accepted as part of the traditional family of America.” These efforts to be accepted, he suggests, explains both marriages. Although the marriages are here contextualized as part of McGreevey’s assiduous work towards normalcy, he is careful to note that they cannot be reduced to instruments of social acceptance. Both marriages, he notes, have been very positive experiences, founded on love and sources of both daughters and joy. The marriages, daughters, and joy could not, however, deal with the instability of his identity. McGreevey could never, he tells us, completely banish “some feelings, a certain sense that separated me from others.” Despite this inability to achieve normalcy via heterosexual marriages and the production of a “traditional family,” McGreevey claimed that misguided “resolve” nonetheless drove him towards normalcy: “I forced what I thought was an acceptable reality onto myself, a reality which is layered and layered with all the, quote, ‘good things,’ and all the, quote, ‘right things’ of typical adolescent and adult behavior.”

Yet typicalness was not to be McGreevey’s lot. Despite the marriages, the daughters, the joy, the resolve, and the good and right things with which McGreevey surrounded himself, he could not, he tells us, solidify his sense of self or alleviate the persistent ambivalence regarding his identity, an ambivalence which perpetually kept “acceptable reality” at bay. Thus, McGreevey tells us that, at a “reflective” and
“spiritual” level, he began to question the nature and form of this reality. Could it be that this pursuit of “acceptable reality” had been, all along, a flight from reality: “Were there realities from which I was running?” Then, following some theological musings about the goodness of God, McGreevey renounced the resolve that had, theretofore, characterized his entire life. With unwavering poise and eloquence enough to silence the usually rowdy bars of Trenton, McGreevey renounced the endless pursuit of normalcy and embraced instead the depth of his own unique reality:

At a point in every person’s life, one has to look deeply into the mirror of one’s soul and decide one’s unique truth in the world, not as we may want to see it or hope to see it, but as it is. And so my truth is that I am a gay American. And I am blessed to live in the greatest nation with the tradition of civil liberties, the greatest tradition of civil liberties in the world, in a country which provides so much to its people.

These lines were unquestionably the climax of the speech. They were excerpted and quoted scores of times and they landed on the front page of *The New York Times*. *The Advocate* later declared that McGreevey’s focus-group tested coinage of “gay American” had become a “ubiquitous” part of the gay vernacular; *The New York Times* declared that these lines constituted the “most remarkable moment in a dead-silent room filled with normally voluble journalists and political operatives;” the *Daily News* claimed that “gays everywhere” kept “repeating the line, ‘I am a gay American,’ as if it was a war cry;” and *The Washington Post* specified that it was McGreevey’s “pained talk of his lifelong denial of his sexuality” that was “riveting,” not the balance of the speech.
These lines were not only the climax of the speech, they were also the turning point of the speech. It is at this point, that McGreevey abandons confession-as-expressivism in favor of confession-as-a-speaking-of-transgression. There is no more spiritual self-reflection, no more looking “deeply into the mirror” of his “soul,” no more of the painful first-person narrative of a normalcy pursued and denied. Indeed, the second half of the speech assumes a matter-of-fact tone, the shift being marked by McGreevey’s rather awkward transition as he emerges from his heart-wrenching hermeneutics of the self: “I am also here because, shamefully, I engaged in an adult consensual affair with another man.” McGreevey himself seems to recognize that the remainder of his speech must feel like an addendum compared to the centrality of his coming-out. Even the very fact of his affair, purportedly the reason for his resignation in the first place, is appended to an “I am also here,” suggesting that McGreevey knew just as well as The Advocate that his coming-out was the real reason for the speech. After asking the forgiveness of his wife, who, he assures us, has been “extraordinary” throughout the entire ordeal, McGreevey proceeds to announce his resignation. Like the news of his affair, the announcement of his resignation requires no soul-searching and demands little eloquence. McGreevey explains that the secrecy of his affair as well as his sexuality poses a threat to the governor’s office, leaving it “vulnerable to rumors, false allegations, and threats of disclosure.” It is the removal of these threats, McGreevey explains, that prompted him to publicly announce his sexuality in the first place.

There is no question that the media lavished its praise only on the first half of the speech, the confession-as-expressivism. The media almost exclusively focused their praise on McGreevey’s self-expression. The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, for example,
claimed: “[McGreevey] laid open his soul and his sexuality on camera. His speech was so personal and revealing, at one point I found myself wishing he would stop. It was as if he was giving us too much information, even for a society and media that crave such intimate details about our leaders and our celebrities.” 25 The New York Times claimed that the speech offered “an extraordinary glimpse into the private torment that can accompany a public life lived in the closet.” 26 And the Star-Ledger claimed that “even by the standards of a self-revelatory era in American political life,” the insight the speech afforded into McGreevey’s personal life was “stunning.” 27 By all counts, then, the power of the speech derived from the act of expressivism rather than the second half of the speech in which McGreevey confessed to an affair and resigned the Governor’s office.

