

Introduction



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What is confession if not an admission of failure? The essays you are about to read are doubly confessional in speaking to the subject at hand through the veil of personal failure. *Two Confessions* is the work of two remarkable women from Spain, María Zambrano and Rosa Chacel. Intellectually daring, Chacel (1898–1994) and Zambrano (1904–1991) shared a common trajectory that helps explain why both chose to focus on confession. Contemporaries and friends, they belonged to the fabled group of vanguardist writers and artists that included Lorca, Alberti, Cernuda, Buñuel, and Dalí. They were also strong supporters of the Second Republic, and exiles in Latin America after the Spanish Civil War. They were disciples of the philosopher Ortega y Gasset, but they questioned his concept of “vital reason,” making their own way and creating highly original voices in different genres. Like other Spanish exiles of the time, they were marginalized and largely neglected until the transition to democracy after Franco’s death in 1975.

However sweet the belated triumph of their final years, triumph was not what marked Zambrano and Chacel. The history that shaped their writings and lives came early, endured for decades, and was scarred with deep failure: the failure of the Second Republic and the trauma of the civil war in the 1930s. That failed history runs like an underground river through the essays and is part of what is confessed. Chacel underscores both the history and the failure, laden with guilt, in the preamble to her essay. After the exceptional promise of the 1920s, she says, “we felt guilty of not putting all our strength . . . in defense of life” (67). Did they do enough? Did her generation rise to meet the

challenge of their circumstances, as Ortega would have said? Clearly, she is referring to the debacle of the thirties. Yet this history, as vital as it is to understanding the two essays, is really a metaphor for a more universal appreciation of confession itself, as a window into human inadequacy, human incompleteness, what in Western culture traditionally has been called original sin. For Zambrano, the self flees in “horror of being born” and falls into confusion. For Chacel, the self has become profoundly detached from the mystery of eros, an eros so all-encompassing it can only be called life.

There is a long-standing cliché that Spanish literature is lacking in the autobiographical and confessional tradition. Chacel’s essay is to a significant degree a response to that view, in particular to Ortega y Gasset’s remarks on the paucity of memoir. Whether we agree with Ortega depends of course on what we mean by the term *confession*. In a Catholic country, confession is penitential. But confession appears fairly early in Spanish literature, notably in the sixteenth-century picaresque novel *Lazarillo de Tormes*, in which fictional autobiographical revelations acquire a legal flavor, unsurprising in an inquisitorial society. Leopoldo Alas’s 1884–1885 realist masterpiece, *La Regenta* [The Judge’s Wife] (trans. *La Regenta*), is the most striking example of fictional confession, still attached to the tribunal of penance, as a driving force behind the main character and the narration itself. Chacel and Zambrano enlarge the presence and significance of confession, extending it beyond literature to life and treating writing, especially in relation to confession, as relevant and crucial to life. Indeed, confessional intimacy and autobiography are fundamental to much of their own writing. These essays exemplify that integral relationship and can both be seen as confession-texts. But are the two writers confessing the same thing?

Both essays were written in exile and are, in this sense, a product of history. Zambrano’s appeared in 1943; Chacel’s (written between 1964 and 1968) in 1971, with a second edition in 1980. Although there is no direct evidence that Chacel was responding to Zambrano’s earlier text, we see a secret, subterranean dialogue passing between the two. In many ways, this is not surprising, given the close coincidence of intellectual formation and interests. Their relationship, while one of friendship, was at the same time filled with reticence and ambivalence. A correspondence begun in 1938 appears to have broken off by the

late 1950s. In 1965, Chacel responded to a query from future novelist Ana María Moix saying that, for some unexplained reason, she had lost track of Zambrano, claiming as well that she could remember the title of only one book by her friend (Chacel, *De mar a mar* 71; see also Zubiaurre).

