

JOHN BANVILLE'S *SHROUD*: A DECONSTRUCTIONIST'S
CONFESSION

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ABSTRACT

This article analyses John Banville's novel *Shroud* as the protagonist's autobiography which both follows and resists the confessional mode. Axel Vander, an ageing famous academic and champion of deconstruction, faces the necessity to confront his real self, although he spent his entire academic life contesting the concept of authentic selfhood. Alluding to the infamous case of Paul de Man, whose deconstructionist theories have been reinterpreted in the light of the revelation of his disgraceful wartime past, Banville's novel presents a man who veers between the temptation to fall back on his theories in order to uphold a lifelong deception, and the impulse to reveal the truth and achieve belated absolution. The article examines Vander's narrative as an attempt at a truthful account of his life, combined with the conflicting tendency to resist self-exposure. Despite the protagonist's ambivalent and self-contradictory motivations, his account of his life belongs to the category of confessional writing, with its accompanying religious connotations. It is argued that the protagonist's public denial of authentic selfhood is linked to his private evasion of moral culpability.

Keywords: John Banville, Paul de Man, deconstruction, autobiography, confession

Early studies in the genre of autobiography, while acknowledging the inevitable element of artifice and invention inherent to autobiography as a narrative, identify the quest for a unified self as a hallmark of autobiographical writing. Georges Gusdorf (1980 [1956]: 37) states that the task of autobiography is to reconstruct "the unity of a life across time". He further defines autobiography as "one of the means to self knowledge thanks to the fact that it recomposes and interprets a life in its totality" (Gusdorf 1980 [1956]: 38). Gusdorf stresses the temporal dimension of autobiographical writing, which enables an author to achieve a sense of individual unity, consisting of all the past and present experiences that he has been through. The distance at which memory situates the author in

relation to his life experience creates a new mode of being, which Gusdorf (1980 [1956]: 38) is prepared to regard, after Hegel, as “consciousness of self”.

In “The Style of Autobiography” Jean Starobinski emphasizes that the narrating “I” is different from the self at respective stages of his life, while the autobiographer aims to show how he has become what he is at present. Turning to the past serves to discover the genesis of the present condition (1980 [1971]: 78-79). Likewise, in another early account of the genre Roy Pascal underlines autobiography’s preoccupation with the self “in its delicate uniqueness” (1960: 180-181). In the concluding chapter of his book *Design and Truth in Autobiography* Pascal explores specifically the problem of truth in autobiography. Referring to the Gestalt theory, he claims that the truth value of autobiography lies in the consistent composition of a unified personality through the images that a person has of himself, which embody his mode of reacting to the external world. The images must be related to each other both synchronically and diachronically. Thus, an autobiography will appear genuine if it conveys the sense of a homogeneous self (1960: 188). An autobiography may attain depth and weight if it is predicated on a fundamental inner personality; hence Pascal hypothesizes (1960: 195) that “[t]rue biography can be written only by men and women pledged to their innermost selves.” The referential dimension of autobiography, enabled by its reliance on truthfulness to life, differentiates autobiography from purely fictional writing. The autobiographical pact has been famously defined by Philippe Lejeune (cf. Eakin 1988: 10) as a tacit agreement between writer and reader, permitting the reader to trust the veracity of the account.

Postmodern accounts of autobiography stress the aspect of self-invention and the predominance of rhetoric over referentiality. In his essay “Autobiography as De-Facement” (1979) Paul de Man challenges the implicit assumption that autobiography, unlike fiction, is underlain by verifiable biographical facts:

But are we so certain that autobiography depends on reference, as a photograph depends on its subject or a (realistic) picture on its model? We assume that life produces the autobiography as an act produces its consequences, but can we not suggest, with equal justice, that the autobiographical project may itself produce and determine the life and that whatever the writer does is in fact governed by the technical demands of self-portraiture and thus determined, in all its aspects, by the resources of his medium? And since the mimesis here assumed to be operative is one mode of figuration among others, does the referent determine the figure, or is it the other way round: is the illusion of reference not a correlation of the structure of the figure, that is to say no longer clearly and simply a referent at all but something more akin to a fiction which then, however, in its own turn, acquires a degree of referential productivity?

