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***Confession and third party revelation in memoir: The narrator, the confessant, and textual strategies for decentring the memoirist's authority***

*Abstract*

*This paper explores the mechanisms of first and third party confession, and compares the different confessional approaches deployed in a range of memoirs including Vivian Gornick's Fierce Attachments, Jean Jacques Rousseau's Confessions, Dave Egger's Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius, and my own book, The Last Thread. My paper examines the use of both implicit and explicit self-reflexive confessional gestures regarding the ethical boundaries of the texts that memoirists have written and argues that, despite the transparency that such gestures appear to offer the reader, it is largely through the separation of the roles of narrator and confessant that occurs through third party revelation – and consequently the disruption of the prescribed roles of writer and reader as the deliverer and receiver of confession – that memoirists can effectively decentre their own authority.*

*Keywords: memoir, life-writing, confession*

In the construction of contemporary memoir, 'what right do I have?' is often the first and only port of call for memoirists exploring the question of authority in relation to third party revelation. That is, the ethics of making or conveying revelations or confessions on the behalf of those whose private lives intersect significantly with the narratives constructed by the memoirist are so pressing that they tend to become *the* question relating to authority and confession in memoir. As the critic and memoirist Nancy K Miller frames it:

If ... every account of the self includes relations with others, how can an autobiographer tell a story without betraying the other, without violating the other's privacy, without exposing ... without doing harm, but nonetheless telling the story *from one's own perspective*, which by virtue of being a published text exerts a certain power. (Miller 2008: 47)

Writers' reflections upon this question, whether from within the text or from outside it, tend to culminate in uncomfortable attempts at détente wherein the writer in effect confesses to the reader once more, this time to transgressions that are at once difficult to justify and intrinsic to the making of the work. As Miller writes in response to her own question, 'It is not my wish to do harm, but I am forced to acknowledge that I may well cause pain – or embarrassment to others – if I also believe, as I do, in my right to tell the story' (2008: 51). The

supplementary first-person confession alters what may have seemed, at the outset, to be an ethical examination of the confessional gesture, into a device that instead perpetuates and expands its scope: ultimately making the question a rhetorical and self-justifying gesture rather than a self-reflective one. The reader is left with the proposition that, as critics Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson put it, ‘being suspicious about the ethics of autobiographical writing may be the one ethical act available to it’ (Smith & Watson 2001: 9).

This supplementary first-person confession diverts and satisfies (to the degree that this is ever possible) the critical attention of the reader and implicitly re-affirms the circumscribed roles of memoirist and reader. It also obscures the potential of third party confession in memoir to offer a different entry point into the memoirist’s authority – and perhaps a genuine means of offsetting it – that may be achieved by fracturing the relationship that underpins the circumscribed nature of these roles: the unity, in first-person confession, of narrator and confessant. This essay aims to lay bare the mechanisms of first-person and third-person confession in memoir and the roles that they generate, in order to explore what happens when the circumscribed positions of the memoirist and reader, the former as the deliverer and the latter as the receiver of confession, are disrupted.

But what exactly does confession in memoir mean? In his essay, ‘Confession and Double Thoughts’, JM Coetzee relies on an interpretation of confession that is differentiated from memoir and the apology ‘on the basis of an underlying motive to tell an essential truth about the self’ (Coetzee 1985: 192). In making this distinction, Coetzee draws on Francis R Hart’s seminal description of confession as ‘personal history that seeks to communicate or express the essential nature, the truth, of the self,’ apology as ‘personal history that seeks to demonstrate or realize the integrity of the self’ and memoir as ‘personal history that seeks to articulate or repossess the historicity of the self’ (Hart 1970: 491). Lionel Gossman also draws on Hart’s description of confession, and adds:

Hart wisely emphasizes that his principles are not meant to be exclusive of one another, but are all usually active together in varying degrees in any given work of autobiography. It is indeed possible to go through the *Confessions*, or any other autobiographical work, and find passages that are predominantly, even explicitly and programmatically, confessional, others that are predominantly apologetic, others again that are primarily commemorative. (Gossman 1978: 65)