It is not simply that the expressive portion of the confession received journalistic praise. More importantly, it is the expressive portion of the speech that, from the media’s perspective, had democratic political potential. Dave DeCicco, vice president of communications at the Victory Fund, put it most succinctly; he claimed, “[McGreevey] made a very eloquent and well-spoken resignation speech. I wish it had ended with, ‘I am a gay American.’ The rest was unfortunate.” 28 What I wish to point out is this: the “unfortunate” part of the confession was the only part of the speech in which McGreevey even attempted to talk about his transgressions; it was the only portion of the speech that made reference to mistakes; and without this “unfortunate” addendum the speech would have made no sense at all because their would have been no rationale for McGreevey’s resignation. It is a testament to the influence of expressivism that DeCicco could not simply praise the eloquence of McGreevey’s confession-as-expressivism, but also suggest that the remainder of the speech was “unfortunate.”
To be clear: in all likelihood, DeCicco was not saying that the remainder of the speech was unfortunate in itself. Judging from other journalistic accounts, DeCicco would probably concede that in certain circumstances McGreevey would have needed to talk about his political mistakes rather than talk about his struggles with sexual definition. What DeCicco objected to was not the second half of the speech simpliciter, but rather the second half of the speech appended to the first half of the speech. DeCicco, in other words, objected to resigning from office and admitting political mistakes in the context of coming out. These sentiments were widely shared. The Daily News, for example, argued that “to leave office after you come out is to do a disservice to gays who have fought so hard to prove their sexuality does not determine how well they can perform their job.”

Eric Marcus, who The New York Times describes as an “authority on gay history and culture,” agrees; “I don’t think [the coming-out] reflects well on gay people,” Marcus said, “Here is a man who chose to hide who he was, came out under pressure because he had engaged in an adulterous affair, had given his romantic partner a government job. It’s not exactly a moment I think anybody who has been involved in the gay rights movement can take pride in.”

What DeCicco, Marcus, and other are getting at is this: it was McGreevey’s conflation of two forms of confession that is politically unfortunate. By confessing his political mistakes in the context of expressivism, McGreevey, his critics argue, was simply “wrapping himself in a rainbow flag” to distract the public from his political missteps. As the Daily News put it, “Coming out of the closet should not and must not be a shield from scrutiny and possible prosecution.” Thus, while most critics praised the expressivism of McGreevey’s speech, they also suggested that the political power of
expressivism was undermined by the second half of the speech in which McGreevey shifted from confession-as-expressivism to confession-as-a-speaking-of-transgression.

On one hand, this insistence affirms an argument I have been making throughout this dissertation. Namely, that, politically speaking, the Augustinian tradition of confession-as-apology is diametrically opposed to the Rousseauian tradition of confession-as-self-expression. These two traditions operate according to fundamentally different political logics and, as McGreevey’s critics point out, the two traditions resist conflation. To conflate the two traditions is to undermine them both. Expressivism loses its force if it is perceived to be a calculative attempt at distraction, and confession-as-apology loses its force if the misdeeds it confesses are naturalized and explained as “self-expression.”

On the other hand, insofar as the media suggests that it is the second half of the confession that is “unfortunate,” they are suggesting that purer expressivism is more politically viable than the Augustinian tradition of confession. And this, of course, runs directly counter to the argument I have been trying to make. I have been arguing that expressivism undermines the prospects of democracy; that the promise of public confession depends, not on expressivism, but on a speaking-of-transgression. This disagreement between me and those critics who pushed for a purely expressive confession is not unique. Indeed, within communication studies there is a running debate over the political consequences of expressivism within the context of coming out. Because it is current issue in communication studies and relevant to these texts, I want to consider in the next section this the debate over the politics of self-expression within the
context of coming out. I will argue with recourse to McGreevey’s confession that expressivism undermines the politics of coming out.

**Expressivism and the Politics of Coming Out**

There is a sustained body of literature within our discipline that reads expressivism in the context of coming out as a “radical” and “emancipatory” political act. Michael Warner explains that that the category of “the public” is policed via “unwritten rules about the kinds of behavior and eroticism that are appropriate to the public.” Warner asks us to consider that heteronormativity—the “tacit sense of rightness” that attends our “national heterosexuality”—functions as the mechanism of gendered exclusion *par excellence*; a mechanism that preserves the public as a “sanitized space of sentimental feeling and immaculate behavior” while it minoritizes and deprives gendered differences.³³

Because the gendered inequalities of the public sphere are protected by norms rather than rules, democracy requires what John Sloop and Kent Ono have famously labeled as “outlaw discourses”—discourses that stand conspicuously outside the “norms and expectations” of dominant culture.³⁴ The democratic potential of outlaw discourses is grounded in their ability to disrupt and defamiliarize the normal. In Judith Butler’s terms, outlaw discourses effect “gender trouble”; they subvert and disrupt (“trouble”) the “naturalized and reified notions of gender that support masculine hegemony and heterosexist power.”³⁵ It is in this sense that Warner explains the politics of coming out: “It is the deformation of public and private that identity politics—and the performative
ritual known as coming out—tries to transform.” In other words, performances of coming out do the democratic work of calling into question falsely naturalized categories (public/private, male/female), thereby de-forming the very categories which ground and authorize gendered exclusions. It is for this reason that Warner can claim that “the disclosure of the self partakes of freedom” and Gilad Padva can celebrate the “radical politics of coming out.”

