Volume Two - Exegesis

*Postmodern confessions:* the intersection of the confessional narrative mode and postmodernism in Richard Ford’s *The Sportswriter* and Kazuo Ishiguro’s *The Remains of the Day.*

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Andrew Morgan
BA (Hons)

School of Creative Media
Portfolio of Design and Social Context
RMIT University
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Introduction

The person who confesses is lying and fleecing the real truth, which is nothing, or unformed, and in general blurred.

– Paul Valery (qtd. in Gusdorf 41)

I will begin (and end) this essentially traditional, impersonal critical study by framing it within a personal confession. I must admit I do not recall which came first: my interest in Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Remains of the Day*,¹ or my idea for the story that became the creative component of this PhD project. Looking back, it seems almost as if the two defined each other simultaneously, like two mirrors turned to face each other – an image much favoured by postmodern theorists, and one which will recur in the text that follows.²

Suffice to say that Ishiguro’s novel – the account of an ageing butler’s journey across England after the Second World War, during which the protagonist-narrator finds himself re-evaluating his life – helped me sense the possibilities of my own nascent work. At that point the latter was nothing more than a premise: a protagonist whose inability to distance himself from a doomed relationship creates trouble for himself and those around him, and eventually destroys a chance at real happiness.³ Like most, if not all, stories it had been ‘done’ countless times before in various ways. The only thing I knew for sure was that I wanted to tell it in the first-person, from the protagonist’s point of view, in order to understand the logic of his series of disastrous choices from within.

This, of course, is not only the approach taken in *Remains*, but also a general characteristic of the confessional narrative. This form has played a significant part in literary history, from
Augustine’s *Confessions*, ‘regarded as a founding moment in Western autobiographical narrative’ (Root 15), through canonical works of English literature such as *Moll Flanders*, *Jane Eyre* and *Great Expectations* to recent works such as Banville’s *The Untouchable*. Indeed, today the confessional model ‘permeates our culture’ (Brooks 2). According to Foucault, ‘Western man has become a confessing animal’ (*History* 59).

But I also realised, in a hazy and unformed way, that *Remains* differed from other confessional stories – in ways that came to seem increasingly intriguing and subversive as I investigated further in preparation for my research project. It was around this time too that I discovered Richard Ford’s *The Sportswriter* – a novel about a former novelist turned sportswriter in mid-1980s America, recovering from a failed marriage and the death of his first child. Though different in style and content, *Sportswriter* seemed curiously similar to *Remains* in its themes and formal techniques, which also seemed strongly (albeit obliquely) connected to the confessional mode.

I found the touchstone for exploring this commonality in an essay on Ford in Durante’s *Dialectic of Self and Story*, where *Sportswriter’s* narrative is described as a ‘postmodern confession’ (47). The term seemed to appropriately evoke the unconventional use of conventional materials in both *Sportswriter* and *Remains*. I read on, expecting further explanation or at least an attribution – in vain. After further research I came across Head’s observation, concerning British fiction, that ‘the post-war era is dominated by a new kind of confessional mode in the novel’ – based upon a profound scepticism about the limitations of knowledge (244). However, I have yet to find any attempt to theorise a specifically postmodern form or practice of confession – this despite the fact that contemporary critics have enthusiastically scrutinised past confessions from the vantage point of postmodernity.
Superficially the reasons for this lacuna appear obvious. The vast majority of contemporary confession narratives vary little from long-established models. Furthermore, despite the fragmented and diverse range of positions that fall under the term postmodernism, a brief overview of some of its more influential ‘versions’ suggests it is fundamentally opposed to the concepts underwriting confession. McHale, for instance, writes of a shift away from epistemology (that is, issues of truth) towards ontology (modes of being). Lyotard’s famous description, in *The Postmodern Condition*, of an ‘incredulity towards metanarratives’ (xxiv) is echoed by Ricoeur’s call, in *Freud and Philosophy*, to subject all truth claims to ‘the hermeneutics of suspicion’ (27). Harvey likewise characterises the postmodern moment as one of ‘[r]agmentation, indeterminacy, and intense distrust of all universal or “totalizing” discourses’ (9). In short, Tambling notes, ‘[a]ll suspicion of finding deep grand narrative-like truths connecting parts of a text: refusals, indeed of confession…these things mark out post-modernism as a trope’ (186, emphasis added). The resulting speculations on ‘the death of voice, self, representation, and referentiality’ (Gallagher 14) – not to mention the ideological foundations of confession itself – conspire to relegate confessional narrative to the museum, and encourage a view of its contemporary presence as merely vestigial. Even Gallagher’s argument for the relevance of confession to postmodernity, in her study of recent confessional practices in South African literature, expresses ambivalence about the value of postmodern theory.7

One of the many paradoxes of postmodernism, however, is that even as it questions and deconstructs confessional conventions, it also espouses a confessional imperative. Beneath its fragmented, diverse surface is what Durante identifies as ‘the one agreed upon premise of postmodernism – that it is essential to make our underlying assumptions clear and precise rather than allowing categories to do our analysis’ (51). In this respect, Tambling concedes,
‘[a] sense of the life as a text, where the question of who interprets is dominant: this issue confronts post-modernism and confession alike’ (192). If all truth claims are tied to the circumstances of their production it becomes vital to confess one’s own interpretive context, ideological position, frame of reference – even though the only means of doing so are implicated in the very processes that prevent direct access to ‘the truth’. Looked at another way, postmodernism is obliged on principle to confess its own inability to make a conclusive confession.

It is hardly surprising that critics have been wary of venturing into such conceptually difficult territory. Yet it is just such terrain that *Sportswriter* and *Remains* negotiate: a world (or worlds) in which confession seems more imperative and yet more problematic than ever before.

My examination of the intersection of the confessional narrative mode and postmodernism in these two novels falls into two parts. The first begins with a brief overview of the historical development of the literary confession based on Gallagher’s genealogical analysis, distinguishing two varieties of confession – the latter reacting to and defining itself against its predecessor, while retaining certain key assumptions. (I would emphasise from the outset, however, that my position is nominalist not empiricist; by ‘distinguish’ I mean construct.) Again following Gallagher, I use Fowler’s theory of literary modes to provide a non-essentialist account of the range of confessional texts and available confessional tropes.

From this standpoint I offer preliminary readings of the primary texts. These readings serve several purposes: to further explicate and illustrate key tropes associated with the confessional mode; to establish the ways in which *Sportswriter* and *Remains* relate themselves to the confessional tradition and encourage a reading within this interpretive framework; and
also to suggest how these texts problematise such a reading and demand a more innovative approach.

Part II introduces the socio-historical and theoretical context of postmodernism. I do not attempt to say anything new about this much-analysed subject, simply to acknowledge its complex nature and identify some significant aspects relating to the confessional mode. This will lead to a re-examination of the primary texts, revealing how their confessional strategies derive narrative impetus from dramatising the tension between the compulsion to confess and the difficulty of doing so. Furthermore, they raise other postmodern concerns such as the relationship between narrator, narrated and text; ‘the causes and consequences of split subjectivity’ (Wall 38); ‘the mutual contamination of realistic and ironic modes’ (Currie 111); and the movement from ‘[i]ntractable epistemological uncertainty’ into ‘ontological plurality or instability’ (McHale, Postmodernist Fiction 11). In the case of both novels, the result is a radical postmodern critique of the confessional mode that also uses it to illuminate problematic aspects of postmodernity itself.

It should be noted that I am not making a case for regarding the postmodern confession as a subgenre in its own right. This would require a much broader survey of contemporary fiction than is possible within the scope of this study. Nor does my analysis of the primary texts pretend to be exhaustive. My aim, first and foremost, is to investigate what I believe to be the fascinating intersection of an established discursive mode and contemporary concerns. My means of doing so will be to suggest how the term ‘postmodern confession’ might offer a productive way of framing and illuminating significant aspects of two quite different texts, while at the same time using these texts to explore and articulate the possible meanings and significance of the term. The principle, again, is not unlike two mirrors facing
each other. It is my hope that what is produced or found in the space in-between may provide fruitful material for further study.
Part I – The Confessional Narrative Mode
1 – Entering the Confessional

The first part of this study seeks to examine the relationship between individual texts and generic conventions. Specifically, it investigates the relationship between two contemporary novels – Richard Ford’s *Sportswriter* and Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Remains of the Day* – and the literary confession narrative. Regarding the latter, it is important to note Gallagher’s observation that ‘most scholars no longer consider genres as permanent and unchanging. Rather, we realize that authors constantly experiment with and adapt formal conventions, and that material, economic, and social factors play a major role in these revisions, adaptations, and innovations’ (16).

The confession is indeed freighted with many, varied meanings and associations. Its origins date back to Hebrew and early Christian religious practice (Gallagher 3); Root notes that Augustine’s *Confessions* is ‘regarded as a founding moment in Western autobiographical narrative, a model for other literary discourses of the self’, and that the codification of the practice in 1215 by the Fourth Lateran Council contributed to the development of modern subjectivity and self-consciousness (15); the popularity of public confessions gave rise to some of the earliest novels in English, such as *Moll Flanders* and *Roxana*, which in turn inaugurated a tradition of fictional confessional writing including *Jane Eyre* and *Great Expectations*. According to Stephen Spender, ‘ours is an age where many people feel a need to confess the tensions of their inner lives’ (122). And Brooks observes, ‘Western culture, most strikingly since the Romantic era to our day, has made confessional speech a prime mark of authenticity’ (4), to the point where the confessional model ‘permeates our culture, including our educational practices and our law’ as well as saturating the popular media (2).
The historical dimension of genre may also lead to ambiguities, such as the fact that by the mid-twentieth century the term confession was used to refer to literary narratives falling into two broad categories, reflecting two quite different understandings of the nature of both confession and narrative. The difference can be illustrated by comparing two studies published within a few years of each other. Collett, in *Writing the Modern Confession Story*, refers broadly to ‘the sin-suffer-repent story’ (vii), going on to list ten structural elements necessary to the generic popular magazine confession:

I. Narrator’s character flaw
II. Motivation for narrator’s character flaw
III. Device that creates narrator’s immediate problem and necessitates a decision or plan
IV. Narrator’s wrong decision or plan
V. Result narrator expects or hopes for
VI. Action resulting from narrator’s decision or plan
VII. Unexpected and unfortunate result of the above action
VIII. How this unanticipated result causes narrator to see where and why she was wrong
IX. Narrator’s remorse and her attempt to make restitution
X. How narrator’s remorse and attempt to make restitution unexpectedly bring her happiness, after all. (10)

In contrast, Axthelm, analysing in *The Modern Confessional Novel* a number of canonical nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century texts from Dostoevski to Bellow, states simply that ‘[t]he confessional novel presents a hero, at some time in his life, examining his past as well
as his innermost thoughts, in order to achieve some form of perception...of the truth that
lies at the center of his existence’ (8, 11). While this description might encompass all
autobiography, Axthelm distinguishes the ‘confessional hero – afflicted and unbalanced,
disillusioned and groping for meaning’ (9), which he is unable to find outside himself
although his search ‘is inherited from the religious idea of purgation or absolution through
confession’ (11).

To generalise, the former model is plot-centred, focusing on external acts within a
particular narrative arc; its story is closed in the sense that its significant action has already
occurred and will not be affected by the telling. The latter model is character-centred and
introspective; it is open in that it presents the act of recollection and reflection as a major, if
not the major, factor in the unfolding of the story. These differences were first noted by
Olney in his influential study of confession’s now dominant offspring, autobiography (of
which more in Part II). Gallagher, following Olney, suggests the designation ‘premodern’
for the former and ‘modern’ for the latter (12) – terms I will use from henceon, whilst
acknowledging that they are somewhat problematic, since both varieties continue to co-exist
and have precedents in the earliest examples of the form.

The original usage of the term confession was two-fold, covering professions of faith as
well as admissions of guilt. Both usages are present in Augustine’s Confessions, a common
starting point for studies of confession and autobiography. The Bishop of Hippo was the
first to deeply expose the divided, conflicted nature of the individual and to frame his
narrative as part of an ongoing process of self-transformation. However, he did not invent
the form: ‘many religious autobiographies were written in Augustine’s time; typically they
described a dramatic conversion in which the self was radically, completely, and successfully
transformed’ (Gallagher 12). This, in a nutshell, is the premodern confession: the narrator
retrospectively presents past misdeeds and misapprehensions culminating in the
transformation that now provides a new, privileged perspective from which to relate and
judge his or her earlier self.