I too will work with the proposition that these modes operate through and alongside one another in memoir and, accordingly, I am particularly interested in the variety of ways confessional moments may operate within the genre. Ira Bruce Nadel traces confession in personal narrative back as far as St Augustine:

Traditionally, it meant the examination of one’s conscience and the admittance of one’s guilt, an act simultaneously professing knowledge of God and of one’s self. Duty and self-discovery became united in the literary form of confession as seen in Augustine and Rousseau. (Nadel 1982: 189-190)

In this passage Nadel broadly outlines much of what drives confession in narratives of the self even today. In memoir, confession has become a creative examination and exposition of the self through and within a given context; a

context that incorporates more than just the life of the author, as Timothy Adams points out:

Memoir differs from autobiography in its emphasis – not inwardly on the constructed story of the author's life but outwardly on the story of the author's life as it relates to the lives of others. (Adams 2004: 85)

That is, the depiction of the *intersection* of the memoirist's life with those significant others around him or her is integral to the genre of memoir. In addition, as in religious confession, the confessional mode in memoir involves the unpacking of the conscience and the negotiation of shame. But in memoir there is no priest to provide absolution or to guide the process; rather it is the writer that guides his or her own process of self-examination and exposition, and the writer that wields a certain authority and power. As Coetzee points out, this kind of secularised literary confessional mode – deprived of the religious machinery of absolution – risks perpetuating itself endlessly:

Self-forgiveness means the closing of the chapter, the end of the downward spiral of self-accusation whose depths can never be plumbed because to decide that guilt ceases at such-and-such a point, is itself a potentially false act that deserves its own scrutiny. (Coetzee 1985: 230)

I am interested, however, not in the confessional moment that, driven by guilt, seeks absolution, but in the confessional moment that, hinging on shame, is constructed *largely to be conveyed* as a way of making use of that shame. I am interested in literary confession, where the purpose is not absolution (which in a sense would deprive the memoirist of essential material and the capacity to reflect on it in an open-ended way) but *connection* between writer and reader. Writes Nadel of the evolution of the confessional form in the nineteenth century:

The private nature of the confession created sincerity and authenticity through the intimate dialogue between the narrator and reader, which in turn intensified believability in the text. Revelation, not justification, became the major focus. (Nadel 1982: 190)

Bound up in the use of the word 'revelation' is the idea of a mutual discovery, the sense that the author is not so much explaining his or her life and its intersection with others, as inviting the reader on a mutual journey of exploration into this subject matter with the writer's personal experiences and perspective as the lens. Such a journey requires a connection based on trust and it is the notion of 'believability in a text' that makes confession a potent means of establishing a link between writer and reader.

The confessional moment connects the memoirist to the reader because it implies a kind of (limited) equality in the relationship between reader and writer based on the show of vulnerability that the confession entails. Confession, in memoir, draws much of its moral authority from the transmission of shame. It is through a display of such vulnerability that the memoir writer gains the trust and engagement of the reader. Blake Morrison, in *And When Did You Last See Your Father?* – the memoir that is said to have revived the genre of life-writing in the 1990s – describes a moment in which he masturbates in the bath while his father lies dying downstairs:

The hot water laps over my stomach and thighs. I think of the behind-locked-doors furtiveness of adolescence, and the

thought, or the soapy water, arouses me, because I am hard now, and start to masturbate, wondering if this is wrong and something I should feel guilty about, in the midst of death and with my father downstairs, but wanting to escape, reluctant to let the feeling pass. Now little white snakes swirl in the water, and Sylko threads snag against my skin. (Morrison 1993: 66)

The writer who reveals himself in such a vulnerable way can surely be believed because he is earnest to the point of compromising himself. It is easy to read these moments and to feel as if we are vicariously experiencing the discomfort of the narrator who recalls them, to feel as if we are inhabiting the very psychological and emotional space occupied by the memoirist. However the discomfort that comes from delivering the confessional moment is not the same as that which comes from receiving it, and there is more to a confessional moment in memoir than a show of vulnerability.