Perhaps grounded in the increasingly recognized limits of identity politics or Sedgwick’s oft-quoted skepticism regarding the emancipatory potential of coming out, it has become almost a scholarly commonplace that the “radical politics of coming out” are seldom realized in practice. Indeed, John Sloop has made a productive career by charting the various ways in which “outlaw discourses”—particularly gendered outlaw discourses—are troped, co-opted, and made to reinforce prevailing sexual norms. In *Disciplining Gender*, the latest and most compelling articulation of this argument, Sloop explains that the emancipatory logic of gender trouble is undermined because it is “persistently ‘disciplined,’ [and] contained within the realms of gender normativity.” Moreover, in the important preface to the 10th Anniversary Edition of *Gender Trouble*, Butler herself cautions that disruptive performances of gendered norms may actually “deflect non-normative sexual practice and thereby work to keep normative sexuality intact.” If Sedgwick, Sloop, and Butler suggest that gendered outlaw discourses may, in theory, be “contained” by heteronormativity, a number of critical case studies in the past four years confirms that, more often than not, performances of coming out carry little emancipatory potential. In an important article in *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, for example, Bonnie Dow argues that the coming out of Ellen
DeGeneres/Morgan was politically irrelevant because it was framed as purely personal decision, thus reinforcing the heteronormative assumption that the private is a pre-political site of uncontested individual identity. More recently, two articles in *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* have advanced similar claims. Padva argues that the politics of coming out are undermined by melodramatic staging and Helene A. Shugart draws on Dow’s work to argue that the coming out of Rosie O’Donnell was “mitigated and rationalized by powerful preexisting narratives.” In each case, the politics of coming out were countered and co-opted by powerful contextual discourses which functioned to turn gendered dissent against itself. In sum, it seems as if there is, within our discipline, a profound anxiety regarding the politics of coming out. As a discipline it seems that we are keenly attuned to the fragility of democracy and stand poised to disclaim the various ways that potential acts of dissent are contained within standards of normality.

Citing McGreevey’s August 12 confession as evidence, I wish to add expressivism to the already-long list of ways in which the “radical politics of coming out” are undermined. Indeed, the coming-out portion of McGreevey’s first confession—the expressive portion in which he narrated his sexual journey—lends itself with particular ease to a Foucauldian analysis. I argued in Chapter Three that Foucault has a very narrow understanding of confession and concluded that his critique of confession holds only for particular kinds of confession: expressive confessions that rely on a “hermeneutics of the self.” Unlike the confession to the murder of Emmett Till and Swaggart’s confession, however, the expressive portion of McGreevey’s confession is built on precisely the sort of self-interpretive work that Foucault disclaims. Grounded in Foucault’s critique of a
“hermeneutics of the self,” I argue that McGreevey’s disclosures cannot be a “radical” political moment, even if they were, as DiCicco wished, severed from the “unfortunate” remainder of the confession. Consider again the climax of McGreevey’s confession:

At a point in every person’s life, one has to look deeply into the mirror of one’s soul and decide one’s unique truth in the world, not as we may want to see it or hope to see it, but as it is. And so my truth is that I am a gay American. And I am blessed to live in the greatest nation with the tradition of civil liberties, the greatest tradition of civil liberties in the world, in a country which provides so much to its people.

These lines were not simply the climax of McGreevey’s speech. They were also that portion of the speech which lends itself most obviously to a Foucauldian analysis. The excerpted lines are the culmination of a meticulous hermeneutics of the self in which McGreevey reflected on his “feelings,” his pre-articulate “senses,” and his misguided resolve. McGreevey charts his inner self and interprets it as an insatiable drive for normalcy. In turn, McGreevey interprets this drive for normalcy as indicative of a deeper, truer reality—the reality that he was, in his words, a “gay American.” In Foucauldian lingo: McGreevey’s “feelings” and “senses” were the materials from which he constructed himself as a “gay American.” “Gay American,” then, is one more Foucauldian “fictitious unity” or “domain of knowledge;” it is the very real consequence of an arbitrary interpretive act which denies the incommensurability of “feelings” and “senses.” If, for Foucault, the “homosexual” became a species in 1870, McGreevey became a “gay American” on August 12, 2004. Foucault explains the birth of
homosexuality requires an interpretive practice that would read particular urges, practices, and disturbances as evidence of a particular inner disposition from which they all arose. He writes, “Homosexuality appeared as one of the forms of sexuality when it was transposed from the practice of sodomy onto a kind of interior androgyny, a hermaphrodisism of the soul.” McGreevey’s acknowledgement that he is a gay American is grounded in nearly identical hermeneutic moves.

If Foucault’s analysis is correct, then McGreevey’s interpretation of his own inner thoughts as indicative of a deeper and truer homosexuality should be considered a regressive moment for the gay rights movement. The interpretation calcified and objectified McGreevey’s sexual deviances into the category of the “gay American.” And, as I explained in Chapter Three, the process of normalization proceeds by objectification. Through a rigorous self-examination, McGreevey has constituted himself as an object (a “gay American”) that is fit to be arranged and disciplined by modern society. Unlike his incongruous feelings, which in their very incongruity resist objectification and normalization, the reification of these feelings into a stable object renders McGreevey particularly susceptible to the normalizing effects of bio-power. Far from resisting the norms which govern public sexuality, then, McGreevey’s expressive confession supports and enables them. Expressivism is thus not an “outlaw discourse” precisely because it is not outside the “norms and expectations” of dominant culture. To the contrary, Foucault demonstrates that it is expressivism that makes the norms of dominant culture possible. We must conclude that to the extent that the disclosure of the self depends on a hermeneutics of the self and calcifies the dynamic senses of the body it does not partake in freedom—at least not by challenging heteronormativity. For the moment that
McGreevey came out as a “gay American,” he provided bio-power a point of purchase and subjected himself to the norms of being gay in America. It is, after all, a minoritizing coinage—“gay American”—because it suggests that being gay is only acceptable if it is modified by its placement in America, America being a shorthand term for a place which affords civil liberties to minority citizens.