If we read, however, one author against, through, and alongside the other one, the resonances are striking, despite the differences of approach and emphasis. Once again, failure binds them together, here by way of a foundational figure of modern Spanish literature, the nineteenth-century realist writer Benito Pérez Galdós. I don't think we can understand these essays without considering the key role Galdós plays in shaping the vision of both confession and its relation to history, especially Spanish history, in *Two Confessions*. Galdós consumes Chacel, while, paradoxically, his name never appears in Zambrano's text. It is important to remember, however, that Zambrano wrote repeatedly on the Canary-born novelist, beginning in the 1930s all the way through to 1986 (see Mora García). Chacel views Galdós's failure to confess through the vehicle of his fiction as a failure of modern, liberal Spain. His failure is also ultimately the inability to embrace eros, which becomes a flawed understanding of reality that she extends to Spain itself.

A good deal of Chacel's essay focuses on Galdós. His canonical status today as a master of realism is taken for granted. That status, however, is relatively recent. In the 1920s and '30s, vanguardists such as Chacel rejected not only his realist aesthetics but his approach to Spanish history and society. *They* were modern; Galdós was the past. Her anti-Galdosian prejudice is generational. When civil war erupted in 1936, the view of Galdós shifted, as Republican supporters began to see in his historical novels, the *Episodios nacionales* [National Episodes], a symbol of *el pueblo*, the people, struggling to liberate themselves. Both perceptions are part of the backstory to her text and help to explain how Galdós's presumed inadequacies end up standing in for the personal and generational inadequacies to which Chacel only partially admits. I see her reading of Galdós as profoundly and brilliantly mistaken, but her misunderstanding is one of those fruitful misunderstandings that leads to further meditation and larger questions on the nature of writing, the relation between writing and life, between writing and author, between the novel and confession. If, as

Chacel argues, Galdós disappoints as a novelist insofar as he refuses to confess, then what is she saying about the novel in general? Must novels always be confessions? And if so, what should they confess?

For Chacel, what is missing in Spain and Spanish literature is eros. A person confesses, she says, “when the enormous weight of which he wants to unburden himself is not an act that he’s committed, nor even a considerable number of acts, but a persistent conflict that led to all of them, a mystery that not even he himself understands and that perhaps he confesses only for the sake of hearing it told, in order to understand it. The mystery that became a conflict . . . was eros” (97). This is what she finds in the exemplary confessions of Augustine, Rousseau, and Kierkegaard, but does not see in Galdós and in Spanish literature as a whole, characterizing it as reserved and opaque when it comes to confession, with the exception of Cervantes and to some extent Unamuno. One wonders how she would have read the other master of nineteenth-century Spanish realism, Leopoldo Alas (Clarín), whose novel *La Regenta*, unappreciated in Chacel’s day, is overwhelmingly confessional (and filled with the longing of eros). Augustine’s confession is the universally recognized template, as both Chacel and Zambrano agree. But as Chacel writes, what we are hearing in confession is “the conflictive secret,” the unresolvable tension between inner being and real life. What can ever be produced from such tension other than the admission of lack? In this sense, the ghost confessions Chacel discerns above all in Spanish writers can be observed globally. Her comments on Rousseau’s “desertions,” whether real, emotional, or metaphorical, make clear that he holds back when confessing, though of course we know he is holding back. He writes, “It isn’t a question of saying too much or of saying lies, but of not saying everything, of silencing truths” (1:276). Can one ever confess completely? All confession is by nature then a failure. All confession is a specter of itself.

The failure of confession and the failure that is being confessed are at the heart of Chacel’s essay. This is why Galdós is so key to her argument. She needed the absence of Galdosian confession, that is, her particular interpretation of the novelist, to propel her essay forward, to affirm the failure of confession. Chacel is at her most quixotic in her obsessive quest for the nonexistent confession in Galdós. Any traces of confession can only be found in male characters (stand-ins for the novelist?) and, most especially, in one of the heroes of his historical

fiction, Monsalud, who incarnates conflict itself. In other words, where Chacel seeks confession she finds not inner conflict, but the national drama of Cain and Abel. The nineteenth-century history that Galdós brings to life is unending strife and disturbance: a Spain at war with itself, precisely the contemporary historical experience that marked the writings and lives of Chacel and Zambrano.