When the Fourth Lateran Council formalised the process of confession, the celebratory
aspect became secondary to the issue of guilt. And as the authors of the first fictional
versions realised, if the premise of public confession was theoretically to present a warning
to prospective wrong-doers and/or a testimony of the mystery of divine grace, both could
be highlighted by the most lurid presentation of the preceding sins. (Indeed, since divine
grace was by definition inexplicable it might be conveniently glossed, allowing maximum
coverage of the titillating, scandalous material guaranteed to appeal to the popular taste.)
Whatever the underlying motives for these confessions, however, the narrator is clearly
situated in a narrative space – Genette’s ‘narrating instance’ (212-215) – separate from that in
which the main action occurs, giving the reader no reason to question the veracity of the
tale.

This tradition of popular confessions has continued with relatively few changes into the
present, to the form described by Collett. Contemporary versions are likely to devote more
time to the suffering experienced by the narrator as the result of her or his mistakes, partly
because the conservative impulse in such stories is no longer underwritten by the guarantee
of supernatural justice; partly as a concession to modern psychology, in order to motivate
the narrator’s recognition of the error of his or her ways. But, as previously, the confessing
narrator is above suspicion and ‘correct’ – at least in relation to the subject matter. There
are, Olney notes, ‘no agonizing questions of identity, self-definition, self-existence, or self-
deception – at least none the reader need attend to – and therefore the fact that the
individual [is] himself narrating the story of himself [has] no troubling philosophical, psychological, literary, or historical implications’ (20).

A subtler but more far-reaching effect of the Lateran IV decrees was ‘the birth of a new form of identity, a new discourse of the self’ (Root 1). This development in the articulation of subjectivity would lead eventually to Descartes’s theory of the autonomous transcendent subject, which, in conjunction with the Enlightenment’s Grand Project ‘to achieve certainty in the form of pure, disinterested, objective knowledge’ (Gallagher xiv-xv), marked the beginning of the modern era. The first notable literary manifestation of this modern sensibility was Rousseau’s *Confessions*. As Levin observes, its title simultaneously situates the work within a religious and literary tradition, and presents a direct challenge to these traditions. Its premise – ‘to display to my kind a portrait in every way true to nature, and the man I shall portray will be myself’ (Rousseau 17) – proved vastly influential, as studies by Levin, Beebe and Axthelm show.⁹

The confessional narratives that followed, though more varied in form and content than their precursors, tend to involve a ‘a sensitive, introspective, and egoistic’ protagonist (Beebe 61) focusing on a ‘specific problem…that is usually a source of guilt or anxiety’ (Levin 127) and that serves as a spur to ‘explore his own being, not in an effort to move closer to God, but in a quest for a meaning which does not depend on God or on any force outside the self’ (Axthelm 6). The major difference between early and later examples of the modern confession lies in the character of the protagonist. Romantic confessants¹⁰ (such as De Quincey and Musset) are usually portrayed as heroic individualists; their post-romantic successors (beginning in the Russian tradition with Gogol) are often ineffectual nonentities whose romantic ideals are absurdly unrealistic (Axthelm 7). But ‘[t]he cumulative effect of these novels was to change the emphasis in fiction from outside the self to analysis of the
hero’s psychology’ (Beebe 50), producing texts ‘in which revelation and analysis, set out in language, work to establish a coherent self’ (Levin 128).

Neither the concept of the self as a work in progress nor the emphasis on inner scrutiny was new; as noted above, both are present in Augustine. But Augustine’s insights into the composite, conflicted nature of the individual could be interpreted ‘as representative of something greater than himself’ (Root 30). According to Barrett, the full, existential force of the issue ‘did not erupt into painful consciousness until the modern period, when the containing structure of the church, which had held the conflicting elements together in a kind of suspension, could no longer serve this purpose’ (qtd. in Axthelm 5).

The problem of unifying the disparate elements of selfhood introduced new preoccupations in place of sin and redemption – chief among them the trustworthiness of the confessant’s narrative. It is no accident that many of these protagonists are artists or artist-surrogates (Beebe 50), deeply concerned with ‘the relationship of lived and narrative events’ (Levin 14).

According to Hart, surveying a range of post-Enlightenment autobiographical works, confession is not a kind of autobiography but ‘a kind of autobiographical intention…that seeks to communicate or express the essential nature, the truth, of the self’ (247, 227). While this concurs with my characterisation of the modern confession, it also raises problems, among them the issue of establishing intention, considered a questionable enterprise since Wimsatt and Beardsley’s critique of the ‘Intentionally Fallacy’. More significant for the purposes of this study is Hart’s assertion that the confessional ‘impulse [that] places the self relative to nature, reality’ is primarily ontological (227). In Part II, it will be seen that this issue is crucial to an understanding of postmodernism. As McHale acknowledges, questions of ontology (that is, being) and epistemology (that is, knowing) never exist entirely independent
of each other (*Postmodernist Fiction* 11). However, I would argue that the former is of secondary importance in both premodern and modern confessions, simply because each takes its ontological ground for granted. In the premodern confession, the ontological ‘mode of being’ is fixed securely within the external world and the externalised, narrated self; the modern confession turns for its ultimate point of reference to the narrating self. Thus Coetzee, surveying confessions ranging from Augustine to Dostoevski, initially accepts Hart’s assessment, yet goes on to thematically define confessional fictions as ‘a subgenre of the novel in which problems of truth-telling and self-recognition, deception and self-deception, come to the forefront’ (194). In other words, the primary focus is not ontological but epistemological.

To further investigate the commonality shared by the two forms of confession I have distinguished, it is necessary to turn to the work of Frye and his successors. Frye’s own definition of confession is possibly the most inclusive: confessions deal with ‘those events and experiences in the writer’s life that go to build up an integrated pattern. This pattern may be something larger than himself with which he has come to identify himself, or simply the coherence of his character and attitudes’ (307). This description is broad enough to cover texts reflecting the Christian notion of human guilt and error redeemed by divine grace; the more recent secular equivalent in which the protagonist’s guilt or error is redeemed through personal suffering and the capacity to learn from experience; and also those more varied modern texts that simply depict the anxious struggle to find a coherent pattern. However, Frye admits it also encompasses all autobiography plus literary texts concerning ‘some theoretical and intellectual interest in religion, politics, or art’ (308). His choice of the term is simply a nod to Augustine; he cares less about its subsequent
applications and associations than about its convenience in his project to divide all literary prose into four categories (307).

While this usage is inadequate for closer analysis of the confessional tradition, it pointed the way for later critics such as Fowler, whose diachronic approach to genre studies is summarised by Gallagher:

kinds, or genres, of literature often evolve into modes of literature, as in the case of the formal Greek tragedy, which became the more general tragic mode that appears today in poetry and fiction as well as drama. Our terms for kinds of literature can usually be put into noun form (comedy), while modes appear as adjectives (comic).

Modes do not follow an exact semiotic pattern or formal architecture, yet Fowler explains that ‘a mode announces itself by distinct signals, even if these are abbreviated, unobtrusive…The signals may be of a wide variety: a characteristic motif, perhaps; a formula; a rhetorical proportion or quality’. (Gallahger 17)

This model explains how Beebe and Axthelm can include among their catalogue of modern confessional narratives texts that do not meet what might seem to be the basic criterion – the presence of a first-person narrator. It also suggests how later writers can draw upon a range of past confessional devices and tropes to radical effect. In Part II, I will consider how this phenomenon might manifest itself within the context of postmodernism. First, however, I will examine the ways in which my two focal texts – Richard Ford’s The Sportswriter and Kazuo Ishiguro’s The Remains of the Day – invoke some of the aforementioned formal and substantive signals to invite a reading within the confessional mode.
2 – ‘[T]he possibility of terrible, searing regret’:

*The Sportwriter* as a confession narrative

Apart from Durante’s tantalising reference to *The Sportwriter* as a postmodern confession, the only other study to explicitly link the novel to the confessional mode is Dupuy’s ‘Confessions of an Ex-Suicide’. Focusing on two significant themes, the ‘efficacy of language’ (94) and the way that Frank is able to ‘relent’ to life’s mysteries (97-99), Dupuy concludes that ‘[l]ife is forever a text which cannot be fully read, and to get on with life, one must finally relent’ (99). While concurring with his interpretation, I find it theoretically problematic that Dupuy’s terms of reference are drawn from outside the text (mostly from comments made elsewhere by Richard Ford). There is no attempt to examine – as I will now – how the novel itself authorises a confessional reading.

If the ultimate ‘meaning’ of a text may only become clear in retrospect, the phenomenological experience of narrative – the *act* of reading – is linear and temporal, the construction of meaning ongoing from the outset, not deferred till the end. And as Fowler points out, ‘[t]he generic markers that cluster at the beginning of a work have a strategic role in guiding the reader’ (88). Among the markers Fowler highlights are titles, and opening formulas and topics.

In the case of Ford’s *The Sportwriter*, the title suggests a focus on an individual defined by his employment – a predicament common to the failed heroes of many post-romantic confessions. There is an echo, too, of the modern predilection for artists or artist-surrogates, though undercut by the lowbrow connotations of sports writing (on par with the contemporary popular ‘true confession’ writer). The use of the definitive article raises the
possibility of an emblematic reading, in which the image provides a ‘subtle tangential interpretation…an independent route to [the text’s] meaning’ (Fowler 96). And as several critics have noted, there may also be an allusion to a well-known earlier modern confessional novel: Walker Percy’s *The Moviegoer.*

The opening passage exemplifies several major confessional tropes. It begins with a direct address to the reader by a narrator obviously preparing to tell his story: ‘My name is Frank Bascombe. I am a sportswriter’ (Ford 9). A paragraph later Frank admits, ‘just exactly what that good life was – the one I expected – I cannot tell you now exactly, though I wouldn’t say it has not come to pass, only that much has come in between.’ The sentence is dense with suggestion. The statement of uncertainty followed by the double negative creates a tone of suppressed anxiety undercutting the hypothesis that all might be well. This tone, the meandering introspective syntax and the hint of a more in-depth disclosure in the phrase ‘I cannot tell you now *exactly*’ align Frank clearly with the typical modern confessional narrator. The final statement – ‘much has come in between’ – with its intimations of a vista of accident and error, seems to put the issue beyond doubt.

The passage continues in this vein, offering further glimpses into a life ripe for self-examination (Frank’s marriage has failed, his first child is dead and he has made a series of questionable career choices) delivered in a manner so perfunctory it almost screams a need for resolution, and punctuated by assertions such as ‘very little really worries me or keeps me up at night. I still believe in the possibilities of passion and romance. And I would not change much’ (10) – so laced with ambiguity as to imply almost the opposite. The passage ends with a surprisingly authoritative moral lesson more in keeping with premodern confessions – ‘for your life to be worth anything you must sooner or later face the possibility of terrible, searing regret. Though you must also manage to avoid it or your life will be
ruined’ – followed by what could be an archetypal statement of the premodern confessional narrator’s position: ‘I believe I have done these two things…And I am still here to tell about it’ (10). There is however a tension between the lesson Frank claims to have learned about avoiding regret and the act of confession, which traditionally requires regret.

According to the premodern model of confession this introduction would be followed immediately by a retrospective chronicle illustrating how Frank learned his lesson. Instead we are given a scene in the present, extending what initially seemed a simple framing device and destabilising the original impression of a settled point of view. There are strong indications that Frank’s story remains unfinished and the chapter ends with his admission that ‘I have a feeling…that something is over and something begun, though I cannot tell you for the life of me what those somethings might be’ (29).

Another crucial generic indicator identified by Fowler is the use of names – even in the modern verisimilar novel with its naturalistic imperative, via suggestion. In the case of Sportswriter’s narrator, if there is one quality shared by previous confessants, it must be frankness. And while Frank supplies the names of every other character in his account, he refers to his ex-wife only as X – the letter traditionally emptiest of signifying power and therefore most resonant. Perhaps this is simply because, as Ford himself has said, ‘Frank can’t bear to say her name’ (qtd. in Bonetti 31), underscoring his general reluctance to articulate loss. However, the device is also ‘often used to suggest scandal, or merely that the author was personally involved in the events narrated’ – two crucial elements in the confession genre – and furthermore has seen ‘frequent use in the work-in-progress novel’ (Fowler 86), a type closely linked with modern confessional concerns.