As Dennis Foster observes in *Confession and Complicity in Narrative*, ‘Despite his own sense of guilt, a confessor commands a power over a listener because he controls the material the other is obligated to use to be the one who understands’ (Foster 1987: 14). There are two points to be drawn here. First of all, as a counterbalance to the effects of any display of vulnerability on the part of the narrator, there is the ever-present sense, for the reader, of the narrator’s position in the narrative and the authority this confers. In terms of Philippe LeJeune’s ‘pact’ that there should be an affirmation in the autobiographical text of ‘the identity of name between author, narrator and protagonist’ (LeJeune 1989: 14), it can be said that the narrator sits at the heart of the material, the gatekeeper to his or her own interiority, the position of expertise. Secondly, even within the most earnest work, this position also leads to the fact that the writer chooses which parts of himself or herself to reveal, and the manner in which they are revealed. The memoirist constantly works to project an image of intimate revelation. Thus the confessional moment is still an act of agency, and therefore power, on the part of the writer, while the attendant vulnerability – whether this is intended or not – can create not only the illusion that the writer, as a whole, is making himself or herself vulnerable, but that the reader has a kind of unrestricted access to the situations that are described and therefore to the confessional mechanism by which they are conveyed.

The title of Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s two-hundred-year-old work, *Confessions*, and the way that it feeds back into the work of St Augustine, plays into the above illusion. From the outset, Rousseau sets up a philosophical approach that will provide a template to writers and readers for generations to come:

With equal freedom and veracity have I related what was laudable or wicked, I have concealed no crimes, added no virtues... Such as I was, I have declared myself; sometimes vile and despicable, at others, virtuous, generous, and sublime; even as Thou hast read my inmost soul: Power Eternal! assemble round Thy throne an innumerable throng of my fellow-mortals, let them listen to my confessions, let them blush at my depravity, let them tremble at my sufferings; let each in his turn expose with equal sincerity the failings, the wanderings of his heart, and if he dare, aver, I was better than that man. (Rousseau 1779: 3)

The book’s worth, according to this account, is based on its apparently uncompromising scope and veracity. The moral standard he applies to himself is one of proficiency, in the sense that he submits to be judged only on the veracity with which he unpacks and examines his life. Rousseau goes on to

make the sorts of uncomfortable confessions that make him appear not only naked, but also establishes a convention and value system for ensuing writers of memoir to embrace, a convention where the vulnerability within confession gives the narrative voice a sense of validity, expertise, and authority. As Lionel Gossman suggests, Rousseau is probably drawing directly on the tradition initiated by Augustine, both in terms of subject matter and style:

Rousseau's projection of himself in the *Confessions* may well owe something to the model provided by St. Augustine... Above all, both Confessions are conversion stories, involving a repudiation of worldly signs and pleasure, of art and literature; both offer themselves therefore not as art, but as inmost truth. (Gossman 1978: 60)

JM Coetzee notes the way in which Rousseau establishes his authority as truth-teller and expert on the subject of himself, in part through his exposition of his own style:

The immediacy of the language Rousseau projects is intended as a guarantee of the truth of the past it recounts. It is no longer a language that dominates the subject as the language of the historian does. Instead, it is a naïve language that reveals the confessant in the moment of confession in the same instant that it reveals the past he confesses – a past necessarily become uncertain. (Coetzee 1985: 209)

A powerful example of this portrayal of 'the confessant in the moment' of confession occurs early in the book. It occurs in the context of a confession that is bold even by modern standards:

Now I have made the first and most painful step in the dark and miry maze of my confessions. It is the ridiculous and the shameful, not one's criminal actions, that it is hardest to confess. But henceforth I am certain of myself; after that which I have just had the courage to say, nothing else will defeat me. How much it has cost me to make such revelations can be judged when I say that though sometimes labouring under passions that have robbed me of sight, of hearing and of my senses, though sometimes trembling convulsively in my whole body in the presence of the woman I loved, I have never, during the whole course of my life, been able to force myself, even in moments of extreme intimacy, to confess my peculiarities and implore her to grant the one favour which was lacking. (Rousseau 1931: 28)