In this view, Galdós appears not simply to externalize the inner conflict that compels one to confess but to nationalize it. Only by briefly examining Zambrano's understanding of Galdós, however, is it possible to see how Chacel tends to box in both herself and the nineteenth-century novelist, making it nearly impossible to produce confession. And that is because the true center of her quest is ultimately unconfessable and, in that sense, unknowable. Chacel says of Galdós and Unamuno: "if they did not confess it was because they lived *unconfessable lives*" (168). The same could be said of Chacel. Zambrano too resisted the full revelation of self, but she saw something in Galdós that permitted an opening, the hope of escaping the solitude of the self. That something was the fullness of immersion in life, which in turn held the promise of communion.

Zambrano's first commentaries on Galdós appeared in the celebrated Republican wartime journal, *Hora de España*, to which Chacel also contributed, and where they undoubtedly read at least some of each other's essays. Chacel even wrote on the master of realism in *Hora de España*, characterizing his work as infused with a sacramental sense "of reciprocal and incessant communion" ("Un nombre al frente" 49). This view is actually very close to that of Zambrano, who held, in an essay published in 1939, that Spanish realism in general was "nothing less than being in love with the world, captivated by it, and therefore bound to it." She saw in realism an "equilibrium between the individual and the community. Through poetic knowledge man never separates himself from the universe, and, preserving intact his private nature, participates in everything, he belongs to the universe, to nature and to the human and even to what exists within the human, and even beyond that" (*Pensamiento y poesía* 135, 159). Galdós's characters were hungry for life, they thirsted after reality, Zambrano observed more than once (see *La España de Galdós*). They sought "the place of life."

Nowhere is this more evident than in the novelist's late masterpiece, *Misericordia* [Compassion], which is discussed in Chacel's essay.

For Zambrano, Benina, the servant who begs on the streets to save her mistress, is as a character complete and rooted in reality. Yet “free of history, it is as if she were being born at every instant.” As embodied compassion, she also represents “the constant breath of creation maintaining the world. . . . He who lives by compassion, lives in it, caught in its orbit, connected to other creatures by this force” (*Misericordia* 138, 141). On another, more historical level, Benina is *el pueblo*, the Spanish people, signaling Zambrano’s desperate desire for *communitas*, for the spirit of community, in an essay written as civil war raged in Spain. Chacel’s view of the novel is very different. In *Confession*, she says bluntly, the theme of compassion is a cliché in Galdós’s hands. She grants that he has managed to provide a richly documented figure in Benina, but clearly does not share Zambrano’s sweeping, transcendent vision of the novel. One cannot help thinking that her remarks are in some ways an indirect response to Zambrano, who unlike most of the vanguardists openly embraced Galdós.

Chacel’s comments on *Misericordia* reinforce her generally critical view of Galdós, which in turn drives her quest for the elusive presence of confession as a genre, albeit in a different way. Zambrano and Chacel alike associate confession with the novel. Curiously, Zambrano’s essay bears the subtitle “A Literary Genre,” but appears at first to speak little of the link between confession and fiction, or at least of specific novels, whereas Chacel’s text concentrates heavily on the linkage, all the while *not* actually finding confession. The predominant motif in both writers once again is failure. In 1937, Zambrano argued that the novel as a genre “is submerged in failure.” It is, she said, “a partial failure . . . revealing on the other hand a hidden sustenance. It is an historical failure, a failure in the world upon which the novel is forged” (“Reforma del entendimiento” [The Reform of Understanding] 95–96). That hidden support system is *convivencia*, which can only weakly be expressed as a living together, or *communitas*, exemplified in the relationship between Don Quixote and Sancho Panza. This is, ultimately, “the place of life,” the communion of life, for Zambrano.

Zambrano’s views on the novel also help explain how she sees confession. There is, she writes, a radical disjunction between the truth of reason and life, and life is confusion, a kind of scattering. (This too is what Galdós shows in his novels.) Confession serves to bridge the gap between truth and life, the gap that also points to the lack of

unity of the self. One confesses to escape the self that one does not want. Confession becomes especially acute in periods of crisis, of fracture, produced in moments when culture appears to be broken. Here she observes that the novel comes closest as a genre to the confession, reflecting the pain and abandonment of life, but at the same time there are sharp differences. Only when the time of the novel is the time of life can we speak about a kind of confession. Zambrano's vanguardist aesthetics continues to see the novel and literature in general as distinct from life. (This viewpoint helps explain why she criticizes literary realism as radically false in a brief passage of *Confession*, in contradistinction to her already noted, earlier espousal of Spanish realism as a form of poetic knowledge.) Indeed, she considers the autobiographical novel a narcissistic failure, a form of perpetual adolescence revealing a failed self (see also Johnson 57). At the same time, as with Chacel, writing is never disconnected from life. Literature and life, while distinct, are also porous, the one bleeding into the other.