Other indicators linked to the confessional mode that occur in the first chapter include the setting: a graveyard, evocative of the weight of the past, at the start of Easter weekend, the
holiday still most strongly associated with Western religious traditions and in particular with
the concept of redemption, which underscores all confessional writing. Frank recalls his ex-
wife’s analysis of his character in terms of past mistakes and the influence of history (Ford
19), although he is more optimistic, believing he has ‘nearly put dreaminess behind me’ (16,
emphasis added). Later X asks him if ‘you’re at the point of understanding everything that’s
happened – to us and our life?’ (27). All these elements figure strongly in modern
confessional narratives, and the anxiety and sorrow Frank feels about his dead son and his
failed marriage appears all the more powerful and potentially catalytic for his emotionally
muted response. In short, the opening chapter seems to establish itself as a premodern
confession before shifting toward the modern confessional mode.

The ensuing narrative follows Frank’s progress over the course of this Easter weekend as
he reflects upon the events that have brought him to this point, expounds his vaguely
optimistic personal philosophy, and attempts to fulfil his latest professional assignment and
make the most of his new romantic attachment. When both the assignment and the
relationship come unstuck and he learns of the suicide of an acquaintance in a similar
situation to himself, Frank is pitched into a crisis he had hoped to avoid, and from which he
finally escapes to achieve a tentative reconciliation with life.

One of the two most important techniques of the modern confessional novel, according to
Axthelm, is the device of the double, ‘used consistently to express the confessional hero’s
relations with others in terms of self-discovery’ (11). One such double in *Sportswriter*,
identified by Folks, is the crippled athlete Herb Wallagher. Frank’s disastrous visit with the
angry, self-pitying Herb is both ‘a lesson in the despair to which he also is susceptible’ and ‘a
warning about the consequences of withdrawal from society’ (Folks 129). Furthermore,
Folks writes, ‘if it is one of the more significant of Frank’s failed attempts to establish
connection with others, it may also mark the beginning of his difficult journey back to social and ethical selfhood’ (129). A more obvious double is Walter Luckett, another member of the Divorced Men’s Club, whose suicide on Easter Sunday – a day usually associated with renewal – precipitates Frank’s crisis. Symbolically, Walter’s funeral takes place on Frank’s birthday, and it is his final message to Frank that sets the latter onto a new course. (The other major modern confessional technique noted by Axtelm, ‘the use of irony by both the author and the hero’ (11), will be discussed in Part II.)

The pivotal roles played by Herb and Walter, both of whom offer Frank their own confessions, only serve to highlight Frank’s desire to avoid confessing. His philosophy holds little place for old-fashioned notions of sin or repentance, yet the fact that such concepts are not so much discarded as repressed is shown by his dreams. In Detroit, immediately before the pivotal meeting with Herb, Frank dreams that someone he knows but has forgotten ‘mentions to me – so obliquely that now I can’t even remember what he said – something shameful about me, clearly shameful, and it scares me that he might know more and that I’ve forgotten it, but shouldn’t have’ (Ford 150). The obliqueness of the accusation suggests the degree of repression involved, and Frank is disturbed by the thought that forgetfulness, one of the cornerstones of his personal credo, is not always accompanied by forgiveness. Later, fleeing by train to New York after Walter’s death, he recalls another dream about being in bed with an unknown woman ‘whom I must lie beside for hours and hours on end in a state of fear and excitation and scalding guilt’ (357). In both cases, the references to guilt and shame – key concepts in confessional narrative, which apparently play no part in Frank’s waking life – are more striking for their absence elsewhere in the text and the power they may still exert when left unacknowledged.
On the other hand, Frank is clearly eager to expound his personal, sportswriting-based philosophy – beginning in the novel’s opening passage with ‘if sportswriting teaches you anything, and there is much truth to it as well as plenty of lies…’ (10) – an impulse that recalls the second original function of confession, the profession of one’s beliefs and values. (After Lateran IV, this professing aspect, though never definitively abandoned, had increasingly come to be expressed in negative terms: by the narrator’s divergence from the proper course, or as a source of doubt and confusion for the modern confessional narrator.)

The preoccupations reflected in his musings, too, are often confessional motifs: truth (e.g. ‘people never tell the truth anyway’ (82)); voice (e.g. ‘I wonder…what my own voice will sound like. Will it be a convincing, truth-telling voice?’ (17) and ‘I even had, in fact, a number of different voices’ (70)); and disclosure (e.g. ‘Full disclosure never does anybody any favours, and in any event there are few enough people in the world who are sufficiently within themselves to make such disclosure pretty unreliable right from the start’ (83)).

Turning to a broader view of the story – and bearing in mind Fowler’s observation that ‘distinguishing features [of a genre]…may be either formal or substantive’ (55) – it is possible to see even in the brief summary above that the plot of Sportswriter adheres to the comic narrative arc. That is, the protagonist gradually slides toward rock bottom, at which point a sudden reversal of fortune puts him back on top. This is the arc described by most premodern, and some modern, confessions, and raised to an imperative in the popular confession stories characterised by Collett’s ‘sin-suffer-repent’ formula. The use of a framing narrative to contain and provoke recollection and re-evaluation is also characteristic of the confession in contrast to the autobiography (where recollection and re-evaluation are often presented for their own sake, unprompted by any need to resolve a particular issue).
Finally, Frank’s eventual discovery of a new life apparently involving some degree of reconciliation with the past has given rise to the widely accepted thematic reading of the story as a chronicle of personal redemption. It is a reading espoused by Ford himself (Bonetti 31), and the theme at the heart of all confession narratives whether religious or secular, optimistic or sceptical.

Any attempt to understand the text as a confession, however, is complicated by the narrator’s attitude. If the premodern confession hinges on regret over past misdeeds and the modern confession hinges on the desire to comprehend the meaning and significance of the present (often by way of the past), Frank’s narrative veers between a past he refuses to regret and a present whose significance he continually tries to evade or downplay. Yet despite his stated disinclination to either regret or explain, he spends considerable time doing both. And although he finally realises that the past ‘is not a burden, though I’ve always thought of it as one’ (377) and recognises the fact that he has been in mourning since his son’s death (380), these revelations are presented as a postscript to the action. Ultimately, if Frank’s circumstances have changed and he has weathered his crisis, the reader is left wondering whether this is despite, or because of, the narrator’s resolute resistance to playing the role of confessant.
3 – ‘[W]hy should I hide it?':

*The Remains of the Day* as a confession narrative

The term confession has been used to describe *The Remains of the Day* by Lodge (*Art of Fiction* 155) and Wong (‘Kazuo Ishiguro’s *The Remains of the Day*’ 494); other commentators have referred to it as a diary (Parkes 27) and a memoir (Petry 89), two forms closely linked to the confessional mode. Lodge uses the term in passing, within a brief study of narratorial unreliability. Wong’s analysis is more detailed but focused on the novel’s presentation of historical revisionism on a personal level, and she concludes that ‘[f]inally, Stevens adjusts his present physical surroundings so that these correspond to his role as diarist, rather than as confessor’ (501). The issue of whether either novel can finally be said to be a confession is one I will return to in Part II. In this chapter, as with *Sportswriter* in the previous chapter, I will examine the ways in which *Remains* encourages the reader to apply the interpretive framework of confession to its narrative.

In brief, the novel recounts an ageing butler’s journey across England in 1956, ostensibly for the professional purpose of inviting a former housekeeper to rejoin the staff of Darlington Hall, though it becomes clear his deeper motivation is the hope of recovering the love he once rejected. As his narrative of the journey unfolds, Stevens is forced to reconsider past decisions to abandon personal happiness in favour of service to his late master, Lord Darlington, now reviled as a Nazi collaborator.

The title of Ishiguro’s novel, unlike Ford’s, does not immediately focus attention on the narrator-protagonist. Instead it establishes an elegiac, nostalgic mood, hearkening back to ‘the early twentieth-century vogue for echoic titling’ (Fowler 94). In this sense it is an echo
of an echo. But despite the classical/biblical overtones it does not refer to any pre-existing, authoritative text. Its context and significance remain obscure (though gently prefigured) for the majority of the book, in a manner more akin to ‘novels of ideas’, which ‘often have an apparently irrelevant or riddling title’ (Fowler 94). It is not until the end that the image figures explicitly, as a symbol of the butler’s recognition that he cannot undo the past and must simply make the best of what little remains to him. By this structural device the reader’s experience is aligned with the narrator’s. We only comprehend the full meaning of both the title and the text it designates retrospectively, in tandem with Stevens’s final moment of insight, and thus our experience evokes the growth toward understanding that underlies both premodern and modern confessions.

But it is not only in hindsight that Remains positions itself within the confessional mode. As in Sportswriter the opening passage contains many indicators. Stevens does not present himself directly as the subject of his narrative. Rather, his focus is on ‘the expedition that has been preoccupying my imagination now for some days’. Yet there is no missing the note of self-consciousness in the second sentence: ‘An expedition, I should say, which I will undertake alone’ (Ishiguro 3, emphasis added). The ensuing details, none of which appears to warrant the imperative inflection, simply highlight the presence of a particular, if obscure, value system. The following sentence too contains a similar formula – ‘I should point out’ – leading into still more innocuous content. These linguistic signals (used repeatedly through the novel) sensitise the reader to the presence of a moral and/or ethical framework, a fundamental element of confession. Furthermore, the apparent compulsion to explain or perhaps justify, unaccompanied by any obvious necessity, both increases narrative tension and suggests a character strongly aware of guilt and responsibility.
Another confessional trope is introduced in this opening paragraph by the words *I recall*. This phrase, along with variations, will return again and again throughout the text, evoking a deep preoccupation with both the past and the act of recollection. Its next appearance, two paragraphs below, is attended by the statement ‘*quite probably* I said nothing very definite’ (4, emphasis added), underscoring the uncertain nature of memory. However, an identification of the narrative as confessional is complicated from the outset by an equal but opposite force, indicated by the phrase *as I foresee* along with a general sense of expectation – the converse of the regret that traditionally prompts confession.

The account of Stevens’s initial reaction to his new employer’s suggestion of a journey is revealing when considered in terms of confession. Although the butler is capable of an articulate response in terms of his own values, those values prevent him from offering more than an ambiguous, shorthand version to the person who prompted his reflections. From the reader’s point of view, on the one hand this characteristically modern introspection suggests we will be offered a privileged insight into his internal world; on the other hand, this further instance of Stevens’s self-consciousness regarding what may and may not be said raises the possibility that even this insight may fall within certain limits. The confession (not acknowledged as such) that his utterances to others are governed by his sense of propriety rebounds upon itself, throwing doubt upon the account he is giving – a recurrent theme in modern confessions.

Still more redolent of the confessional mode is the extraordinary sentence that occurs soon after: ‘The fact that my attitude to this same suggestion underwent a change over the following days – indeed, that the notion of a trip to the West Country took an ever-increasing hold on my thoughts – is no doubt substantially attributable to – and why should I hide it? – the arrival of Miss Kenton’s letter, her first in almost seven years if one discounts
the Christmas cards’ (4-5). The tortuous syntax alone suggests the narrator’s difficulty in addressing the subject. The interjection *and why should I hide it?* – to all appearances unprompted – could only indicate a voluntary but reluctant admission. If the question functions rhetorically as an assertion, it also implies that the issue has been (and may still be) in doubt; that there *might* be cause to hide this information. Stevens’s insistence that it should not be regarded as a confession is itself a tacit admission that he has been thinking in these terms, and begs the question anew.

Ironically, the butler’s determination to justify his *volte-face* in purely professional terms leads him directly to an open confession: ‘The fact is, over the past few months, I have been responsible for a series of small errors in the carrying out of my duties’ (5). And from this point through the remainder of the prologue, the explicit confessional tone continues in his concessions that ‘blame can be laid at no one’s door but my own’ (5) and ‘I was perhaps negligent’ (9); in the undercurrent of regret suggested by his habit of glancing through a guidebook describing Miss Kenton’s new abode (11); in the admission of another ‘error of judgement’ (13) followed by the statement ‘I must confess, I remain rather unsure’ (14); and in references to his discomfort over the issue of bantering (15-19).