**Expressivism and the Fictionalization of Citizenship**

On November 8, 2004, nearly three months after his initial confession, McGreevey delivered his “farewell address” to 500 invited guests at Trenton’s State Museum auditorium. Although this speech received far less media attention than his August 12 confession, it too was widely praised for its eloquence and emotive power. *The New York Times* called it “reflective and impassioned,” “tinged with soul searching and regret.” Moreover, like the August 12 confession, this speech too is an amalgam of the Augustinian and Rousseauian confessive traditions.

Unlike the August 12 confession, however, McGreevey this time began in the Augustinian tradition of confession-as-a-speaking-of-the-self. Moreover, whereas he originally confessed to “circumstances surrounding the affair,” in this speech McGreevey confessed to a litany of wrong-doings and apologized to a number of different constituencies. He confessed to “mistakes in judgment” and “actions that have hurt those I love.” He apologized to those in his administration for the disruption and upheaval that his resignation caused. And he apologized to the citizens of New Jersey for disappointing the trust they placed in him, for poor decision-making, and for insufficient
courage to discharge his duties with integrity. To be sure, McGreevey still did not mention Cipel’s name, the lawsuit, or the “circumstances” surrounding the affair. But, even though he did not mention these decisive facts, this is, nonetheless, not expressivism. McGreevey is not here expressing his inner self, he is articulating his misdeeds. As *The New York Times* put it, McGreevey “finally acknowledged—if vaguely—the catalyst for his resignation.” In fact, McGreevey explicitly rejects expressivism: “I am not apologizing for being a gay American, but rather for having let personal feelings impact my decision making and for not having had the courage to be open about who I was.” This sentence is explicable only in the Augustinian tradition. Confession is, McGreevey insists, not about the depths of the self—not about his sexuality—but rather about his political mistakes: his poor judgment and lack of courage.

Immediately after these words, however, McGreevey resorted to the “hermeneutics of the self” so characteristic of expressivism and his August 12 confession. McGreevey explained that the events of the past couple months had led him to “reflect” on his youthful idealism and that he wanted to use the remainder of his farewell address to talk about those reflections. He explained that he had spent several months “face to mirror, so to speak, [and] I can’t help but share a few thoughts from that private internal conversation.” This is not explicable in the Augustinian tradition; it is a reversion to the Foucauldian-style expressivism of the August 12 confession. McGreevey is no longer speaking his misdeeds; he is interpreting his inner self. McGreevey does not, however, provide another narration of his sexual struggles; he provides instead a narration of his political struggles, his lifelong struggle to be a good citizen. If the August 12 confession locates homosexuality in the “depths” of McGreevey’s being, the
November 8 confession locates citizenship at the depth of his being. And, if in the August 12 confession McGreevey interprets the materials of his body (his “feelings” and “senses”) as evidence that he was a “gay American,” in the November 8 confession he interprets the materials of his body (“thoughts from that private internal conversation”) as evidence of an essential citizenship. Consider.

McGreevey began this political expressivism by recalling his first yearnings for public office: “[I]t was with the passion and idealism of a young man who believed that government could help make our lives better, that public service was caring, and citizenship demanded responsibilities.” This idealism soon faded. McGreevey lamented that

[w]e are losing sight of civility in government and politics. Debate and dialogue is taking a back seat to the politics of destruction and anger and control. Dogma has replaced thoughtful discussion between people of differing views. And so, we can’t hear each other. Instead we mark our territory.

But there is hope. The recovery of both rhetoric and politics, McGreevey insists, depends on further hermeneutics of the self: “It is so important to look inside ourselves, to make sure that power does not become an end in and of itself, and that different ideals do not become polarized, self-righteous ideologies.” Without introspection—without looking inside the self—debate is muted such that “we can’t hear each other.” And, when debate is muted, politics is reduced to the assertion of the self; politics is a “marking of one’s territory.” Both rhetoric and democracy, then, depend on looking inside ourselves.
McGreevey explains that such introspection has the capacity to produce what he calls “integrated selves.” McGreevey explains that the integration of the self involves the “proper alignment” of words, actions, and thoughts: “I want the words of my mouth and actions of my hands and the thoughts of my heart to be one and the same thing.” More importantly, McGreevey insists, integrated selves are rhetorical and political selves. While “divided souls” mark their territory and “need to shout in order to be heard,” McGreevey explains that integrated selves “speak softly” and are thus able to find “common ground,” deliberate, and thereby preserve democracy. For democracy demands “leaders who value their words as much as they do their actions and who, above all, believe in their heart what they do and say.” Above all, McGreevey insists, we must have integrated selves as politicians, selves who know themselves deeply, who speak softly, and who act out of integrity. For without integrated politicians, deliberation degenerates into dogma and violence. “We smile in person,” McGreevey explains, “and then throw each under the bus when we leave the room. In this context, public service can be reduced to blood sport and the souls in the ring are more often than not divided souls.” Divided souls shout and do politics through violence, integrated selves “speak softly” and rely on deliberation. In short, an “integrated self” is, for McGreevey, coextensive with the category of citizenship; the integrated self is McGreevey’s citizen *par excellence*.