Rousseau is speaking here of his sexual obsession with receiving corporal punishment from a woman. This introduction plays an important role in offering a challenge that engages the reader by the risk it takes through the intimate depth of its revelation. Gossman observes, "Rousseau's candour about the details of his sexual life, for instance, was not in itself shocking; what was, was the seriousness with which he treated them and asked the reader to treat them" (Gossman 1978: 60-61). I would argue that Rousseau does not ask the reader to treat these moments with seriousness, but *expects* it. As he takes the "first and most painful step in the dark and miry maze," the very seriousness with which he pursues his exposition assumes that the reader is there following in his footsteps. What reader would dare avert their gaze? As Nadel describes Rousseau's approach, "Often, he intimidates his readers into viewing acts they may not want to see, insisting they witness what they have personally avoided

or could not face' (Nadel 1982: 191). Rousseau's intimacy in this confessional moment both conveys a revelation of sexual vulnerability and restages it in the form of the confession. Rousseau simultaneously delivers the confession and manages the framework within which it occurs. The submissive and seemingly passive sexual vulnerability that he confesses to the reader obscures the real power he exerts in positioning himself and the reader within the framework of the confession.

Rousseau's moments of confession, despite their openness and revelatory power, ultimately serve to reinforce the way in which he has constructed his memoir by circumscribing the position of reader. To augment the authority that comes from his role as expert on his own material, he constructs a value system in his introduction based on absolute honesty and veracity and then sets himself up – and the reader – to recognise his own supremacy in the field.

Rousseau's strategies contrast and echo the approach of Dave Eggers, two centuries later, in the memoir *A Heart Breaking Work of Staggering Genius* (2007). Both writers use a deliberately challenging title, and both provide a template for approaching their work within the work itself. Moreover, both seek a connection with the reader through a confessional intensity and veracity that attempts to break new ground. Take this passage by Eggers about the title of his book in the 25-page acknowledgment:

Yes it caught your eye. First you took it at face value, and picked it up immediately. "This is just the sort of book for which I have been looking!" Many of you, particularly those among you who seek out the maudlin and melodramatic, were struck by the "Heart Breaking" part. Others thought the "Staggering Genius" element seemed like a pretty good recommendation. But then you thought, Hey can these two elements work together?... In the end, one's only logical interpretation of the title's intent is as a) a cheap kind of joke b) buttressed by an interest in lamely executed titular innovation (employed, one suspects, only to shock) which is c) undermined of course by the cheap joke aspect, and d) confused by the creeping feeling one gets that the author is dead serious in his feeling that the title is an accurate description of the content, intent and quality of the book. (Eggers 2007: acknowledgments)

This is part of an introductory section (to what is ultimately a more traditionally structured memoir) that runs for more than thirty pages and includes tables, lists, suggestions for parts of the book that can be read or omitted, passages that have been 'deleted' from the main body of the book, trite explanations of symbolism, a flow chart, and endless admissions about the fabricated nature of parts of this memoir and how to approach it. The use of the second person, combined with the ironic tone, makes the reader complicit in constructing the authority of memoir as a kind of illusion. The reader may be positioned in the role of a confessor, which offers an illusory power, but the writer still imposes a filter and value system through which the confession must be received. He extends an expert status to the reader by sharing his knowledge of the construction of the text, but in fact retains it for himself, by pre-empting the reader to an absurd level as he illuminates, dismantles and appropriates the formulations that characterise memoir. The internal workings are a kind of false bottom beneath which the real mechanisms of narrative construction and obfuscation are at work. Eggers interrogates one form of uncomfortable truth: the deceptively fabricated nature of memoir writing, but while he appears to challenge Rousseau's means of asserting complete transparency (and indeed his

method of intimacy and the way that he circumscribes the position of the reader) he simply elevates all of this to a meta-fictional level. Take this reference to the confessional mode in memoir:

THE EASY AND UNCONVINCING NIHILISTIC  
POSEURISM RE: FULL DISCLOSURE OF ONE'S  
SECRETS AND PAIN, PASSING IT OFF UNDER A SEMI-  
HIGH MINDED GUISE WHEN IN FACT THE AUTHOR IS  
HIMSELF VERY PRIVATE ABOUT MANY OR MOST  
MATTERS, THOUGH HE SEES THE USE IN MAKING  
CERTAIN FACTS AND HAPPENINGS PUBLIC. (Eggers  
2007: acknowledgments)