Stevens’s anxiety over his diminished professional sphere and the evidence of his fading powers clearly echoes Axthelm’s description of the condition of the modern confessional narrator. His predicament is thrown into starker relief by the journey. ‘I must confess I did feel a slight sense of alarm’ (Ishiguro 24), he admits, reflecting upon the moment of finding himself in unfamiliar territory. And the external journey is soon paralleled within his consciousness, in a perfect illustration of what Axthelm describes as the process of ‘examining his past as well as his innermost thoughts’ (8).
At first the butler’s reveries are of a general nature: the section entitled ‘Day One’ is largely
given over to the questions of what makes a ‘great’ butler, and the nature of dignity. Whilst
serving to establish the framework of values within which his judgements are made,
Stevens’s comprehensiveness on these points also raises a suspicion of repressed anxiety.
And as he drifts into more personal considerations, the confessions resume and multiply.

They begin mildly enough: ‘I should by now have explained myself as regards my referring
to “Miss Kenton”,’ who has in fact been Mrs Benn for twenty years (Ishiguro 47) – a fact
Stevens seems to prefer to ignore. Indeed, following an extended recollection of the
beginning of their acquaintance Stevens admits that his ‘becoming preoccupied with these
memories...is perhaps a little foolish’ (67). Yet he soon returns to the topic in an attempt to
justify his behaviour during that same period toward his ailing father – a former butler
himself. These extenuating circumstances, however, simply emphasise the degree to which
he has repressed his feelings. The telling phrase ‘why should I deny it?’ marks Stevens’s
admission that the night he neglected his dying father in order to pursue his professional
duties remains for him one of the highlights of his career, and one he continues to regard
‘with a large sense of triumph’ (110).

A sequence of further confessions begins with the realisation that he has failed to properly
consider ‘a whole dimension’ to the question of professional greatness (113). This, we learn,
has been prompted by the butler’s mistake in allowing his car to run out of water (118),
which leads to an admission of two deceptions – one in the present, the other in the recent
past – practised by Stevens in conversations about his former employer (119-26). Shortly
afterwards he returns again to the fact that ‘it has to be admitted, over these last few months,
things have not been all they might at Darlington Hall’ (139), focusing on another instance
of his laxity, regarding the silverware (139-40).
Then another motoring mishap (159-60) provokes the remark ‘One has to confess…to being overcome by a certain sense of discouragement’ (161) and provides the catalyst for a significant personal revelation. Whilst in service together, Miss Kenton discovered Stevens’s penchant for ‘sentimental romance’ fiction; Stevens, greatly disconcerted at the time, avoided the moment of intimacy that might have followed and maintains that ‘perusing such works…was an extremely efficient way to maintain and develop one’s command of the English language’ (167). But he continues, ‘having said that, however, I do not mind confessing today – and I see nothing to be ashamed of in this – that I did at times gain a sort of incidental enjoyment from these stories. I did not perhaps acknowledge this to myself at the time, but as I say, what shame is there in it?’ (168). This confession, significantly, is two-fold: that he found personal pleasure in these stories, and that he failed to admit this to himself. The note of regret becomes more distinct as he reconsiders this and other possible turning points in his relationship with Miss Kenton, understanding with the benefit of hindsight ‘that such evidently small incidents would render whole dreams forever irredeemable’ (179, emphasis added).

Stevens’s desire to relate every aspect of his life back to his professional role exemplifies the modern confessant’s need – identified by critics such as Axthelm (11) and Levin (128), and noted in Chapter 1 – to discover or create a unifying principle of selfhood. His strategy of absolute identification with his role is reflected in the fact that he is only ever identified by his surname – the name under which he operates professionally and that emphasises his place within a lineage, at the expense of any indication of individuality. Other telling uses of names in the novel include the butler’s aforementioned habit of referring to his former colleague by her maiden name (an indication of his obsession with the past and another hint of what he prefers not to admit to himself). On two occasions he also employs the device,
mentioned in relation to *Sportswriter*, of generic designations that give a further air of authenticity, personal involvement and scandal, referring to ‘gentlemen I shall merely call Mr Smith and Mr Jones’ (Ishiguro 37) and ‘a certain extremely illustrious Frenchman – I will merely call him “M. Dupont”’ (76).

This self-reflexive note is one of many throughout the novel that mark Stevens as, if not an obvious artist-surrogate, certainly a skilled, conscious manipulator of language. Other, aforementioned examples of self-conscious artifice include his carefully worded ‘white lies’, his reflections on what may and may not be said to his employer, and the suggestion that he might derive some of his linguistic mannerisms from romance novels (though this too is an avoidance tactic).

By far the most significant modern confessional technique in *Remains*, however, is the use of doubles ‘as the hero seeks self-perception through his perception of others’ (Axthelm 44). The first of these is Stevens’s father, whom he clearly regards as a role model (Ishiguro 42, 54) and whose ability and determination lead Stevens to observe, ‘a stranger might have believed there were not one but several such figures pushing trolleys about the corridors of Darlington Hall’ (78) – a description echoed later in reference to the narrator himself by a visiting guest, who compliments him: ‘At one point during dinner, Stevens, I would have sworn you were at least three people’ (107). As well as the similarities in their professional commitment, father and son share an extraordinary emotional detachment that apparently precludes familial intimacy (64–67), and the former’s decline becomes a prefiguration of the fate Stevens is now facing. It is only in their final conversation, on his deathbed, that Stevens’s father abandons his professional role and says, ‘I hope I’ve been a good father to you. I suppose I haven’t’ (97) – a confession to which the narrator is manifestly incapable of responding.
In neglecting his father’s last hours, Stevens demonstrates his allegiance to another figure: his employer, Lord Darlington. According to Raphael, ‘Stevens’s mirroring of Darlington is a defining characteristic of the butler’ (175). And as Shaffer notes, the ultimate result of this ‘extreme and perverse identification with his father-substitute’ is that he becomes ‘a pawn of a pawn of Hitler’ (Understanding 74). Even after Lord Darlington’s disgrace and death, Stevens continues to defend him, though it becomes increasingly obvious that in offering excuses and rationalisations for his employer’s behaviour he is also offering a thinly-veiled justification for his own unquestioning obedience. Likewise, his eventual acknowledgement that ‘his lordship’s life and work have turned out today to look, at best, a sad waste’ (Ishiguro 201) is a reflection of how he views his own life. (And in following up this statement with the observation that ‘it is quite illogical that I should feel any regret or shame on my own account’, he again explicitly sounds the confessional note, despite phrasing his comment in the negative.)

Lord Darlington is not the only vehicle for Stevens’s projected confessions. Initially he imagines his offer of re-employment for Miss Kenton will provide ‘consolation to a life that has come to be so dominated by a sense of waste’ (48), prefiguring later revelations about his own motivation. And when they finally meet, his impression of her ‘weariness with life’ and ‘something like sadness’ in her demeanour is at least as indicative of the narrator’s state of mind (231). But on this occasion, as previously, Miss Kenton refuses to simply mirror his attitudes. One of their most significant differences is her ability to openly confess – as shown previously by her forthright admissions that she’d abandoned her principles out of cowardice (152-53) and been mistaken in hiring an unreliable housemaid (158). And now she admits to having once imagined ‘a different life, a better life…I may have had with you, Mr Stevens’ (239).
Stevens responds to this last, belated confession in typical fashion. While inwardly observing, ‘Indeed – why should I not admit it? – at that moment, my heart was breaking’ (239), he makes no open acknowledgement of his emotion. However, despite this characteristic (non)display of feeling, his emotional growth may be seen in the compassionate advice he gives the former Miss Kenton to ‘do all you can to make these years happy ones for yourself and your husband’ (240) – a marked contrast to his past insensitivity to her needs.

Having made all the restitution available to him, Stevens finally delivers the confession that lies at the heart of his story. For it has become clear that behind the strained, halting litany of his professional shortcomings is a much greater failing that lends his situation real pathos. The tragedy of *Remains* is not that Stevens has substantially failed to live up to his value system but that he has nearly succeeded and must now face the fact that the system itself, to which he gave his unqualified allegiance, was inadequate and ultimately damaging – both to himself and the world at large. As he admits openly for the first time, to a stranger, ‘I can’t even say I made my own mistakes’ (243) and this abdication of responsibility in favour of duty has robbed him of the dignity he’d spent his career trying to attain. In response, his interlocutor (himself a former servant and one of several minor doubles in the book) offers absolution and advice that points Stevens toward a more positive future in which he might reconcile the legacy of his past decisions with his newly acknowledged desire for ‘human warmth’ (245).

Like *Sportswriter*, Ishiguro’s novel is obviously permeated – in its characters, its subject matter, and its narrative arc – by elements of the confessional mode. But in this work, even more so than in Ford’s, a reading within the limits of traditional confession overlooks some of the most powerful aspects of the story. Like Frank Bascombe, Stevens is deeply resistant
to ‘removing one’s clothing in public’ (Ishiguro 210). Although his journey/narrative ostensibly stems from his original confession of professional negligence, as an attempt to make amends, on another level this is clearly a pretext. On two significant occasions he chooses to lie rather than confess his past association with Lord Darlington (119-20, 123). And if the butler is more willing than his sportswriter counterpart to confess about certain matters, it becomes increasingly obvious that his use of confessional tropes is a vital part of his strategy of concealment, misdirection and displacement rather than a direct attempt at revelation. This ironic reversal is highlighted by two faux-climaxes within the story: the aforementioned night of Stevens’s father’s death; and the night of Miss Kenton’s engagement, when he again subjugates his personal life to his professional duties (228). The narrator claims that both occasions (which I will examine further in Part II) are marked in his recollection by a sense of triumph. But if his behaviour at these moments is, in a sense, exemplary, it also typifies the narrow-minded isolation that will ultimately become his greatest regret. Significantly his final, heartfelt confession is marked by the absence of his typical formulae such as I must confess and why should I deny it?

To understand the implications of these tensions we must re-examine the confessional mode in the light of contemporary literary theory, and reconsider both Sportswriter and Remains as instances of postmodern confessions.
Part II – Postmodernism
4 – Postmodernism’s True Confessions

In his study of postmodern narrative theory, Currie describes ‘the trade-off between self-consciousness as narrative and narrative self-consciousness’ – a phenomenon of particular significance in the history and theory of the confessional form:

If self-narration can function as a form of therapy by recognizing the truth about a past lie, it can do so only at the expense of…narrative self-consciousness because it has to present itself as reliable narration in order to distance itself from the unreliability of what is narrated. (118)

In the simplest terms: if the narrator has been mistaken previously, why should we accept his or her authority now? Only by supposing a radical break with the past, by narrating the self as if it were another, can one establish one’s authority. As we have seen, this is precisely the process employed in premodern confessions: a process of dissociation, using narrative to fix the transgressive act within the past, whereby the confession was its own proof of the narrator’s re-integration within the proper order of things. (It is also, Currie notes, the process later taken up by psychoanalysis, an important influence on postmodern theory.)

In inaugurating the modern confession, Rousseau threw this neat narrative economy into turmoil. For him confession was not an end in itself but a tool by which to assert his integrity (in the sense both of truth and coherence). Instead of repudiating his past Rousseau attempted to recuperate it as evidence of his unique, autonomous self. But as Coetzee demonstrates in ‘Confession and Double Thoughts’, this strategy of revealing one’s shame as a guarantee of authenticity suggests a deeper form of shamelessness that undermines its premise and leads to a potentially infinite regress – the confession itself
becomes matter for further confession, and so on. By drawing attention to the subjectivity of the confessant, Rousseau prised it from its position of safe anonymity within the normative world and exposed it (and its testimony) to scrutiny and suspicion. The result: instead of underwriting the narrator’s integrity, this strategy constantly threatens to reveal the unstable binary of narrating and narrated selves.

The preoccupation of subsequent modern confessional writers with the self (noted in Part I) is testament both to its importance within the grand project of modernity – as the ground of post-Cartesian knowledge – and also to its problematic nature. As Toulmin notes, romanticism never broke with rationalism regarding the primacy of the individual subject; ‘rather, it was rationalism’s mirror image, focusing on the independent self’s emotions rather than its intellect’ (qtd. in Gallagher xix). And the same assumption may be identified in another guise in high modernism, where Kant’s potentially disruptive notion that truth is made not found is co-opted to the heroic myth of the creative artist as bearer and shaper of higher values within a debased society. Just as the centripetal force of Christian ideology had contained particular subversive elements of confession from Augustine’s time until the decline of the church toward the end of the eighteenth century, the grand project of modernity contained others. It would take the trauma of two world wars to finally shake that latter ideology to its foundations.