McGreevey then proceeds to suggest that he is just such an integrated self. Although he concedes that he temporarily lost sight of his inner citizen and gave in to “blood sport” politicking, he suggests that, through confession, he has “mended his soul” and regained his freedom:
Like the Psalms of old, I have asked God to create in me a clean heart and to renew the right spirit within me. I stand before you as a man who has experienced the freedom that comes with the truth, claiming the promise that the truth will set you free.

McGreevey has regained his citizenship via a changed heart. Confession, McGreevey explains, brings “proper alignment, something true and whole.” This is a highly Foucauldian moment. McGreevey, like Foucault, recognizes that confession is invested in the integration and stabilization of otherwise disintegrated selves.

This, however, is where the similarities end. For McGreevey this wholeness is at once the condition of both speech and politics: integrated selves speak softly and preserve democracy through deliberation. Foucault, of course, argues precisely the opposite. He argues that integrated selves are a mechanism through which disciplinary power operates. As noted in Chapter Three, “wholeness” will always be a fiction. Foucault reminds us that there is “nothing in man—not even his body—that is sufficiently stable to serve as the basis for self-recognition.”

McGreevey’s production of wholeness, then, is tantamount to forcing the irreducibly heterogeneous materials of the body to function in the service of a stabilized identity. From Foucault’s perspective, then, integrated selves are one more Foucauldian “fictitious unity” in the service of a normalized society. Thus, McGreevey’s ideal citizen—the integrated self who preserves speech and democracy by speaking softly—is itself complicit in the normalization of society. McGreevey’s citizen, in other words, is a fictionalized citizen; the condition of citizenship is a wholeness that is constantly denied by the heterogeneity of the body.
How could this happen? By what logic could the category of the citizen be internalized and fictionalized. Why would McGreevey define citizenship in terms of wholeness and integration rather than political actions? I suggest that it is from the conflation of the two confessive traditions. Like a good Augustinian, McGreevey knows that confession should not be about the “depths” of his soul, but about his political mistakes—“I am not apologizing for being a gay American, but rather for having let personal feelings impact my decision making . . . .” Like a good Rousseauian, however, he also wanted to disclose the depths of his inner self—“I can’t help but share a few thoughts from that private internal conversation.” Somewhere along the line, the two traditions became conflated and political mistakes were folded into, and explained by, the integrity (or lack thereof) of the inner self. The result of this, of course, is that citizenship is not only fictionalized—in that it is rooted in a counterfactual wholeness—but it is also falsely naturalized. What democracy needs, McGreevey explains, are citizens who “understand their own finite nature.” In other words, democracy requires citizens who understand themselves in terms of the fictional categories imposed through confession.

But this is not all. Democracy requires not simply “integrated selves” or “whole” persons, it requires people who (mis)understand this wholeness or integration as their natural condition. McGreevey, in other words, asks citizens to “look inside” themselves and interpret the staggering multiplicity of their acts, thoughts, and words as evidence of a natural wholeness or a natural brokenness. McGreevey asks citizens to eliminate the category of the political: to read all ostensibly political acts as the expression of a natural disposition. And, as I have been trying to argue throughout this dissertation, this is politically devastating. The naturalization of politics is the end of politics; any rhetorical
form that falsely naturalizes political processes undermines the prospects of democracy by explaining misdeeds as the natural expression of the self.
Notes


7 Barron, "Personal Crisis."; Benson, "Shocking."; Whelan, Hester, and Martin; "After a Calm Morning, a Thunderbolt."


17 Cloud, "The Governor's Secret Life."


20 Aregood, "More Than Sexual Predilections Sank N.J. Governor."; Barron, "Personal Crisis."; "The Governor's Secret."; Santos, "In the Gay Community, Gov Is an Instant Hero."


22 Benson, "Shocking."

23 Santos, "In the Gay Community, Gov Is an Instant Hero."


25 Boyer, "A Rare Act of Political Courage."

26 "The Governor's Secret."
27 Whelan and Hassell, "McGreevey Quits, Admits Gay Affair."

28 Nagourney, "A Conflicted Pol and Public."

29 Santos, "In the Gay Community, Gov Is an Instant Hero."

30 Nagourney, "A Conflicted Pol and Public."

31 Capehart, "Out of the Closet, into Gay History."

32 Ibid.


38 On the limits of identity politics see Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 7-8; and Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*, 18, 26, 34.


41 Butler, *Gender Trouble*, xiv.


44 Nor should this be thought of as a problem unique to the politics of gender and sexuality. Sacvan Bercovitch has argued that it is a peculiar quality of American dissent that it is so consistently wrapped back into to dominant voices. Sacvan Bercovitch, *The Rites of Assent: Transformations in the Symbolic Construction of America* (New York: Routledge, 1993).