(De Man 1979: 920-921)

De Man questions as an illusion the idea that a stable knowledge of the self is possible; the constraints of language cannot be evaded. He relegates autobiography to yet another mode of discourse while deconstructing the traditional associations of autobiography with truth, self-knowledge and self-discovery (Eakin 1988: 189). Rather than being an instrument of self-expression, in de Man's understanding language takes control of the writer, shaping his autobiographical project in accordance with its own rules.

De Man's deconstruction of the traditional relationship between the autobiographer and his material has been reassessed, ironically enough, in the light of what has been revealed about de Man's own biography. It was only in 1987, five years after the celebrated theorist's death, that a Belgian graduate student, Ortwin de Graef, discovered pro-Nazi and anti-Semitic articles written by de Man for Belgian wartime collaborationist newspapers. The revelation caused a scandal among literary theorists, especially among the numerous deconstructionists who hero-worshipped him. For a number of academics, the posthumous disgrace of de Man the man extends to his work as a proponent of deconstruction. His insistence on the non-existence of a stable, unified self as well as his prioritization of rhetoric over referentiality may now be seen as a privately motivated attempt to conceal and discount his youthful moral transgression. Allan Stoekl, for example, argues that the more we appreciate the force of de Man's arguments against personal responsibility

the more we recognise their significance for a (re)writing of his own biography ... Following his own logic, as soon as we consider his own biography, and in any way try to "judge" him, it is our reading that is guilty, that ... sees de Man's larger argument, so rigorous, so irrefutable, as just another excuse.
(in Rajan 1991: 241)

The last chapter in de Man's *Allegories of Reading*, called "Excuses (Confessions)", analyses the stolen ribbon episode in Rousseau's *Confessions*. Rousseau admits to his one-time theft of a ribbon, of which he accused a fellow servant who was subsequently dismissed. De Man uses the episode to argue that there can never be a true or pure confession, but that a confession always involves an excuse. Reading de Man with respect to his own unrevealed guilt, Derrida tried to defend his late friend by interpreting this analysis as an allegory of de Man's own struggle with the problem of confession, whereas David Lehman accused de Man of self-serving, ulterior motives in championing the rhetorical aspect of confession (Kaplan 1998: 35).

It has been revealed that on arrival in the US de Man deliberately and methodically separated himself from his past, occasionally resorting to lies as a means of self-promotion. Gerald Graff draws attention to the paradox that while

deconstructionists tend to disclose the hidden or repressed meaning in a text, de Man's own theoretical writing now lends itself to this treatment, owing to the new biographical knowledge (cf. Wiener 1988: 23). Ironically, what de Man once wrote about autobiography tends to be read as a clue to the enigma of his own life.

All commentators identify Paul de Man as the main inspiration for the protagonist and narrator of John Banville's novel *Shroud* (2002) and the writer himself indicates this connection in the Acknowledgements. In the words of Lene Yding Pedersen, "in the reading of Banville's novel, we cannot avoid asking questions and making connections between voices, authors, and history" (2005: 141). In unequivocally alluding to de Man's case, *Shroud* "cuts across several generic planes – biography, autobiography, memoir, historical novel, roman à clef" (Palazzolo 2005: 147). Although named Axel Vander, the character shares a large part of his biography with de Man. Born in Antwerp, Vander escaped from occupied Belgium and eventually made his way to California, where he soon acquired the status of a celebrity within academia. However, the narrative reveals at the start that his illustrious career was built on a series of falsehoods. Vander is also "a stock Banville character" (Anderson 2002: 55) in that he has a troubled, obscure and traumatic past which he now reconstructs in a convoluted, labyrinthine retrospection, and thus is yet another character in Banville's catalogue of people who "have done great wrongs and lived a lie" (Bawer 2003: n.p.) but now have to face up to their responsibility. Vander is an aged man, physically decrepit and occasionally suffering from lapses of consciousness. Adopting an external perspective, he realizes what a pathetically comic figure he appears to outsiders: "They do not seem to mind if I am mad. But I am not mad, really, only very, very old" (*Shroud*, 3).¹ He has lived long enough to confront the situation which Paul de Man was spared: a young researcher working in an Antwerp library has come upon wartime papers which may ruin his reputation.