Part of the difficulty of understanding what has come since is that, as McHale points out, there is no single postmodernism but rather a range of postmodernisms, ‘all literary-historical fictions, discursive artifacts constructed either by contemporary readers and writers or retrospectively by literary historians’ (Postmodernist Fiction 4). Even a brief sample of the range of pronouncements upon the subject confirms this. McHale himself celebrates postmodernism as a paradigm shift from epistemological to ontological concerns (9-11). A
similarly revolutionary note is sounded by Lyotard’s influential description of the postmodern ‘incredulity towards metanarratives’ (Postmodern Condition xxiv), and by Ricoeur’s call, in Freud and Philosophy, for a ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’ (27). The result, according to Guinn, is a world ‘in which reality seems increasingly problematic’ (xvii), reflected in the arts by the effacement between high and low culture.

However, other theorists such as Graff (in ‘The Myth of the Postmodern Breakthrough’) and Huysen (in ‘Mapping the Postmodern’) view postmodernism as merely an extension of previous, modernist values – the latter with a degree of hope, the former with condemnation. Still others identify a reactionary spirit within postmodernism: Gallagher, following Toulmin, suggests it may constitute a hearkening ‘back to the legacy of Renaissance humanism, with its intellectual respect for complexity, diversity, and ambiguity as aspects of the human condition’ (xvi), although she cautions against a more radically sceptical, but politically conservative, version.15 A similar ambivalence can be heard in Lodge’s statement concerning the debate over whether or not postmodernism is significantly new: ‘Both opinions are tenable – both are in a sense ‘true’. It depends upon what you are looking for and where you are standing when you are looking’ (Modes 228). (Of course, this statement itself suggests a characteristically postmodern relativism.)

Endeavouring to synthesise such conflicting claims about its nature and significance, Hutcheon in Narcissistic Narrative describes postmodernism as a movement of ‘complicity and critique, of reflexivity and historicity, that at once inscribes and subverts…conventions and ideologies’ (11). Similarly, Harvey, whilst characterising the postmodern moment as one of ‘[f]ragmentation, indeterminacy, and intense distrust of all universal or “totalizing” discourses’ (9), also observes – in Currie’s words – an ‘increasing interpenetration of opposite tendencies’ including ‘the mutual contamination of realistic and ironic modes’
(111). And Currie himself writes of an accompanying movement in contemporary narrative theory towards the principles of ‘[d]iversification, deconstruction and politicisation’ (6).

The above, necessarily limited, survey lends credence to Hutcheon’s warning that ‘[l]ew words are more used and abused’ (*Narcissistic Narrative* 1). Nicol likewise contends that ‘[p]ostmodernism is the most problematic concept in contemporary cultural criticism’ owing to its use across a wide range of academic disciplines as well as its entry into popular discourse, plus its application to swiftly changing phenomena; thus ‘it is almost standard practice for introductions to postmodernism to begin with the rather paradoxical assertion that postmodernism is impossible to introduce satisfactorily’ (1).

Having acknowledged this, however, Nicol goes on to suggest that if the object known as postmodernism remains difficult to define, the *academic construction of postmodernism* – that is, the theory surrounding, and purporting to explain, that object – ‘has become more or less established in critical discourse as a term that refers to a shift in what it means to be a subject in late twentieth-century society and to designate a related attitude of self-reflexivity or ironic knowingness that permeates our culture as a result’ (2). From this we may deduce what Durante calls ‘the one agreed upon premise of postmodernism – that it is essential to make our underlying assumptions clear and precise rather than allowing categories to do our analysis’ (51).

It is not the intention of this study to champion a particular ‘version’ of postmodernism.¹⁴ Nor will I attempt to unify a body of thought deeply concerned with plurality. My interest lies in the ramifications of the ideas noted above for the confessional mode (and vice versa), and the way these ideas and their ramifications might be exhibited and explored in my two primary texts.
To generalise, the implications for confession are profound. The inherent tension of self-narration described at the start of this chapter is just one issue that has been foregrounded within the general climate of epistemological uncertainty. Given the crucial role of the self in post-Enlightenment ideology it is not surprising that this entity became a primary target for postmodern interrogation. Jameson, Deleuze and Guattari, and Harvey all relate postmodernity to the condition of schizophrenia – ‘a disunity in the personality, where different states of mind cannot be unified in the pronoun “I”’ (Currie 102). Nor is this condition confined to the individual. Rather, ‘the widespread use of psychoanalytic terminology in cultural theory...should be understood less in the spirit of analogy between the mind and the world than as a dismantling of the boundary between them’ (Currie 102).

Gallagher, on the other hand, points out that assertions of ‘the death of voice, self, representation, and referentiality’ (14) are only one pole of the spectrum of postmodern thought and are themselves open to ideological critique; she follows Ricouer in suggesting that ‘[i]dentities are not always seen as completely free or autonomous, but rather as constituted within relationship’ (16). Nevertheless she concurs that ‘[t]he critical deconstruction of the idea of the author – of any text – has rendered an especially powerful blow to those texts that purport to represent the self’ (14). This point is well illustrated in the epigraph (from poet Dick Higgins) to the first part of McHale’s study of postmodernist fiction, which describes a shift in artistic enquiry from the questions ‘How can I interpret this world of which I am a part? And what am I in it?’ to the questions ‘Which world is this? What is to be done in it? Which of my selves is to do it?’ (1).

If there can be no privileged ethical or moral value system; if all confessions are vulnerable to endless interrogation; if even the presence of a confession no longer guarantees the existence of a confessor – in the face of such difficulties, what remains of the form? As I
suggested in Chapter 1 (following Gallagher), one way of revisiting the issue has been suggested in Olney’s influential ‘Autobiography and the Cultural Moment’, a study of confession’s now dominant offspring.

According to Olney, the history of autobiography can be divided into three stages, each characterised by a particular focus on one of the three constituent elements within the term autobiography (literally ‘self-life-writing’). Early examples assumed the centrality of *bios* – ‘that body of historical facts that lay there in a clear and objective light to be recovered accurately by the author’s memory and to be transmitted faithfully to the reader’ (Olney 21). This was followed by a shift in focus toward the *autos* – ‘the “I” that coming awake to its own being shapes and determines the nature of the autobiography and in so doing half discovers, half creates itself’ (ibid.).

It will be seen that these two stages correspond respectively to those periods in the development of the confession narrative that I have called premodern and modern. My argument, as I will develop it through a further examination of *Sportswriter* and *Remains*, is that the confession narrative in its postmodern phase shares with the third stage of Olney’s model a preoccupation with *graphê*. This term may refer either to the process (in Olney’s analysis the act of writing and/or reading) or the product (in Gallagher’s analysis the text) in which ‘the self and the life, complexly intertwined and entangled, take on a certain form, assume a particular shape and image, and endlessly reflect that image back and forth between themselves as between two mirrors’ (Olney 22).

As previously noted, the ‘double-mirror’ image is something of a postmodern *idée fixe.* Indeed, Olney’s observation of an increased focus on the text seems in line with the self-reflexive turn of many postmodern fictions, such as those surveyed in influential studies by Lodge (*Modes of Modern Writing*), Waugh (*Metafiction*), Hutcheon (*Narcissistic Narrative* and *A*
Poetics of Postmodernism) and McHale (Postmodernist Fiction and Constructing Postmodernism). Yet neither Ford nor Ishiguro seems to belong in such company, and each novel has found critics willing to champion it as a reaction against postmodernism. Furthermore, both authors have been quicker to acknowledge a debt to Chekhov’s concern with everyday life, and to distance themselves from the overt metafictional experimentation associated with postmodern literature (Parkes 17). Ford has admitted, ‘I had been trying to write under the influence of Donald Barthelme, Robert Coover, William Gass…But my instincts, I guess, weren’t particularly well served by those narrative practices and conceits’ (qtd. in Lyons 51). Ishiguro has said, ‘I don’t believe that the nature of fiction is one of the burning issues of the late twentieth century’, citing Ford’s writing as ‘an antidote really to those over-intellectualized or self-conscious literary creations that almost seem to be created for the professor down the corridor to decipher’ (qtd. in Vorda and Herzinger 145); and elsewhere he states, ‘I try to avoid that very postmodern element in my books’, although this is followed by the riddling remark, ‘I always try to disguise those elements of my writing that I feel perhaps are experimental’ (qtd. in Mason, ‘An Interview’ 340, 346).

But if Ford and Ishiguro are evidently keen to eschew overt experimentation, I would suggest that the postmodern awareness of textuality may manifest itself in ways that are more subtle if no less far-reaching. Indeed, if Derrida has suggested that ‘there is nothing outside the text’ (Of Grammatology 158), to interpret this as meaning that truth or reality have simply been relocated to discourse would be reductive – no more than a variation on the epistemological theme identified by McHale as preceding postmodernism. As Lodge argues in Modes of Modern Writing, texts preoccupied with their own textual status do not escape the structuralist dialectic proposed by Jakobson; they simply tend towards the metaphorical (that is, symbolist, writerly) pole and away from the metonymic (that is, realistic, readerly) pole.
However, he goes on to suggest that postmodernist texts may in fact occupy a third position, critiquing the metaphoric-metonymic binary by resisting final identification with either pole and instead producing ‘labyrinths without exits’ (Modes 226).

To return to Olney, a second glance at his use of the ‘double mirror’ image implies a similar understanding: the text cannot be said to exist independently, or separated off from the opposed mirrors of world and self, narrated and narrator. Rather it is constituted within their relationship, whilst denying the possibility of fixing either as a definitive point of origin. In the following chapters I will argue that this is also the way in which both Ford and Ishiguro achieve their distinctive effects, and that Sportswriter and Remains may be viewed as examples of what Elias has termed ‘Postmodern Realism’.

Let me reiterate, however, that the primary purpose of this analysis is not to claim either text for a particular version of postmodernism. I merely suggest – following critics such as Guinn (regarding Sportswriter) and Petry (regarding Remains) – that the comments by Ford and Ishiguro noted above indicate the authors’ awareness of postmodern theory and practice, and that their works, each in its own way, are as deeply concerned with and responsive to these same issues. It is this postmodern sensibility that informs their use of the confessional mode; the departures from earlier confessional tropes, far from weakening the text, demonstrate a productive intermingling of traditional and contemporary elements.
5 – ‘[N]either the seer nor the thing seen’:

The Sportswriter and Postmodernism

Having examined some of the ways Sportswriter draws upon confessional tropes, I will now suggest how such a reading is in turn informed by postmodern concerns. In this light, Sportswriter appears, paradoxically, most confessional in those moments when it confesses its limits as a confession, encouraging the reader to adapt to indeterminacy, to accept that we cannot ever be sure about the relationship between narrator and narrated, the confessing subject and the object of confession.

Following Hutcheon’s assertion that postmodernism involves both complicity and critique, I will first examine the representation of postmodernity within pre-existing confessional conventions, then as a force of complication, critique and development.

We have already noted that the premodern confession, suggested by the novel’s opening, is focused on the external world (Olney’s bias) including an externalised version of the narrator’s past self. As lengthy studies by Guinn and Folks have shown, the world represented in Sportswriter is saturated with postmodern elements. Among the ‘postmodern currents’ identified by Guinn is ‘a pervasive commercialism that exerts a homogenizing effect on the local culture’ (118, 119-120). Or as Frank puts it, ‘with enough time American civilization will make the midwest of any place’ (Ford 121), and he extols his hometown of Haddam as ‘a little Anyplace…with stable property values, regular garbage pick-up, good drainage, ample parking, located not far from a major airport’ (109-110). Descriptions of localities within Haddam and on Frank’s trip to Detroit emphasise the way in which ‘the local and the regional have been subsumed by an anarchic mix of architectural references’
(Guinn 120), blending high and low culture into a ‘pretentious midwestern pseudo-luxury’ (Ford 126). The ‘simple, unambiguous, even factitious’ result (Ford 109) is an environment devoid of any real ties to history or tradition: ‘New today. New tomorrow. Eternal renewal on a manageable scale’ (154). According to Lash, in the postmodern world ‘our everyday life becomes pervaded with a reality…which increasingly comprises representations’ (12).

