

SOME THOUGHTS ON TELLING THE TRUTH

by Darian Leader

WHY IS IT THAT RATHER THAN REMOVING GUILT, confession so often aggravates it? Confessing a crime, an infidelity or an emotion might be very different activities, yet they are not always followed by the sense of relief we might expect. Is that because we are not really telling the truth in the first place or is it because truth and guilt are not as opposed as we think?

A confession matters not simply for what it says but for when it is said. Telling your partner of an infidelity may seem like an act of compassionate honesty at one moment, and of pure malice at another. As Theodor Reik once said, it is not silence that is golden, but tact: which means knowing when to speak and when to keep silent.

This is not made easier by the fact that today's culture has placed its bet on candour. The topics of speech seem wondrously enlarged compared to those of the past, and our modern heroes are just as likely to go through the trials of confession as those of endurance and conflict. We can either watch programmes in which contestants undergo tests of physical endurance and competition, or soaps in which people talk about their worries, joys and despairs with the kind of compulsive candour that characterises the modern subject.

Truth here takes on two forms. On the one hand, with fly on the wall realism, on the other with the confessional style of trying to say everything. What fly on the wall shows us is that when people do not know that a camera is there, they still behave as if they are being watched. Their actions and words will be addressed to an unseen spectator. Confessional style, with its spectator beyond the camera, is not so different. And both styles have one further thing in common: that the relation to the unseen spectator is always to deceive. Probably, to deceive this spectator that one is lovable.

Being lovable can mean being lovable as a saint or as a sinner, depending on the specificity of one's own childhood constructions. If we expend our efforts in making some other interested in an image we offer to them, what we think will interest them will vary from one subject to another. It could take on the form of the image of a sweet, docile child, or, on the contrary, of a dropout. But whatever the image, it is there to captivate someone else's desire; in other words, to deceive.

This nuances today's obsession with confession. We assume that revealing how one has sinned, how one has been bad, is a road to truth. Truth is always grim, so the more we show our grimness, the more we show our true self. Yet the image we offer in doing this is still an image and it is still addressed to an other we are probably not conscious of. Civilisation is not so interested in this aspect of confession, and boasts an increasing number of stages in which we are obliged, and invited, to reveal all.

If Truth has always clamoured to be known, does this mean that it now no longer blushes to be seen? We might hesitate before answering this question if we consider the link between telling the truth and truth. Heine was suspicious of Rousseau's so-called confessions, and in particular the admission of Jean-Jacques' theft of a ribbon, which supposedly caused the unjust dismissal of a chambermaid. Beyond this appeal to truth, Heine supposed another crime which was not mentioned.

In a psychoanalysis, we often find that the patient's revelation of an embarrassing and unpleasant detail is functioning to draw attention away from some other significant and disturbing detail. That's why, in an analysis, there is no real confession: each admission evokes the point where something is not being said, or sometimes, cannot be said. When George Washington told his dad that he had cut down the fruit tree, perhaps he made his confession because there was something he felt far guiltier about. Perhaps afterwards he could have continued masturbating in peace.

Curiously, a deliberate lie might be a finer vehicle of truth than confession. Questioned as to his whereabouts the previous night, a teenager admits to his parents that he had been in the company of a woman, yet wishing consciously to withhold her identity, he invents a name for her. This baptism would become troubling for him when, in speaking about the deception, he realises suddenly that he had chosen the middle name of his mother. The unconscious desire thus finds a niche in the space opened up by deception. The lie is the privileged home of truth here.

This might persuade us to reinterpret a famous vignette related by Michael Balint. He receives a patient who tells him a long and complicated story about his life. By the end of the first consultation, Balint admits that he needs more time to form a picture of the case, and so a further session is scheduled. As the man continues his story, Balint interrupts him and tells him that he is still clueless. The patient takes a deep breath, and says 'At last – a sincere man'. His entire story, from his name to the list of his symptoms, had been fabricated as a test, he claims, to find a truthful interlocutor to whom he could then reveal his secrets. Balint observes that this method must have been a bit tiresome and certainly expensive, but we might suppose that in fact this man's invention vehicled his unconscious truth. The distance between him and his story was perhaps alibi.

If lying gives a form of truth, can truth be a lie? Confessing in order not to confess something else may be one example, and that might explain the feeling of guilt which remains after the act of candour. But isn't there also a lie – more structural – in the effort to be honest, to say everything? Since everything cannot be said, the claim to say it is a false one, and will always leave a margin. And, in confessing, in revealing to the other the most heart-felt emotions, the deepest secrets, isn't there always the terrible fact that articulating what seems to be our very sense of self still leaves something out. If we tell everything, in an act of love or hate, there is the confrontation with the unreality of what we have said. The feeling of emptiness, that there must be more to our sense of self than what we have confessed, may then take on the form of a sense of guilt. Even if we don't know consciously what this guilt is about.

Children often show us the value of avoiding confession. In not even trying to say everything, they might withhold some thought or information which has a special value. Not a value in terms of its content but as something to make one separate. At what moment, in fact, can a human being truly be said to speak? Machines can be built that replicate sounds and even reproduce them at appropriate moments. But replication and simple articulation are not the same as speech. Something more is necessary, and many of the scholars who have turned their attention to this problem have agreed on what it is: lying.

Children sometimes have the idea that the adults around them know their thoughts. They know this for the simple reason that the thoughts, being words, come from the adults before they come from the infant. Language is there before we are,

and is, in this sense, the property of others. It is imposed on us, and we have to take up our positions in relation to it. Now, if human subjectivity is always defined by refusals – the refusal to look where the parent wants you to look, to eat what they want you to eat, to shit when they want you to shit, etc – to inhabit language must be linked to the moment when one can refuse it: in the sense of a property coming from the other.

If words come from the other, it is only when it becomes possible to separate words from the other that the dimension of subjectivity is realised. By withholding a thought, a child can demonstrate that he or she is separate from his or her words. Which is the first lie, the barrier between what one says and how one is different from one's words.