The trajectory of Zambrano's essay goes from Job's preconfession, or complaint, to the Augustinian act of offering himself to God, Descartes's discovery of human solitude, Rousseau's conversion of confession into the history of his solitary heart, to the later artificial paradises of Baudelaire, Rimbaud, and the surrealists, and finally to the underground man, reminiscent of Dostoyevsky's character, whose soul has gone missing. In essence, she traces through confession the eventual appearance of modern man, of what modern life is. "Modern culture," she writes, "is born lacking oneness" (46). The path she follows is like a widening fissure, blowing a large hole in the imagined integrity of the self. Confession reveals "the fragmentary character of all life . . . in that every person feels himself to be incomplete bits and pieces, no more than an outline; a piece of one's self, a fragment" (26–27). Zambrano grounds the substance of this insight in a sweeping historical awareness of the changing shape of confession. In her view, Augustine appears to be the first and the last to find the unity, or oneness, of his life—though even this statement is subject to revision, as this is the *figure* of the unity of life. All confession seeks to regain a lost paradise, but Augustine understands this to be impossible. He can only hope to find the oneness of his own being through the being of the divine.

With Descartes, she argues, thought affirms human solitariness. In a brilliant intuition, she says that Descartes's revelation is the reverse of that of Augustine, "who felt alone, a fragment among things. Descartes withdraws from things" (45). There is only consciousness. This radical solitude anticipates the crucial turn confession takes with Rousseau. The heart becomes an abyss. Even more significantly, it acquires a history. Here, Zambrano takes up once more the thread connecting confession to the novel, arguing that the outpouring of the heart's history is what allowed for the development of the modern novel—and of course for romanticism. Romanticism "makes confessions in the form of histories, turning history into confession" (48). The same can be said of the novel, demonstrating a commonality with romanticism.

Jean-Jacques not only advocated for the unique status of his own heart's history, but claimed for it a naturalness that assimilated the heart to a garden, in a word, to paradise. In underscoring the heart's originality, Rousseau "produces a life, the least imaginable kind of life, the literary life or life in literature, life in imaginary situations" (49). In essence, with Jean-Jacques, confession becomes a kind of fiction, an imaginary place. Here is the "novel" again, a personal fiction that is Jean-Jacques's life. Everything that comes after Rousseau follows a similar pattern, creating a series of artificial paradises, such as we see in Baudelaire, Rimbaud, and the surrealists. Surrealism's attempt to regain the intimate center of being ends as a confession of failure, as mere hallucination.

So we come to Zambrano's final iteration, underground man, the ultimate evolution of the Cartesian self's fundamental solitariness. This creature I take to be the endpoint to her understanding of the modern self: weighed down, larval fragments of being. The living dead. Soulless. In hell. Confession is necessary because without it we suffocate. But something has to be there, something propitious, that allows the inner reality to be confessed. What happens if that inner reality is missing or is inadequate? Paradoxically, underground man is too filled with things to properly confess. He is overloaded, jammed full, "crowded with things, with embryonic beings, hopes and longings, drafts and projects, traces and premonitions of a nameless reality" (60). In truth, he is filled with solitariness, which Zambrano figures as "faceless, anonymous beings, embittered by their halfway existence." This, she says, is hell. The Christian existentialist Nicolas Berdyaev

took it further, saying that “hell belongs entirely to the subjective and not to the objective sphere; it exists in the subject and not in the object, in man and not in God. . . . In hell the soul is separated from everyone and from everything, completely isolated and at the same time enslaved by everything and everyone. . . . Hell is nothing other than complete separation from God” (268, 277). Both Zambrano and Chacel skirt around this last point in their essays, in my view, while at the same time, it is impossible to situate their writings without recognizing the spiritual imprint that shapes them.