Similarly factitious is Frank’s community, which embodies ‘an eclectic and mobile contemporary social order. No-one who lives in Haddam is actually from there’ (Guinn 123). The narrator’s isolation is established from the outset, as he waits alone in a graveyard, listening to his neighbours play tennis and reflecting that ‘we chitter-chatter across the driveways and hedges and over the tops of each other’s cars in the parking lots of grocery stores, remarking on the condition of each other’s soffits and down-drains and the likelihood of early winter, sometimes make tentative plans to get together, I hardly ever see them, and I take it in my stride’ (Ford 11). As Guinn notes, ‘beyond the conventional suburban discourse of consumerism, there seems to be no lingua franca in the community’ (123). Even when seemingly significant bonds exist, as with Bert Brisker – another former literary writer who later dabbled in sportswriting, and ‘the closest acquaintance I still have in town from the old cocktail-dinner party days’ (Ford 50) – experience has taught the characters that ‘we had nothing to talk about…Consequently we see each other only on the train to Gotham, something that happens once a week. It is, I think, the essence of a modern friendship’ (Ford 51). And the same applies to the Divorced Men’s Club, ‘perhaps the closest thing to community in Frank’s world’ (Guinn 124), where the unspoken rule is never to mention the common fact that unites them. When another member of the group attempts to take him into confidence, Frank is nonplussed and disparaging (Ford 91).
As for the narrator himself, Folks points out that ‘[t]he major elements of his personal history…are all inseparable from the social and historical context in which he has lived; they are not merely idiosyncratic events in a personal history but reflect the shared history of his generation’ (127). Indeed the year of his birth – 1945 – is the year most commonly cited as the start of the postmodern period, and ‘[w]hat Frank ultimately indicates with his love of the quotidian is the failure of the modernist project. He is a lapsed modern among the ruins of modernist culture: a novelist who has given up literature, a former college professor who now reads mail-order catalogues and writes sports – in short, an embodiment of the effacement between high and low culture’ (Guinn 130).

But if Frank can be seen as a representative figure, he is also strangely difficult to grasp – even, apparently, by Frank himself. His ongoing attempts to expound his philosophy of life (with an idiosyncratic, ad hoc terminology including dreaminess, mystery, and literalism) contain innumerable grey areas and contradictions. Frank envies athletes their power of ‘relinquishing doubt and ambiguity and self-inquiry in favor of a pleasant, self-championing one-dimensionality’ (Ford 69); he is always conscious of multiple perspectives and truths, unable to ‘merge into the oneness of the writer’s vision’ (Ford 70). This sense of multiplicity – identified by Guinn as ‘the struggles of the decentred postmodern self…to define that self with limited cultural materials’ (126) – is also reflected in Frank’s confession that he possesses a number of voices that are not wholly his to command. Ironically, the ‘voice that is really mine, a frank, vaguely rural voice’ is actually a construct that he used to practice in college, and that sounds ‘more or less like a used car salesman’ (Ford 17), a comparison that hardly inspires confidence as it evokes the debasement and commodification of narrative, the ‘self-conscious and performative’ aspect of postmodern identity (Guinn 126), and the blurring of reality and representation noted by Lash.
It is tempting to view *Sportswriter* within the premodern confessional framework as a direct, essentially accurate representation of ‘life in the modern world: the individual’s sense of alienation, restlessness, displacement, and fragmentation; the sense of rootlessness, of being cut off from the past, which so often characterizes life in an increasingly mobile society; the disintegration of community; the breakup of the family; and the impoverishment of all human connections’ (Guagliardo, ‘Marginal People’ 5). Yet if Frank displays a characteristically postmodern incredulity towards metanarratives in insisting that ‘there are no transcendent themes in life’ (Ford 22), ‘the answer like most other reliable answers is in parts’ (138) and ‘[l]iterature’s consolations are always temporary’ (229), and by distancing himself from the ‘confident, repentant suburbanites’ of his local church (244); if he rejects the principles of confession by his determination to avoid regret, his ‘conviction that I have no ethics at all and little consistency’ (126) and his claim to be ‘a proponent of... forgetting’ (150) – nevertheless his account is substantially comprised of confessions, regarding both the past (his extra-marital affairs and his ‘dreaminess’ following his son’s death) and the present (his impatience with Walter Luckett before the latter’s suicide, and his increasingly desperate behaviour afterwards).

This chain of confessions leads finally to ‘The End’, in which Frank learns to accept the past, acknowledges that he has in fact been in mourning despite his desire to move on, and subsequently experiences a moment not unlike the epiphanies he previously denounced, suggesting that he has been ‘“saved” in the only way I can be (*pro tempore*)’ (244). Indeed, Durante’s claim that in the epilogue Frank has ‘subsequently moved to Florida to write about his experiences’ (47) encourages such a reading by recasting the story as a retrospective account of how the narrator ‘faced up to a great empty moment in life but without suffering the usual terrible regret’ (Ford 375).
Such a ‘classic’ premodern reading, however, ignores both the experience of the present-tense narration, and its effect on our understanding of the narrator. As Walker suggests, ‘the reader questions just about every claim that Frank makes, at least after the first 50 pages or so, as his penchant for prevarication becomes clear’ (66). As noted in Part I, even the opening passage, despite its strongly premodern confessional tone, contains undercurrents of the modern confession. Frank’s claim that ‘very little really worries me or keeps me up at night’ is too qualified to sound wholly convincing, particularly following the admission that ‘the older I get the more things scare me’ (Ford 10). Likewise, the delivery of his initial thumbnail autobiography is so understated it not only highlights the intimations of loss and turmoil but also suggests an unnaturally muted emotional response, making his subsequent statement, ‘I still believe in the possibilities of passion and romance’ (10) sound both improbable and desperately poignant.

The scene that follows merely confirms that Frank’s struggle is ongoing, while his self-consciousness and evident willingness to lie to X raise more doubts about the integrity of his narrative. Perhaps, then, the world the reader sees is not objective reality but the perception of an unreliable narrator – a possibility that shifts the focus from the story told, to the identity of the teller and the associated concerns of the modern confession.

From the outset, therefore, a more appropriate reading strategy seems to be that of the modern confession, involving scrutiny of the protagonist and close attention to indicators of what degree of ironic distance is required. *Sportswriter* contains many such indicators. The most obvious, as already mentioned, is Frank’s belated discovery that the past ‘is not a burden, though I’ve always thought of it as one’ (377). But the novel is littered with ambiguities and contradictions, from the simplest linguistic level upwards. An apparently simple statement like ‘very little really worries me’ (10), while evidently intended to indicate
that he does not worry about much, might also mean that he is worried by the smallest things. Qualifications abound: ‘I believe I have survived that now and nearly put dreaminess behind me’ (16). Frank’s description of the emotion between X and himself – a ‘sadness that does not feel sad’ (16) – strains the bounds of literal meaning. Other observations display his penchant for the conditional or hypothetical mood, such as ‘it may simply be that at my age I’m satisfied with less and with things less complicated’ (63). Even his most resolute remarks – ‘I would like it as much as it’s possible to like any life’ (146) – are not entirely free from the shadow of equivocation.

An extension of these linguistic ambiguities is the narrator’s homespun philosophy. As previously noted, Frank’s extended and ongoing efforts to convey his view of the world resembles the profession of faith required of earlier confessants. It also resembles Stevens’s efforts in Remains, particularly as both often relate to the narrator’s employment – the more commonly understood meaning of profession within contemporary life. This in itself seems significant, possibly suggesting that the individual’s job may function as a ‘little’ narrative (in Lyotard’s terminology) to provide a sense of value and structure in the absence of traditional metanarratives or ‘grand’ narratives.18

However, as numerous commentators, including Walker (68) and Folks (123-25), have noted, it quickly becomes obvious that Frank’s beliefs are equally unstable. On one occasion he claims ‘nobody’s history could’ve brought another Tom, Dick or Harry to the same place’ (48); elsewhere he says ‘Anyone could be anyone else in most ways’ (87). And rather than providing a set of guidelines for action, such aphorisms seem to function as tools for self-serving rationalisation after the fact: ‘It is possible to love someone, and no one else, and still not live with that one person or even see her’ (380).
The judgements of other characters upon Frank are a more direct challenge to his version of events. According to X, Frank has simply grown ‘untrustworthy’ (Ford 137), and later she says, ‘You’ve really become awful. You weren’t always awful. But now you are’ (341). (Nor does he deny either accusation outright.) When Frank suggests to his new girlfriend, Vicki, that she might be unhappy, she responds, ‘But it’s really you, though…You hate everything’ (291). Even Frank’s former father-in-law, a detached but sympathetic observer, describes him as ‘a pretty remarkable moron’ (133). Likewise, in all the major events of the story – the interview with Herb Wallagher (158-70), Easter dinner with Vicki’s family (249-303), the events involving Walter Luckett, and Frank’s removal to Florida (372-81) – the disjunction between the narrator’s expectations and reality similarly functions to cast doubt on his reliability.

In modern confessions the cumulative effect of such signs is to provide a corrective lens or a key to decipher the meaning behind the text and arrive at the ‘real story’. But if Frank’s account in Sportswriter seems constantly on the verge of unravelling, it never entirely does. Nor is the reader ever able to clearly ‘see around the sides of’ Frank (Ford 70); he himself is so adept at this, so aware of the multiplicity of positions he could assume, that he constantly escapes identification with any single position.

As is suggested by Frank’s wry references to being ‘anxious in the old mossy existential sense’ (151) and to Herb Wallagher as ‘alienated as Camus’ (214), the modern confession may provide a reference point but it is no more capable than the premodern confession of a definitive answer. If ‘Frank’s anxiety is of a different order, the product of cultural and social disturbances rather than the disturbance of “being itself” ’ (Folks 126), the fact that this anxiety is never directly confronted or exposed leaves the question of its effect upon his perspective (and the reader’s) unanswered. While the text displays the postmodern tendency
towards acknowledgement of socio-historical specificity, it also ensures that the relationship between inner and outer disturbance remains obscure.

If Frank has rejected the ‘lie of literature’ (Ford 125), it is not in favour of something more conclusively truthful. Whereas the typical modern confession is based on the search for truth (by and/or about an individual subjectivity), Frank repeatedly assures us of the opposite: ‘[p]eople never tell the truth’ (82); ‘[f]ull disclosure never does anybody any favors’ (83); ‘I’ve stopped worrying about being completely within someone else since you can’t be anyway’ (138); ‘the only truth that can never be a lie…is life itself’ (380). Paradoxically these admissions may serve to encourage the reader’s faith. But given Frank’s understanding of language and storytelling, this too could be a ruse. Like many of his other statements, these could equally be signs of a profound insight and wisdom, or mere justifications for Frank’s own lapses. The end result is a version of the Cretan paradox: if I claim to be lying, my statement rebounds upon itself; it can be neither true nor false but remains impervious to interpretation.

It is hardly surprising then that Sportswriter has been described both as the story of ‘a happy man’ (Dupuy 93) and ‘a devastating chronicle of contemporary alienation’ (Kakutani), and the issues of Frank’s reliability and the appropriate degree of irony required by the text have been much debated. Hoffman disparagingly claims, ‘Bascombe’s estrangement is charted with unsettling irony’ (14). Weber on the other hand detects an ‘overarching lack of irony’ (qtd. in Dupuy 93). Durante draws attention to the positive potential of ‘Bascombe’s self-reflexive irony’ (48). Hobson considers Frank’s narrative to be ‘factually reliable but emotionally unreliable’ (93) and complicates matters still further by suggesting ‘a transcendence of accessible irony – or, perhaps, a deeper irony that turns on itself, ironizing the ironists’ (87).
The issue of irony is significant. As noted in Part I, Axthelm identifies irony as one of the two key techniques of the modern confessional novel. On the other hand, irony has also often been linked to postmodernism\textsuperscript{19} – indeed, according to Nicol, ‘perhaps the dominant mode in postmodern culture as a whole...is irony’ (4). While acknowledging Hutcheon’s point that ‘irony appears to have become a problematic mode of expression at the end of the twentieth century’ (Irony’s Edge 1), I would suggest that there is a clear distinction between Axthelm’s use of the term and later, postmodern understandings of it. For the former, irony ‘maintains the author’s detachment from his hero and also gives the hero a weapon with which to destroy any romantic notions which might lure him away from the central purpose of his confession’ (Axthelm 11). That is, irony in the modern context is a tool for dispelling falsehood and illusion in order to access the ultimate truth about a situation or character. In postmodern practice it performs a quite different function, serving to ‘acknowledge that any belief one might have is provisional and could just as easily be exchanged for another...that there is no such thing as fixed meaning; any meaning is pregnant with others and can be altered subtly into something quite different through a modulation of tone or context’ (Nicol 4-5). This usage of irony is therefore a mark of the inaccessibility of truth – including the degree of its own presence within a text, as shown above in the conflicting readings of Sportswriter. (An extension of this view of irony, involving Hutcheon’s discussion of ‘meta-ironic framing’, will be given in Chapter 6.)