The cynicism in this observation – reinforced by the use of caps – about confessional posturing is itself a posture, but by this stage the reader has had plenty of opportunity to become acclimatised to the mode of play that Eggers promotes in his book, one based on a hyper-self-aware literary positioning and ironic exaggeration. The reader is now aware of the rules of this posturing. In both Rousseau's and Eggers' approach, the confessional mode entails a series of revelations that create complicity between reader and writer. In contrast to Rousseau's emphasis on self-revelation, the revelation in Eggers' introduction is based on deconstruction of the text. Yet this too is aimed at winning trust, as Smith and Watson point out:

By highlighting its rearrangements and masking of experiential history, the narrator asserts the 'truth' of his tale. The apparent lack of contrivance in most memoirs, by contrast, is implied to be a deeper kind of contrivance. (Smith & Watson 2001: 7)

In the moments where each memoirist attempts to confront the question of his own authority as author he may appear to invite the reader into a more privileged position within the interiority from which the author's confessional role operates, however, he is in fact, doing the opposite, perpetuating and reinforcing the assignment of roles. What underpins both the approaches to authorial authority examined at this point is the fact that, in first person confession in memoir, there is a unity not only of writer, narrator and protagonist, but *also of confessant*.

When memoir conveys third party confession, however, this additional unity between narrator and confessant is fractured. In the opening of the memoir, *Fierce Attachments* (1987), Gornick conveys a third-party confession that emerges in conversations with her mother. The revelation concerns an incident that the mother experienced with her uncle when she was sixteen. Gornick hears the story for the first time as a twenty-two year old:

"One night," my mother said, "I jumped up from sleep, I don't know why, and I see Sol is standing over me... He picked me up in his arms and he carried me to his bed. He laid us both down on the bed, and he held me in his arms, and he began to stroke my thigh. Suddenly he pushed me away from him and said, "Go back to your bed." I got up and went back to my bed. He never spoke one word about what happened that night, and I didn't either." (Gornick 1987: 8)

Gornick relates hearing the incident two more times: when she is thirty and forty. When she is thirty, she asks, 'And you didn't say anything to him, throughout the whole time?' and goes on to add, 'It just seems odd not to have

uttered a sound, not to have indicated your fears at all' (1987: 9). At forty-two, her response to the confession is even more pointed:

“Ma, did it ever occur to you to ask yourself why you remained silent when Sol made his move.” She looked quickly at me. But this time she was wise to me. “What are you getting at?” she asked angrily. “Are you trying to say I *liked* it? Is that what you’re getting at?” I laughed nervously, gleefully. “No, Ma, I’m not saying that. I’m just saying it’s odd that you didn’t make a sound.” Again she repeated that she had been very frightened. “Come off it,” I said sharply. (1987: 9)

What strikes me in the above passage is not the confession but the memoirist’s unsympathetic response to it. Gornick indicates her awareness that this is also *her* moment of shame – when she says, ‘I laughed nervously, gleefully.’ In explicitly making her judgement in response to her mother’s confession, Gornick illuminates her role as the *receiver* of confession. By positioning herself in the role traditionally occupied by the reader of memoir, she creates a fluidity in the boundaries. If the narrator can be the receiver of confession, then the reader can judge the narrator’s response to that confession and contest her expert status.

This disruption of roles becomes pivotal when the narrator later reveals her own experience of a sexual encounter dictated by a power imbalance:

Startled, I felt his live mouth on me. I pushed seriously at him, but too late: he sensed my hesitation. He held on to me, pressing himself against my chest, as though now he had a right to me. He was strong, stronger than me... Before I realised what was happening, he had grasped my nipple between two fingers and was moving the middle finger of his other hand towards my groin. I went up like a tinderbox: instant convulsion of the body. (1987: 101)

Gornick’s initial passivity echoes the experience of her mother until she resists that association through the description of her own forceful reaction. But Gornick is seventeen, and her assailant is eight. The incident is underpinned by this disparity in age, and crucially by the sense that Gornick may be attempting to justify her own actions (as she earlier accused her mother of doing) as part of her confession to the reader. The hesitation and ambiguity on her part remains an uncomfortable point of shame. ‘I could see in his face what he saw in mine,’ Gornick says. ‘I could also see what he made of what he saw. His face was intent with triumph, interest, excitement’ (1987: 101). The ambiguity combines with the fact that we read this having already read the mother’s confession. The narrator’s earlier response as the receiver of confession, in this moment, frames and ruptures the unity of her role as *both* narrator and confessor, decentering the authority with which she addresses the reader.