One needs a soul to confess, not psychic facts or acts of consciousness. But modern man has erased the soul. Zambrano appears to elide the notion of soul and subject at the end of her essay, since she also talks about the disappearance of the subject. What is left is an elusive, resentful ghost. Emptiness. Despite Zambrano’s asking for a “true and implacable confession” at this point, how then can confession be anything other than a shadow of itself? One is reminded of the phantom confessions Chacel finds in Spanish writers. She also observed that confession is a “spectral analysis of the will” (136). Zambrano, in turn, views confession as the pressing need to let loose the creatures inside one’s being. You could say we are haunted by ghosts of our own making. In this both writers are talking about what could be called ghost confessions.

The solitary creature that is modern man is filled with phantoms, the population of solitude. Confession happens because of the pressures of this netherworld. The nightmare of existence leaves us “alienated, with no possibility of communication, as in a bad dream when we call out and no one hears us” (Zambrano 34–35). How to crawl out of this underground life? Augustine’s answer was to open himself up to his fellow man, relying on their good faith in him. “When we count on the faith of others, on their belief in us,” she writes, “the seal of solitariness is broken” (36). Confession ideally ends in communion, shared truth. But, like Chacel, Zambrano surveys the world as it is, filled with fratricidal war. She uses the phrase “*guerra cainita*,” while Chacel’s term is “*drama cainita*,” but in either case, historically, they had in mind the Spanish Civil War. Existentially, Cain and Abel is an allegory of inner conflict. Cain was at war with himself.

Confession exists because of our divided nature, because of the war that goes on inside us, “the civil war in the heart of man,” as

another Republican exile, Francisco Ayala, put it (33). Doing a modern reading of Augustine, Jean-François Lyotard observed in an essay first published in 1998, “The fissure that zigzags across the confession spreads with all speed over life, over lives” (57). Zambrano, we recall, spoke of “the fragmentary character of all life”; Chacel, of the conflict that is eros and that she sees in Augustine, Rousseau, and Kierkegaard. In either case, there is something missing, something hidden, Chacel would say. Flannery O’Connor wrote, “the novelist doesn’t write about people in a vacuum; he writes about people in a world where something is obviously lacking, where there is the general mystery of incompleteness and the particular tragedy of our own times to be demonstrated” (167). Confession, like the novel, underscores that incompleteness and, ultimately, the failure to attain Zambrano’s unity of being or Chacel’s seductive *poesis*, which may be in the end perhaps the same thing.

In any event, confession in these essays is not viewed institutionally, but, in the broadest sense of the word, historically and existentially. Unlike Foucault, neither Zambrano nor Chacel is interested in the power dynamics of confession. Foucault argued that the ritual of confession produces truth. By contrast and in a distinctly nonpost-modern way, here the individual discovers the truth about himself in confessing. What that particular truth is remains a mystery, in my view, and is in keeping not only with the complex, unrevealed personas of Zambrano and Chacel, but with the flexible nature of the essay genre used to explore confession. One of the most fascinating features of their use of the essay is their capacity to let readers see them thinking through the question of confession, the sense that nothing is fixed in stone (as befits the tentative, experimental quality of the essay form), that arguments can be undone, and yet at the same time, that style is substantial here. That is, both writers feel they have something of substance to say, what they write possesses substance, a truth and validity that ground the essays. Neither Chacel nor Zambrano espouses the view that “truth is not discovered or discerned, but rather a mere name we give to the illusion we choose to live by” (Hauerwas 73). Both also share Marilynne Robinson’s defense of “the beauty and strangeness of the individual soul, that is, of the world as perceived in the course of a human life, of the mind as it exists in time” (35). Most importantly, they speak eloquently and movingly of the inner life that besets and enriches us. Or as Zambrano writes, “confession is only

substantiated with the hope that what is not one's self might appear. Thus it reveals the condition of human life as floundering in contradiction and paradox" (27). In a word, to confess is to confess life itself, the life that one lives.

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