I would suggest, therefore, that those critics who attempt to pin Frank down, to establish a fixed relationship between narrator and reader, miss the point. What is at work here is a postmodern phenomenon that Currie, paraphrasing Harvey, describes as ‘the increasing interpenetration of opposite tendencies...[and] the mutual contamination of realistic and ironic modes’ (111). In Lodge’s words, ‘[t]he difficulty, for the reader, of postmodern
writing, is not so much a matter of obscurity (which might be cleared up) as of uncertainty, which is endemic’ (Modes 226). For although the issues foregrounded by irony are essentially epistemological (and thus in keeping with Axthelm’s identification of the technique as central to the modern confession), McHale has noted that ‘[i]ntractable epistemological uncertainty becomes at a certain point ontological plurality or instability: push epistemological questions far enough and they “tip over” into ontological questions’ (Postmodernist Fiction 11).

A similar narrative strategy has been identified by Elias in a number of other novels published in the 1980s. In order ‘to account for the odd mixture of experiment and verisimilitude, metafiction and realism’ such works display (28), she proposes the category of ‘Postmodern Realism’. Following Lash’s argument ‘that modernism conceived of representation as problematic, whereas postmodernism problematizes reality itself’ (Elias 19), Elias suggests that Postmodern Realism ‘seems to return to the “closed text” and fixed subjectivity of realism. But the reality which is once again foregrounded turns out itself to comprise images or representation; turns out itself to be artificial and/or flimsy, turns out to be anything but stable...The “play of the signifier” may have ceased, but the referent...seems to have slipped more or less totally out of control’ (17). This idea of “closed texts that reveal an open reality” (Elias 22) is echoed by Ford himself, who has stated, ‘narrators don’t have to be [reliable]. Or maybe another way of saying it is sometimes they are and sometimes they aren’t’ (Guagliardo, ‘A Conversation’ 155).

What Ford’s comment suggests – and what Sportswriter demands – is that the reader accept that ‘life has only one certain closure’ (Ford 380), which is not life but its negation, death. Indeed, Dupuy has observed that in Frank’s mind at least, Walter Lackett’s suicide was directly connected to the latter’s feeling ‘compelled to explain himself’ (101), and Walter’s
final note to Frank is nothing if not a confession of failure. It is a compulsion Frank has previously encountered in the teachers at Berkshire College, whose ‘explaining, explicating and dissecting...made for the worst kind of despairs’; he considers such people to be ‘born deceivers of the lowest sort, since what they want from life is impossible – time-freed, existential youth forever’ (Ford 228).

An alternative to this life-negating search for permanence and certainty is suggested by Frank’s relationship with the one teacher at Berkshire with whom he feels some sort of affinity. Selma Jassim, a literary deconstructionist (significantly the novel’s most overt nod to postmodernity), assures Frank ‘I’ll always tell you the truth, unless of course I’m lying to you’. And this, Frank realises, ‘was actually a piece of great luck. I was being promised truth and mystery – not an easy combination. There would be important things I would and wouldn’t know, and I could count on it, could look forward to it, muse on it, worry about it if I was idiot enough, which I wasn’t, and all I had to do was agree, and be forever freed’ (83). This could be a summary of Frank’s attitude towards life, as well as a formula for how to approach his narrative.

The advantage of accepting that ‘[l]ife is forever a text which cannot be fully read, and to get on in life, one must finally relent’ (Dupuy 99) becomes clear in the aftermath of Walter’s death. Although circumstances have wrenched Frank so far from the everydayness he craves that ‘Walter would say that I have become neither the seer nor the thing seen – as invisible as Claude Rains in the movie’ – he accepts the possibilities on offer. And momentarily ‘loosed from body and duty, left to drift on the night breeze, to do as we will, to cast about for what we would like to be when we next occur’ (Ford 345), he becomes available for a new, hitherto unimagined phase of his life.
This moment of invisibility is crucial both within Frank’s story, and for an understanding of the nature of that story. It is not only the major turning point but also a point of symbolic death. Frank’s primary double has killed himself after telling Frank, ‘I think I’ll get in my car and drive around’ (200), and now the narrator is in a similar position. The parallel is reinforced by the novel’s Easter setting, which evokes a mythic narrative requiring death before rebirth, and Frank is about to set out on a night-time excursion to ‘Gotham’, earlier compared in hellish terms to ‘the pale hand of a dead limo driver’ (38). The phrase ‘neither the seer nor the thing seen’ suggests the negative side of Frank’s rejection of a fixed position or fixed truths: the possibility of utter dissociation from both the internal concept of self and the ties that situate one within the external world.

Such moments – the lowest ebb, fraught with danger and seemingly bereft of opportunity – traditionally provide the impetus for full confession. In premodern confessions the confessor recognises the extent of his or her violation of social norms; in modern confessions the confessor achieves the supreme manifestation of his or her individuality. Frank has certainly behaved either wrongly or mistakenly with those closest to him (Walter, Vicki and X); likewise he is forced to confront his own selfhood, in the question, ‘Where...do you go if you’re me?’ (Ford 345). Frank’s response, however, is to undercut the significance of the situation. It is not ‘a genuine empty moment’, he suggests, since ‘[a]n empty moment requires both expectation and its eventual defeat...And I have no such hopes to dash’ (ibid.). Whether we can accept this reasoning at face value is debatable. It might be a desperate attempt at self-reassurance during a genuinely panicked moment. Regardless, however, it is a telling observation. His condition is emptier than empty. His confession, such as it is, defies the limits of traditional confession, moving beyond epistemology into ontology: there is nothing to know and nobody to know it.
By drawing attention to the conventional limits of representation, the phrase ‘neither the seer nor the thing seen’ thus also moves beyond the realm of character psychology into textual self-reflexivity. In one respect it reinforces by analogy the idea of symbolic death: to be neither subject nor object is the narratological equivalent of death, non-being. But in another respect it foregrounds a different mode of being – that is, the third term in Olney’s analysis of autobiography, graphē. Or, that which appears in the space between the mirrors, endlessly reflecting back and forth, of self and life. This focus on Frank’s textual nature – or at least his instantiation within the text – raises further ontological questions. Previously the reader has been given reason to question the veracity of Frank’s account in light of his linguistic self-consciousness and possible unreliability. Now, however, we are forced to recognise the fundamental role of linguistic conventions in defining the terms of reference. That is, we must acknowledge that ‘Frank’ may be as much a creation of language as its wielder. Likewise his world, the ‘thing seen’, may provide the material ground of language, but its conceptualisation cannot precede language.

Such observations are recognisably postmodern. But the full deconstructive thrust of the episode lies in its self-negation, its description of a state that is patently impervious to description. The suggestion might be that there is a reality outside of the text, transcending discourse; it might equally evoke pure textuality, a set of unactualised discursive possibilities free of all extra-linguistic connotations. Regardless, this turning back of language upon itself is another version of the Cretan paradox – an expression of indeterminacy, or irreducible multivalency. Yet another layer of uncertainty is added by Frank’s displacement of the claim about seer and seen onto Walter, whose attitude Frank has consistently diverged from. And in light of events, Frank’s understanding of Walter is highly questionable.
Unable to avail itself of the certitude afforded by earlier metanarratives, which privileged either *bias* or *autos* as the locus of truth, the postmodern confession expresses the difficulty of maintaining such fundamental distinctions – or indeed any definitive claims whatsoever. But such radical uncertainty does not mean the end of representation or narrative; instead, representation and narrative are drawn *into* the process, as part of the shifting matrix of conditions that inform the account. World and self merge with each other and with the now-visible presence of the text. At best, Ford himself has suggested, a book ‘may tell a truth’ (Guagliardo, ‘A Conversation’ 155) – the hypothetical ‘may’ and the indefinite article both redolent of postmodern wariness. Similarly he claims that his is a truth ‘with a little t, which is the way most truth comes’ (Guagliardo, *Conversations* 47).

This phenomenon is again evident in *Sportswriter’s* conclusion. Despite his eschewal of conventional confession, Frank nevertheless achieves a kind of redemption, based partly on a new set of inner understandings (concerning his attitude to the past, and his son’s death) and partly on a reintegration with others around him (Catherine Flaherty and his newly discovered Florida relatives). The novel ends with the narrator’s description of a moment of personal serenity and a sense of renewed connection with life. Yet one might question whether this moment does in fact possess the positive significance attributed to it. It may, for instance, be simply a rationalisation on Frank’s part to justify his irresponsibility in running away from his old life. On the other hand, even if it is fundamentally affirmative, is it any more significant than similar previous moments of ‘rare immanence’ such as Frank’s church visit, with its ‘promise that more’s around here than meets the eye, even though it is of course a sham and will last only as far as my car’ (244)? Indeed, the narrator’s reference to ‘this glistening one moment’ suggests not (381).
The language of the passage, however, undeniably evokes a powerful positive charge consistent with the ideal end state envisioned both by traditional confession, and with the author’s professed view of ‘fiction as being essentially optimistic’; that ‘any first person narration of even the grimmest event supposes the event has been survived and can be committed to telling’ (Disher 14, 16). But as Walker points out, if Frank’s description suggests a state of ‘self-reconciliation’ possible ‘after individuals reckon with and accept their own isolation’, it also suggests ‘precisely what he has said happens only in literature: that Joycean epiphany, that…Frank himself has claimed earlier, comprises the great “lie of literature”’ (98-99).

Is this another example of the narrator’s changed attitudes, faced with an experience when reality actually resembles the fiction he’d previously dismissed? Is it simply the best transcription of an experience transcending language and essentially incommunicable? Or is it meant to remind the reader that the entire account is a fictional text; that we cannot expect reality because ‘[t]he only truth that can never be a lie…is life itself – the thing that happens’ (Ford 380)? And if the latter, should this self-consciousness be attributed to Frank the narrator or Ford the ‘implied author’? To further blur the issue, one might argue that the reader’s experience is an equally legitimate ‘thing that happens’ – in which case there can be no clear distinction between ‘life itself’ and the ‘lie of literature’.

Rather than resolving this uncertainty, the final paragraph compounds it still further by switching, in a manner unprecedented in the rest of the novel, entirely to the second person mode of address. In its vernacular usage, ‘you’ can simply register a generalisation – of which the reader may be justifiably suspicious, given that the entire preceding account has tended to foster resistance to such universal claims. Then again, Frank’s awareness of the problem of truth may (as previously) give added weight to his statements.
Paradoxically, although the description evokes a sense of unity and wholeness with one’s self and the moment, the mode of address suggests otherness – possibly a split subjectivity addressing some displaced element of itself (as appears the case with Stevens in Remains). It may in fact be the voice of a character trying to assuage his own doubts about the validity of his discourse.

On the other hand if we do accept this as a moment of genuine, albeit temporary, transcendence, the switch to second person may represent Frank’s experience of coming out of that ‘residue or skin of all the things you’ve done and been and said and erred at’, by which selfhood is conventionally defined (Ford 380). Nevertheless, such an overtly linguistic device draws attention to the text as representation, begging the question of whether it reflects or produces the phenomenon thus construed.

As McHale observes, ‘[t]he second person is par excellence the sign of relation’ (Postmodernist Fiction 223). In this respect the final paragraph might constitute a direct address to the implied reader, encouraging a sense of complicity between narrator/confessant and reader/confessor. Again, however, this directly contravenes Frank’s earlier rejection of the possibility of ‘bel[ing] within myself by being as nearly as possible within somebody else’ (Ford 138). Nor is it possible to determine if this is a narratological attempt to bring the narrative closer to ‘reality’, or rather if the narrator is constructing the reader as part of his text. Thus it seems to simultaneously close and foreground the gap between two levels of reality, or modes of being.