A different approach to decentering the memoirist’s authority also relies on a teasing apart of the roles of narrator and confessor but involves using third-person narrative mode rather than third party confession. The result is the effacement of the narrator as confessor. JM Coetzee provides a notable example of this in his autobiographical work, *Boyhood* (1998). Derek Attridge observes that, in *Boyhood*, the use of third-person, present tense, and chiselled back language constitute an attempt to ‘articulate a truth that could only be diminished by explanation or justification’ (Attridge 1999: 90). A confessional moment Attridge focuses on is a scene (presented as a memory in the narrative)



in which Coetzee's boyhood self injures his younger brother while they are visiting a farm:

He persuaded his brother to put his hand down the funnel where the mealie-pits were thrown in; then he turned the handle. For an instant, before he stopped, he could feel the fine bones of the fingers being crushed. His brother stood with his hand trapped in the machine, ashen with pain, a puzzled, inquiring look on his face. (Coetzee 1998: 119)

Attridge remarks that, despite our expectation of some 'psychological elaboration here, the confession of deep hatred, or of a taste for casual cruelty,' (Attridge 1999: 90) there is only this:

He has never apologised to his brother, nor has he ever been reproached with what he did. Nevertheless, the memory lies like a weight upon him, the memory of the soft resistance of flesh and bone, and then the grinding. (Coetzee 1998: 119)

Writes Attridge of this passage, 'The use of the third person implicitly dissociates the narrative voice from the narrated consciousness, telling us that this was another person...' (Attridge 1999: 81). This is not a gesture to remove responsibility. Rather it denies the narrator justification in the context of a confession. There is no depiction of the narrator receiving a confession, and there is no first-person confession either. Instead, in a dynamic that echoes third party confession, the narrator receives and conveys the confessional memories of his childhood self to the reader. By distancing himself from the subject using third-person narrative mode, and by denying himself the reflexive position afforded by past tense, he substitutes his position as interlocutor and expert for an interpretative space that is equally available to the reader.

The strategies described in this essay thus far are not necessarily exclusive of one another, but part of a continuum that may be applied to different parts of the same work. In terms of my writing practice, the narrative effects of third party confession in particular have been a driving force in my recent memoir, *The Last Thread*. Inspired in part by my reading of Coetzee's *Boyhood*, the first two thirds of my memoir deploys a third-person narrative mode and present tense to relate the first ten years of my character Michaelis' childhood. The key moments of confession – incest, a suicide attempt, problematic decisions with devastating consequences – also belong to others whose lives intersect with mine. Here the stripping away of the authorial expert 'I' and the construction of an interpretative space between author and subject is a vital driving mechanism for my attempt at capturing this abusive and secret-laden childhood in a way that addresses the ethics of my position in conveying the intimate lives of others.

One confessional fragment that is returned to several times in the narrative is the suicide attempt of the narrator's mother. It is related for the first time in the very early part of the narrator's childhood:

"One time," Mum says, "When I got really sick, Constantine found me. I was lying on the ground and I could barely make out the table leg in front of me. My whole body was heavy. I couldn't wake up properly. Your brother shook me, it didn't do any good; I could hear him like it was very far away but I couldn't answer. Constantine didn't cry. He wasn't scared. He just went next door to Moessie for help. If he hadn't done that, I might never have woken up at all." (Sala 2012: 25)