46 Kocieniewski, "McGreevey Apologetic but Proud at Farewell."


Conclusion

Expressivism against Speech and Politics

I have argued that understanding the rhetorical and political dimensions of public confession requires a close attention to the differences between the Augustinian and the Rousseauian notions of confession. Augustine believed that sin was politically disastrous because it was, at root, a turning from “the pursuit of the common good to one’s own individual good.” And, as I argued in Chapter One, this pursuit of individual gain functioned for Augustine as a sort of “self-enclosure.”¹ Sin isolated the self and thereby undermined the very possibility of community. It is precisely the self-enclosing consequences of sin that the Augustinian confessio is deployed against. The decisive characteristic of the Augustinian confession, then, is its capacity to render transgression in speech and thus bring transgression into the realm of politics proper—the realm of human affairs in which transgressions can be discussed and dealt with. I have thus referred to the Augustinian confession as a “speaking-of-transgression.”

Although Rousseau’s Confessions certainly disclose his misdeeds, this is only an incidental characteristic, probably attributable to the fact that Rousseau was self-consciously emulating Augustine’s Confessions. The decisive characteristic of Rousseau’s Confessions is his attempt to disclose the inner recesses of his self: “The particular object of my confessions is to make known my inner self.”² I have thus referred to the Rousseauian confession as a “speaking-of-the-self.” Throughout this dissertation I have objected to this Rousseauian subsumption of confession into a logic of
expressivism on both rhetorical and political grounds. By way of conclusion I consider both objections in turn, pausing to review how each chapter contributes to my overall argument.

**Expressivism against Speech**

Rhetorically speaking, expressivism is a betrayal and a denial of classical notions of speech. This rejection of speech is clearest in Rousseau’s celebration of babbling, moaning, and other instinctive cries. For Rousseau, these instinctive and inarticulate cries hold more expressive power than articulate words because they are, in their very inarticulateness, conspicuously not products of premeditated calculation or rhetorical technique. This rejection of rhetorical technique is grounded in Rousseau’s conviction that language, if it is to have the capacity for self-expression, must be natural. Language must not bear any marks of conventionality that would betray the fact that it is a product of societal protocols and something more than simple and spontaneous effusion. This insistence on the naturalness of language, however, is itself a repudiation of classical notions of speech. Despite the diversity of assumptions and contexts that otherwise separated Plato, Isocrates, the Sophists, Cicero, Quintilian, and Augustine, they all agreed that speech was not natural. Isocrates may have put it most directly when he argued in “Antidosis” that it is through speech that “we have escaped the life of wild beasts.” Isocrates was not exceptional; he was articulating only the unquestioned classical assumption that speech is understandable in terms of the nomos/physis distinction. Wild animals were given in nature; their wildness was a consequence of their naturalness.
Humanity, by contrast, possessed speech, which, before it was anything else, was the power of asserting the primacy of the conventional over the natural and the concomitant ability to defeat the wildness of nature with the conventionality of laws: “For this [speech] it is which has laid down laws concerning things just and unjust, and things honorable and base; and if it were not for these ordinances we would not be able to live with one another.”3 That so many diverse figures from antiquity could agree on the fact that speech constitutes an “escape” from nature is a testament to just how fundamental that conviction was. By advocating expressivism, then, and by celebrating the naturalness of language, Rousseau was rejecting what should be considered, for classical rhetoricians, the first premise of speech.

Given this rejection of so fundamental a conviction, it perhaps should not be surprising that Rousseau provides a new rationale for the communicative power of language. Rousseau rejects the classical heritage that would suggest that the communicative power of language resides in the refinement of techniques, the deployment of reasoning, and the adaptation of speech for a particular audience. To the contrary, he insists that speech has communicative power to the extent that it shuns technique, bears no traces of reasoning, and—above all—is not adapted to the needs of a particular audience. To Rousseau’s mind, adaptation constitutes a crafting of the truth, and a crafted truth is no truth at all. It is thus that Rousseau comes to celebrate instinctive cries, uncontrollable starts, and spontaneous noises. The inarticulate, in short, trumps the articulate through its conspicuous rejection of technique, calculated reasoning, and audience adaptation. That this approach to language led Rousseau to venerate “babbling” and the prayers of the “woman who can only say: ‘Oh’” as fundamentally more
communicative than speech did not trouble him. Within the logic of expressivism, the spontaneous effusion of sounds is more rhetorically sound than the classical ideals of speech.

The opposition of expressivism and speech remains, for Rousseau, a purely theoretical ideal. His Confessions are not inarticulate; it is an eloquent book filled with memorable turns of phrase. But, as I argued in Chapter Two, this articulateness should not obscure the fact that Rousseau’s expressivism is guided by, and aims towards, the ideal of pure inarticulate effusion. Although Rousseau apparently was willing to concede that babbling was an insufficient medium for his Confessions as well as his many other works, he argues that his articulate speech is calibrated to minimize those characteristics which would distinguish it from babbling. For this reason, expressivism embraces rhetorical simplicity and shuns all rhetorical ornamentation as first order evidence of artifice.