Comfortably ensconced in California, to which he privately refers as his Arcady, Vander faces a disreputable end – a situation which he always secretly feared yet hoped to avoid. The morning he received the girl's letter he had "[t]he certain sense of having crossed, of having been forced to cross, an invisible frontier, and of being in a state that forever more would be post-something, would be forever an afterwards" (*Shroud*, 9). The arrival of the letter splits him in two, the "I" before and after the letter. This experience, however, is a continuation and the fulfilment of his lifelong split. As he admits to himself, the girl's discovery may lead to the exposure of his primary lie. Falsehood has been

¹ All quotations from *Shroud* come from the following edition: John Banville. *Shroud*. 2003. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

the foundation and the substance of his life: "All my life I have lied. Lied to escape, I lied to be loved, I lied for placement and power; I lied to lie. It was a way of living; lies are life's almost-anagram" (*Shroud*, 8). The character's post-war life was "a sustained exhibition in *mauvaise foi*" (Davis 2004: 149). This is the essence of his guilt: "the lying and not the betraying" (Markovits 2003: 39).

Most of the narrative is Vander's autobiography, prompted by the sudden confrontation with the legacy of his life and lies. Vander is also confronted with the imminence of death but his narrative makes it quite clear that it is not the end of his life but the fear of exposure that induces the narrating impulse. The protagonist's actions are further provoked by the enigmatic nature of the girl's letter — he does not know how much she knows and what she is going to do with her knowledge. Realizing that he will have to present a version of his life for the sake of the researcher, Vander begins to compose an autobiography of sorts. Yet, his autobiographical project is the exact opposite of what Gusdorf or Pascal once identified as the autobiographer's main task — Vander has no intention of telling the truth and no intention of presenting a unified self to his audience. The first strategy he can think of is yet another lie: "Better far to confront her, laugh in the face of her accusations —" (*Shroud*, 8).

Vander, however, has to confront the fragmentation and inauthenticity of his invented selfhood. His mind keeps wandering, confusing reality with his illusions or delusions. As he comments, "now there was this new I, a singular capital standing at a tilt to all the known things that had suddenly become unfamiliar" (*Shroud*, 9). The first-person narrative conveys his sense of confusion, alienation and the incomprehensibility of people and events. He also frequently adopts an external perspective, from which he appears to be inauthentic to others: "I am used to strangers recognising me. They will pause, the young in particular, and look at me, shyly, or with resentment, or more often just that slow, dull, witless stare, as if it is not the real me they are seeing but a representation of me, an animated model set up for their free and exclusive scrutiny" (*Shroud*, 35). The narrative mode reflects the fact that *Shroud* is also a "theoretical" novel, which self-reflexively "performs" theories about language and identity (Pedersen 2005: 152). Pietra Palazzolo (2005: 153) aptly remarks that the protagonist "serves as an intriguing testing ground for some deconstructive theories."

The fragmentation of Vander's consciousness matches the present disintegration of his body. As his self begins to dissolve, objects seem to acquire a substance and a life, to intrude on his vulnerable selfhood:

The onset of extreme old age as I am experiencing it is a gradual process of accumulation, a slow settling as of soft grey stuff, like the dust in the untended house, under which the once sharp edges of my self are blurring. There is an opposite process, too, by which things grow rigid and

immovable, turning my stools into ingots of hot iron, drying out my joints until they grate on each other like pumice stones, making my toenails hard as horn. Things out in the world, the supposedly inanimate objects, join in the conspiracy against me.

(*Shroud*, 14)

While Paul de Man's transgression was twofold, consisting of open support of Nazism and a subsequent lifetime of falsehood, Vander is guilty only of the latter. He reveals that the compromising articles were not of his authorship, although he secretly did uphold anti-Semitic ideas, despite being Jewish. After the real author's mysterious death, the protagonist adopted his name. In his faltering narrative Vander explains that he continued to wear a mask, although after escaping from occupied Belgium he was no longer in need of a disguise. His offences consisted in petty theft (including an attempt to rob a servant – probably an echo of the episode in Rousseau's *Confessions*) and cold indifference to his numerous lovers. Vander turns out to be a hollow rather than an evil man. California offered him the possibility of self-invention and self-creation. For him, it was not a refuge, but a desirable void (*Shroud*, 183), where everyone flaunted a false identity. From the start, Vander deliberately adopted the pose of a supercilious intellectual, meticulously cultivating his mendacious eccentricities.