There is no direct emotional reaction on the part of the narrator's boyhood self to the core component of this revelation, the mother's suicide attempt. Instead, the next lines focus on what springs to the boy's mind: 'Moessie is their grandmother. After Mum nearly fell asleep, Constantine lived with Moessie and Michaelis stayed somewhere else. Moessie's clear eyes are buried in the soft wrinkles of her face. They light up when Constantine walks through the door' (2012: 25). The narrator's boyhood self is about four years old at this point in the narrative. The conversation triggers a train of thought that invokes jealousy and competition with his brother and that has nothing to do with processing the confession of an attempted suicide. The information, the moment of vulnerability, passes over the child, and the reader, while not receiving the confession, is the one in the best position – as an adult – to respond to it. The narrator's grandmother appears in this fragment to have come to the rescue of her daughter. A later return to the incident, repeated to the narrator when he is nine, reveals a more complex picture:

“I'll never forget how she collected me from the hospital after I overdosed on the pills. She didn't hug me or help me. She just walked ahead of me. She said that she'd let me die if I did it again.” Mum's shoulders drop. “I love her because she's my mother, but she's not what you'd call a nice person.” (2012: 116)

The narrator's boyhood self at this point is old enough to ask a question relating to their return to Holland from Australia: 'Then why did we go back?' But when his mother answers that it was so that he and his brother could be closer to their father – who by this time has been revealed as a paedophile – the narrator does not explicitly make a judgement about what is undoubtedly a problematic (and incomplete) motivation, but returns to an earlier memory of an aunt who tried to deny the abuse that the older brother sustained at the hands of their father: 'Michaelis sees his aunt, Elfje again, standing in the middle of the road, shaking her fist. *You're sick, possessed by the devil*' (2012: 116). Here I have attempted to negotiate several difficult confessional moments; the mother conveying her suicide attempt; her terrible relationship with her own mother; and her flawed logic in returning her children to Holland from Australia so that they could be returned to the influence of their paedophile father. These confessions are directed at my third-person narrator, but he hardly responds, functioning (with the additional emphasis of present tense) more as an observational eye at these moments rather than an active receiver of the confession. What then is the role of the reader at this moment? It is a question I intended for the reader to ask him or herself.

The last third of my memoir, which concerns the narrator's adult life, relies on a transition to first-person narrative mode. My intention is that the 'I' has at this point been so inflected by the fictional elements inherent in the third person depiction of the childhood section of the memoir that the first person narrative mode – appearing at this late stage – offers a stylistic jolt that effectively challenges or complicates whatever authority the use of 'I' may bring with it in memoir. It was my aim that, with the large part of the narrator's identity contained in a dislocated third-person childhood, interpreting the 'I' who finally conveys the confessional moments of those around him (particularly his mother) would require the reader to draw the important connections, to take responsibility for judging the deliverers of confession (including the 'I') in the book.

In Gornick's approach to third party confession the narrator uses her responses to her mother's confessional moments to frame and convey her own confessions and to disrupt the prescribed roles of narrator and reader. In my

case, I attempt to adopt an approach that incorporates third party confessions like Gornick's in *Fierce Attachments*, but for much of the memoir draw on Coetzee's strategy in *Boyhood* where, rather than explicitly judging the receiver or the deliverer of confession, third-person narrative mode and present tense forms a strategy to construct a distance, a reflexive gap, an interpretative space that concedes that the implied 'I' of the narrator may be problematic as the unchallenged expert on his own story. The authority with which he speaks must be treated with caution.

Ultimately the religious origins of confession linger in memoir. Memoir is a form that both addresses transgression and relies upon it. The key strategies of memoirists centre on their own authority because, by speaking of or confessing their own experiences, they implicate and involve others. First-person confession in memoir simultaneously transmits a vulnerability to the reader to offset the question of authority, and denies the reader real access to this question by seamlessly unifying the role of narrator and confessor. This unity between narrator and confessor is disrupted by third party confession in memoir. At this point, the complex intersection of roles between reader and writer and confessional subject can lead into a surrender of power to some extent on the part of the author, and push the reader into becoming something other than the consumer of another's confession 'armed' (or disarmed) with the author's tools of interpretation. Thus, while third party confession may make the question of authority more urgent, it also offers a means to address that question by decentring authority itself.

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