Each of my case studies testifies that Rousseau was badly mistaken. Although the ideal of confession-as-self-expression has been immensely influential, the evidence suggests that it does not have more communicative power than speech. On this score it is telling that in each case study, an expressive public confession is in some way complicit with an enforced silence. Expressivism, then, is not simply theoretically opposed to speech, its deployment works against speech. The expressive confession to the murder of Emmett Till, for example, frames the murder as an attempt to silence the fundamentally talkative Emmett Till. Jimmy Swaggart’s confession is part and parcel of what the Boston Globe labeled a protracted “silence campaign” intended to consign Swaggart’s sins to oblivion. And although James McGreevey proclaimed the importance of disclosure and
honesty in his public confession, he never did disclose the particular circumstances that drove him to confess. That all three confessions are at least partially explicable with recourse to Rousseauian expressivism, and that all three confessions are complicit with the production and deployment of silence is not coincidental. Insofar as expressivism is theoretically understandable only in explicit contradistinction to speech, it should not be surprising that contemporary speakers may draw on the resources of expressivism in the interests of preserving silence.

The capacity of expressivism to function against speech and in the service of silence is aptly illustrated by George W. Bush’s explanation of why Jesus is his political philosopher of choice. Asked by Tom Brokaw to explain his choice of Jesus, Bush responded that Christ “changed my heart.” Unsatisfied, Brokaw asked Bush to elaborate on how, precisely, Christ had changed his heart. Bush: “Well, if they don’t know, it's going to be hard to explain. When you turn your heart and your life over to Christ, when you accept Christ as the savior, it changes your heart. It changes your life. And that's what happened to me.”

Bush, in other words, has no answer to Brokaw’s probes. Or, more precisely, he has an answer, but his answer cannot be put into speech: “If they don’t know, it’s going to be hard to explain.” Bush is reduced to the insistence that his heart is changed, although the specifics of that change and their relevance for political philosophy are elided. This is expressivism: Bush willingly ceded the descriptive powers of speech in exchange for the unexplainable feelings of his heart; he insisted that the most important political philosophy is something that can only be experienced rather than explained; and, finally, he chose to talk about his inner self—his heart—because unlike political philosophy the functioning of one’s heart is better experienced than talked about.
Although I have some sympathy for Bush’s insistence on the centrality of Christ, I have no sympathy for the expressivism which allowed Bush to claim Jesus as his political philosopher of choice, without needing to go to the trouble of justifying that choice in speech. If Christ is indeed as central as Bush claims, it seems that the least Bush could have done was explain why. But expressivism is not good for explanation; it is good only for expressing the instinctual and the natural and political philosophy—by definition—is neither of those things.

Expressivism against Politics

I have argued throughout that expressivism is politically debilitating. On one level this should not be surprising: expressivism is deployed against speech and politics—at least democratic politics—depends on the capacity of citizens to use speech and deliberate amongst themselves. It follows that insofar as expressivism trumps speech, it also trumps the possibility of democratic governance. Given the expressive celebration of babbling, what deliberation is even possible? But it is important to remember that expressivism is only an ideal and, with the possible exception of Jimmy Swaggart’s glossolalia, the public confessions I examined were not babbling: they were articulate and, in the case of James McGreevey, quite eloquent. Despite this eloquence, I argued that each of my case studies was explicable with recourse to Rousseauian expressivism because each confession was concerned far more with self-expression than with a speaking-of-transgressions. Moreover, I argued that these confessions, even though they do not reach the Rousseauian ideal of babbling, are nonetheless politically harmful.
because they naturalize political mistakes and thereby preclude the possibility of judgment.

Foucault is particularly good on this point. As I argued in Chapter Three, Foucault’s argument against confession is more precisely an argument against expressivism. Foucault argues that expressivism falsely naturalizes the self it purports to disclose. Through expressivism, the heterogeneous sensations of the body are collapsed into a “fictitious unity” that masquerades as the “self.” For example, Foucault argues that such notions as “sinner,” “homosexual,” and “delinquent,” are not descriptions of the self disclosed in confession, they are external categories that are imposed on the body through confession. Foucault takes this quite seriously; so much so that he argues that the materials of the body are so heterogeneous that any labeling of the body will, as a matter of course, be a false labeling of the body. That various labels—sinner, homosexual, etc.—have at various points in history been understood as natural dispositions attests to the power of confession to naturalize fictitious categories.

Foucault also demonstrates the political consequences of this false naturalization of the self. He argues that it is precisely the fictitious unities provided by confession that allows power to control large segments of the population. For example, it is only when the various biological urges were interpreted as a sign of an essential “homosexuality,” that people were controlled and organized in terms of their sexuality. If practices of expressivism had not falsely naturalized the self by imposing on the body fictitious sexual categories, it would have never been possible to demean an entire demographic as sexually deviant or abnormal. It was, in other words, only after the false naturalization of
the self in sexual categories effected by expressivism that people began to be organized and controlled according to the normality of their sexuality.

The capacity of expressivism to naturalize political categories is born out by case studies. The confession to the murder of Emmett Till, for example, suggested that the murder was simply a product of the way things are in the South. By occluding the fact that the murder was a political choice, the expressive confession contributed to fifty-years of relatively little debate or public interest in the Emmett Till case. It was not until the Justice Department explicitly rejected the confession in the spring of 2003 that the case was re-opened and people finally began to debate the facts of the case. The Emmett Till confession, then, is a particularly clear example of how expressivism shut down political debate by naturalizing a political misdeed.