In his autobiography, Vander admits to self-serving motives in championing deconstruction:

I spent the best part of what I suppose I must call my career trying to drum into those who would listen among the general mob of resistant sentimentalists surrounding me the simple lesson that there is no self: no ego, no precious individual spark breathed into each one of us by a bearded patriarch in the sky, who does not exist either.

(*Shroud*, 18)

Pedersen (2005: 151) notes that while Vander “subscribes to this postmodern/poststructuralist notion of the self, he also questions it”. Now he admits that there is no sincere element in his entire oeuvre; likewise, his voice and reputation are mere fabrications. Thus, his theories, rather than being disinterested scholarly endeavour, served as a form of self-defence, in anticipation of exposure. Vander owns up to a lifelong obsession with being scrutinized and pursued.

Roy Pascal identified a search for self-knowledge as “a primary motive of autobiography” (1960: 184). Vander, however, has enough self-knowledge to wish to escape from his selfhood. For all his public denunciation of the concept of the unique individual, he privately cannot discard his sense of “an enduring core of selfhood amid the welter of the world” (*Shroud*, 18). This sense of a truth immune to his falsehoods enables him to qualify his public persona as a mask, or

shroud. However, his self-assessment leads to self-irony rather than self-condemnation – Vander is too much of a postmodernist to use moral categories. His self-disgust does not amount to feelings of guilt or remorse, only a certain impatience with his masks and the discomfort of wearing them. Not knowing how the girl came upon his dark secrets, he considers himself “betrayed” by one of his acquaintances (*Shroud*, 91). The worst punishment he fears is exposure and embarrassment. Forced to return to Europe to meet the girl, he dreams of liberating himself from his worn-out persona and attaining a real self. Vander’s imagery echoes the Christian image of the Resurrection – he would like to leave behind his decaying body and become a new, better, authentic being:

Lately I have begun to feel that I am falling off myself, that my suety old flesh is melting off my skeleton and soon will all be gone. I shall not mind; I shall be glad; I shall rise up then, bared of inessentials, all gleaming bone and sinew smooth as candle wax, new, unknown, my real self at last.

(*Shroud*, 6)

John Kenny comments that “Christian hope becomes the outright theme of the novel” (2002: 19). Yet, Vander both evokes the possibility of redemption and denies it. While admitting that his present persona is a fake, or just a shroud from which he would like to liberate his self, he can think of no adequate escape. The present action takes place in Turin, and the protagonist tries but fails to see the famous shroud, which, as he firmly believes, is also only a fake.

Roy Pascal noted a connection between autobiography and Christian confessional writing, illustrated best by St. Augustine’s famous work. Although in Renaissance and post-Renaissance literature autobiographical writing detached itself from a direct connection to religion, it still remained “an affair of conscience,” retaining something of a religious confession’s metaphysical urge, even if the commitment was to one’s own truth (Pascal 1960: 181-182). Georges Gusdorf claims that autobiography, especially if undertaken by an ageing man, involves the pursuit of personal justification. Therefore, the confession may be seen as an attempt at finding “a last delivering word, redeeming in the final appeal a destiny that doubted its own value” (Gusdorf 1980 [1956]: 39).

In Banville’s novel, a residue of religious thinking may be found in Vander’s confessional narrative. He admits that on arrival in America he set up an antithesis of religion, based on “negative faith” – “a passionate and all-consuming belief in nothing” (*Shroud*, 183). The letter from the girl, although it turns his world upside down, is not entirely unexpected. The postman who delivered it is described as “a helmed and goggled Hermes on a bike”. However incongruous this allusion may seem, it nevertheless conveys the protagonist’s vague sense that a divine being has at last decided to take him to account for his ignoble life and exact retribution for it: “The message carried was one I had been waiting

for and dreading all my life” (*Shroud*, 5). Despite all his resentment, anger and determination to continue lying, Vander speculates that this is his “possibility of redemption” (*Shroud*, 5) – a notion that has not figured in his vocabulary thus far. If, as a young man, he was prepared to – and effectively did – sell his soul for public attention and fame (*Shroud*, 136), he is now offered a chance to reclaim his identity.