The confession of Jimmy Swaggart operates according to the same logic. Swaggart relentlessly referred to his never-specified misdeed as a “sin.” Less than two minutes into the confession, Swaggart offers the most quoted lines of the confession: “I do not plan in any way to whitewash my sin. I do not call it a mistake, a mendacity; I call it sin.” Swaggart was insistent on this; he referred to his deeds fourteen times in the public confession, each time with a cognate of the word “sin,” and Giuliano notes that in the three months following the confession, neither Swaggart nor the Assemblies of God ever referred to the events in question as anything but sin. Despite Swaggart’s insistence, it must be noted that this naming is a misnaming: his sexual escapades were mistakes and they were mendacious. But by labeling himself a sinner, Swaggart implicitly suggested that there was nothing unique or worthy of notice about his rendezvous’ with prostitutes—for in Pentecostal theology everyone is a sinner. This
implicit logic was made explicit by his son Donny: “If there’s no forgiveness for Jimmy Swaggart, there’s no forgiveness for you either.” By folding his sexual infidelity into a logic of sinfulness, Swaggart naturalized his infidelities and suggested that they could not be the basis for political judgment. And although it is difficult to establish causal connections, it is significant on this count that Swaggart was not judged. He returned to the pulpit after a mere three month probation and found a congregation waiting with open arms. Unlike the precedents of Jim Bakker and Marvin Gorman, both televangelists whose recent sexual scandals had led to their defrocking, Swaggart emerged from the scandal relatively unscathed. And until three years later when a California policeman pulled Swaggart over only to find him accompanied by a local prostitute and volumes of pornography, Swaggart was, in Giuliano’s words, “clearly headed back to the top of the religious television ratings.”

The confessions of James McGreevey also demonstrate the capacity of expressivism to naturalize its disclosures. One of the unique things about McGreevey’s confessions is that in them he explicitly reflects on the obligations of citizenship. McGreevey argues that citizenship requires an “integrated self,” and an “integrated self” requires public confession. Yet, as I argued in Chapter Six, only an expressive confession dedicated to self-expression could possibly provide an “integrated self.” McGreevey has thus made expressivism constitutive of citizenship: only by imposing on oneself fictitious categories of unity is citizenship possible. This definition of citizenship, I argued, has the unfortunate consequences of naturalizing citizenship by suggesting that citizenship is defined by an integral inner self, rather than by deeds and words performed on behalf of the community.
As I argued in Chapter Two, the reason why expressivism naturalizes the deeds it
discloses is that, under the aegis of expressivism, the self functions as the ultimate arbiter
of good and bad. With expressivism, in other words, the distinction between virtue and
vice is aligned with the distinction between an authentic self and a corrupted society.
There is no reference point outside the self against which the self may be judged. Charles
Taylor explains that, with Rousseau, the expression of the voice of nature took on an
entirely new importance: “Not just that I have, thanks be to God, sentiments which
accord with what I see through other means to be universal good, but that the inner voice
of my true sentiments define what is good: since the élan of nature in me is good, it is this
which has to be consulted to discover it.” This is a profoundly antipolitical ethic because
it suggests that conceptions of good and bad are not derived from the community in
which one lives. Moreover, this is a decisive rejection of the Augustinian understanding
of confession in which personal shortcomings are submitted to the community. Although
expressivism may be a powerful “language of confession” in that it is calibrated to
disclose the innermost recesses of the self, it has absolutely no capacity to recognize
deficiencies of the self. The self is rendered autonomous and declared good: the inner self
has become its own standard and is, by definition, above judgment. The disclosures of
expressivism are natural because they spring from the self, and good because they are
natural. The confession to the murder of Emmett Till, the confession of Jimmy Swaggart,
and the confessions of James McGreevey each in their own way attest to the power of
expressivism to naturalize political atrocities and protect them from the political
judgment they deserve. For no matter how horrific nature may be, the natural stands
conspicuously outside of speech precisely because it cannot be judged by speech. The
self and the misdeeds that are disclosed through expressivism are threats to the body politic precisely because they refuse to submit to its judgments. And the person who refuses the judgments of the political community calls to mind the terrifying figure of Nietzsche’s “nobleman.” In a telling phrase, Nietzsche suggests that the noble race act as “wild animals”:

We can imagine them returning from an orgy of murder, arson, rape, and torture, jubilant and at peace with themselves as if they had committed a fraternity prank—convinced, moreover, that the poets for a long time to come will have something to sing about and to praise.9

Nietzsche’s nobleman perfectly captures the incompatibility of expressivism and political judgment. By locating the good wholly within themselves, the noble race is unable to discriminate between rape and torture on one hand, and a fraternity prank on the other hand.

Nietzsche’s image of humanity acting as wild beasts serves as a poignant reminder of the vast differences between expressivism and speech. Isocrates, you will recall, conceived of speech as the means by which humanity both “escaped the life of wild beasts” and has “come together and founded cities.” In the starkest of contrasts, expressivism constitutes a return to the life of wild beasts and threatens the coherence of the body politic.
Notes


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