Here, however, the analogy must end. For a confession to be effective, Vander would have to transcend the limits of his dubious self and find a legitimate listener. Whereas St. Augustine confessed to God and Rousseau to his readers, Vander addresses his revelations to himself (or, a “discarded version of myself” [*Shroud*, 5]), and to the girl. It remains doubtful, however, whether the confession is ever externalized – spoken or written – for the sake of the supposed confessor; the book contains no record of Cass ever responding to Vander’s story. At any rate, she would be a very inadequate confessor – Cass is mentally unbalanced, prone to seizures and hallucinations, with a personality even less coherent than Vander’s. But perhaps, paradoxically, as John Reese Moore (2004: xli) suggests, this is what makes her Vander’s ideal potential listener. He is driven by the contradictory impulses to tell and not to tell the truth. Vander’s initial impression of his antagonist is anticlimactic:

I had expected someone far more formidable than this. She might have been a student of mine, one of the more desperate types, from the old days, when I still had to have students. So she hoped to make her name by exposing me, did she? Well, she might succeed, but at a cost, and what a cost, to herself no less than to me, I would make sure of that.

(*Shroud*, 60-61)

The two immediately become lovers. What at first is clearly Vander’s cynical exploitation and manipulation of Cass, evolves into a relationship. To his surprise, Vander finds himself in love with the girl. If any justification for this development can be found in the logic of the narrative, then perhaps the protagonist’s strange attachment to Cass has to do with his grudging acknowledgement of his true identity, which in turn enables him to make a full confession to himself of the utter mendacity of his numerous poses. Deception underlies also his academic work, which is the foundation of his fame and power. Vander’s confession deconstructs his ideology of deconstruction; its creator, paradoxically but logically enough, believes in nothing, not even in his own pronouncements: “There is not a sincere bone in the entire body of my text. I have manufactured a voice, as once I manufactured a reputation, from material filched from others” (*Shroud*, 210). Cass’ elusive blankness enables the protagonist to try out his various schemes on her, eventually deciding that she is to be a test of his authentic being, his “last chance” to be himself (*Shroud*, 210).

Although Cass is completely passive, she is cast in the role of not only a confessor but also an agent of absolution. Vander briefly experiences a state of grace – a sense of being reunited with his true self, suppressed since his youth, and an accompanying sense of sharpness of vision and a restoration of his connection with the external world: “I had that heightened sense of self-awareness, that scarcely bearable feeling of being open to the world like a wound ... Everything around me was intensely sharp and clarified and almost painful to the touch, and even to the sight” (*Shroud*, 213).

Yet the aftermath of Vander's belated confession becomes only a poor imitation of a state of grace. Cass tells him she is going to have his child; Vander renounces his academic work as sham and marvels at the miracle of fatherhood, which he is inclined to interpret as his private redemption: “I saw at once ... the implications, the possibilities, what I shall call the saving grace, of this absurdly wonderful happening” (*Shroud*, 240). Acknowledging at last his affinity with his long-forgotten family, Holocaust victims, he thinks of the child as their miraculously granted afterlife, “a world reclaimed” (*Shroud*, 240).

Yet just as Cass was an imperfect confessor, so she cannot be an instrument of his salvation. She has no true commitment to Vander and does not expect him to want any close human relations. For reasons as obscure as all her previous actions, she leaves him and commits suicide. Vander returns to his condition of inauthenticity and his deconstructed self, surrounded by shadows, absences and negativity. In a final twist to his story, he receives disconcerting news about the circumstances of the real Vander's death, which calls into question even the identity he once appropriated. The false Vander remains a shroud – a fake outer covering from which life has escaped and which will not witness a resurrection. Rather than offering the possibility of passage to a different realm of being, in the case of Vander the shroud functions as “a ‘non-symbol’ of transcendence, drawing attention to a point of bodily impasse which prolongs Vander's agony indefinitely” (Palazzolo 2005: 158).

In Banville's novel, the concept of a unitary self turns out to have far-reaching moral implications. The deconstructionist's intellectually appealing denial of the referentiality of language and the dismantling of the self is, paradoxically, a self-protective attempt to evade individual responsibility. Palazzolo (2005: 155) forges a direct connection between the novel's moral concern and the reverberations of Paul de Man's posthumous disgrace: “If, after the de Man scandal, deconstructive attacks on the idea of a unitary self seem a calculated denial of responsibility in human agency, then *Shroud* puts these crucial issues on centre stage ...”. Banville's novel, despite being a self-conscious exemplification of a deconstructed narrative, remains rooted in the humanist tradition of autobiographical writing, concerned with character, authenticity and moral accountability.

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