Once again epistemological issues are pushed to an extreme, refocusing the narrative in ontological terms. The reader is left finally without means to totalise these multiple, irreducible ‘little’ narratives into a coherent whole, or even to determine what the nature of such a truth might be. Instead of knowing, we are asked to accept and appreciate the
experience in all its richness. For, as the novel concludes with beguiling ambiguity, ‘in truth, of course, this may be the last time that you will ever feel this way again’ (Ford 381).
6 – ‘Why…do you always have to pretend?’: 

The Remains of the Day and Postmodernism

In an interview with Susan Chira, Ishiguro spoke of his preoccupation with ‘the way people, and by extension societies, come to face truths about themselves…What I'm interested in is not the actual fact that my characters have done things they later regret… I'm interested in how they come to terms with it’ (3, emphasis added). While the idea of facing truths is clearly central to the confessional mode, I will argue that Ishiguro’s focus on the process of confession, rather than the content, is intimately connected with postmodernism.

If Sportswriter openly revels in the limits of confession, Remains presents a more fraught view of this process. Confession in the latter novel appears to be at once compulsive and involuntary, yet also implicated in mechanisms of self-justifying rationalisation and self-deception. An examination of the resulting tensions and ambiguities suggests that Remains, like Sportswriter, uses traditional representational tropes to present a reality that is inherently unstable.

At first glance Remains has little connection with postmodernity. A period piece, it depicts, and speaks the language of, a vanished world of genteel Englishness. Although the prologue, which establishes the framing narrative, shows this world in decline, the measured tone minimises any sense of disruption and the elegiac undertones harmonise rather than conflict with the ‘old world charm’, suggesting that the more things change the more they stay the same.

Nevertheless, Rushdie points out that ‘below the understatement of the novel’s surface is a turbulence as immense as it is slow’ (53), and the source of this turbulence lies in the
historical genesis of postmodernity. The retrospective sections of the narrative span the period from the aftermath of World War I (the first great blow to the Enlightenment project of modernity) to the final days before World War II, focusing on the politics and ideologies that would culminate in the latter – and would afterwards provide an early target for the collective disenchantment that inspired and informed postmodernism. The situation of the framing narrative in July 1956 means that the novel straddles the historical dividing line between the modern and postmodern eras, the former being reassessed from the standpoint of the latter.

The choice of July 1956 – the month in which the Suez Crisis culminated – is particularly significant in this context, as critics such as Lewis (99-100), Petry (90) and Head (156-57) note. The event symbolically marked the collapse of British imperial power and was a crucial step in the development of a postcolonial consciousness that would become, by the mid-1980s when Ishiguro was writing *Remains*, a dominant strand in postmodern theory (Bertens 8). While Petry (14-17) makes a strong case against those readings that foreground Ishiguro’s postcolonial status, the relationship between individual subjects and larger socio-historical-political forces is a major theme in *Remains*, and it cannot be coincidental that the events which force the narrator to confront the legacy of his past and the collapse of his dreams and aspirations play out against such a background. The fact that this background is never directly mentioned in the text that follows, rather than diminishing its relevance, seems instead to place it among those significant silences with which the novel abounds (the ramifications of which will be examined at length below).

As with *Sportswriter*, it is possible by focusing on such historical details and on the naturalistic style to approach the novel as a more or less straightforward premordern confession with a contemporary moral. Stevens’s final admission – that in placing the grand
narrative of ‘furthering the progress of humanity’ above the ‘little’ narrative of personal integrity, he has wasted his life (Ishiguro 114) – is delivered with all the force of a traditional premodern mea culpa. Retrospectively, at least, it might be cast as the motivation and shaping principle of the entire narrative. The fact that the narrative is not presented as such from the outset – that it proceeds rather with apparent reluctance and growing anxiety through a series of increasingly disturbing confessions – may suggest that the confessant is ‘reliving’ the events described. Crucially, however, he does so from a position in which he can begin to subject his interpretative framework (presented in a manner reminiscent of earlier professions of faith) to a ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’ and so come to articulate responses suppressed at the time. This separation of past and present selves exemplifies the narrative logic of the premodern confession, albeit in an unusually sophisticated version.

Nevertheless, if the novel appears to conform to premodern confessional tropes in its representation of an objectively ‘real’ world, it is a world that resembles Sportswriter and the texts characterised by Elias as Postmodern Realism in being permeated by representations. The novel opens in a library, with the narrator ‘dusting the portrait of Viscount Wetherby’ (Ishiguro 3), immediately suggesting Stevens’s role as maintainer of traditional (and probably highly conventionalised) images. The reason Stevens initially supplies for undertaking his journey involves two other texts: Miss Kenton’s recent letter and his own unsuccessful staff plan for Darlington Hall. (The former becomes the subject of ongoing re-readings, a screen onto which Stevens projects his own feelings but also a disturbing reminder of Miss Kenton’s otherness.) And in planning his trip he spends ‘many minutes examining the road atlas, and perusing also the relevant volumes of Mrs Jane Symons’s The Wonder of England’ (11). The butler continues to refer to the latter work throughout his account, and indeed
much of his subsequent travelogue is expressed in terms one might expect to find in such an opus.

Likewise Stevens bases his own code of conduct upon three stories, all of questionable provenance. The first is a story told by his father concerning a butler in the colonies. Stevens describes it as ‘apparently true’, although he refers to it later as a legend and suggests its factuality ‘is of little importance’ (36, 37). The other two stories concern the elder Stevens himself, though his son witnessed neither and gives no clue as to how he knows the second; indeed, when the narrator adds ‘both of which I have had corroborated’ (42), the reader may suppose he has had doubts. Additionally, in a crucial scene with Miss Kenton, the housekeeper discovers him reading ‘a sentimental love story’, a habit that Stevens insists is primarily ‘an extremely efficient way to maintain and develop one’s command of the English language’ (167). He also subscribes to *A Quarterly for the Gentleman’s Gentleman* (32) and tries to enlarge his professional repertoire by listening to a wireless programme called *Twice a Week or More* (130). His persona is so prefabricated it is little wonder, as Petry (103) observes, that at one point Stevens finds his own authenticity as ‘a genuine old-fashioned English butler’ (Ishiguro 124) called into question.

As Patey has shown, the book also evokes a ‘cluster of literary shadows’ (136) including Henry Fielding, Jane Austen, Charlotte Bronte, Thomas Hardy, George Eliot, Henry James, Evelyn Waugh and P.G. Wodehouse. This has led Janik to describe *Remains* as ‘essentially antimodernist, almost classical in its realism’ (qtd. in Petry 102). But such a reading overlooks the way this circulation of pre-existing representations, narratives and discourses destabilises the text. Given the impossibility of determining the degree to which they shape Stevens’s perceptions, these echoes of other texts disrupt the illusion of direct correspondence between sign and referent. They may mutually bolster their claims to depict
an external world; on the other hand, they may indicate nothing beyond their textuality and the way representations (re)produce. It would therefore seem more accurate to suggest, as Hassan does, that the novel ‘perfects and subverts [literary tradition] at the same time’ (374) – an example of the combination of ‘complicity and critique’ found in postmodernism as defined by Hutcheon. Or, in Petry’s words, Remains ‘simultaneously erases the fictional worlds it so sharply delineates...In this respect the novel is positively a very typical postmodern work of art that always already contains its opposite’ (103).

As with Sportswriter, then, a reading of Remains as a premodern confession is possible but highly problematic. The bios depicted is riddled with uncertainty that extends beyond epistemology to the ontological nature of the world and the knowledge available. As in Sportswriter, reality is contaminated by representations. What makes Remains more subversive in this respect is its location of that quintessentially postmodern condition in a context predating, and apparently antithetical to, postmodernism as a socio-historical phenomenon. Such a strategy effectively deconstructs any simplistic opposition between the reader’s artificial, self-conscious postmodern era and an earlier, more natural, authentic period. If the proliferation of representations extends back indefinitely; if the original source remains inaccessible, eternally deferred, then the idea of an ‘innocent’ past is a retrospective construct – that is, another representation with particular ideological implications. Ishiguro has stated, ‘The kind of England that I create in The Remains of the Day is not an England that I believe ever existed...What I’m trying to do...is to actually rework a particular myth about a certain kind of mythical England’, a myth that sustains ‘an enormous nostalgia industry’ and ‘is used as a political tool...as a way of bashing anybody who tries to spoil this Garden of Eden’ (qtd. in Vorda and Herzinger 139).
On the other hand, Ishiguro has admitted that ‘I’m not overwhelmingly interested in what really did happen. What’s important is the emotional aspect, the...position the characters take up’ (qtd. in Mason, ‘An Interview’ 342). Such a comment might lead one to conclude that Remains is fundamentally a modern confession. Along with the aforementioned presence of other texts and textual echoes within the narrative, which raise doubts about the transparency of Stevens’s discourse, numerous other elements function to shift attention from the bios to the autas – that is, onto the narrating self, the confessant. Among the most obvious (noted previously in relation to Sportswriter) are the present tense framing narrative with its muted hints of ongoing psychic disturbance; the narrator’s repeated, lengthy references to the past despite his stated wish to avoid doing so; and his habit of rationalisation and self-justification, particularly with respect to an arcane value system.

Furthermore, if Stevens is more willing to confess than Frank Bascombe – at least where minor matters are concerned – his deeper admissions seem reluctant and/or inadvertent. This in turn encourages an ironic distance between narrator and reader, and leads Shaffer to assert that ‘the author is more a novelist of the inner character than of the outer world’ (Understanding 8); that ‘Ishiguro’s novels eschew a postmodern dimension’ in favour of modern psychological realism (11). Similarly Parkes writes: ‘like James, [Ford Madox] Ford, and other modern novelists, Ishiguro is interested primarily in the workings of language and consciousness’ (20).

As with a premodern confessional reading, however, this modern reading reveals a significant postmodern dimension. As noted in Part I, one of the narrator’s most obvious characteristics is his ambiguous attitude towards confession. His discourse continually evokes confessional tropes only to undercut their significance or, more often, to deny the need for confession. Indeed, these denials generate much of the narrative momentum,
necessitating explanations that in turn reflect problematically on the claims they are meant to support, necessitating further explanations, and so on. Thus in the process of trying to avoid confession, Stevens furnishes the reader with a wealth of material that might form the basis of one. His habitually defensive tone and repeated reminders to himself not to dwell on the past suggest that he, too, is conscious of this.

But although the material with which to judge him is voluntarily supplied, Stevens cannot be said to confess while he refuses to acknowledge its condemnatory nature. In fact it appears he only volunteers this information because he does not consider it condemnatory as such. On the contrary, in the two most critical scenes before the climax – when he abandons his dying father during the international conference at Darlington Hall (Ishiguro 110), and when he abandons Miss Kenton during the meeting between the Prime Minister and the German ambassador (228) – Stevens admits to nothing but a sense of triumph.

It becomes increasingly obvious that Stevens’s account is motivated less by specific incidents than by the existence of two distinct worlds, between which the narrator is caught. According to the values of his former world – the world in which he has passed the majority of his ‘day’, with which he has sought to identify himself completely, and to which he has sacrificed all else in his life – his past actions were exemplary. History, however, has since challenged the dominance of this world and its values, resulting in a re-valuation so sweeping as to constitute a new interpretive framework. The two frameworks, past and present, are not entirely dissimilar. Nor, it seems, were the values of the old world monolithic and immune to negotiation and re-interpretation, as Lord Darlington’s reappraisal of the subject of the Jewish housemaids shows (Ishiguro 145-51). Likewise, the criticisms of their own milieu voiced by Miss Kenton (Ishiguro 149) and Reginald Cardinal (Ishiguro 222-25) throw Stevens’s unquestioning acceptance into sharper relief.
But the details that now appear most altered are also the defining moments of the butler’s life. He cannot accept the new framework and maintain his sense of self. So while his telltale linguistic patterns and his preoccupation with past choices both imply another perspective (and the increasing fragility of his current one), Stevens continues to resist acknowledging the possibility. And the longer he maintains his indisputable innocence, the more pronounced the gulf between past and present appears, the harder it will be to change course and the higher the stakes become. For if the past proves indefensible, the narrator’s attempts to defend it will constitute either lack of awareness or inexcusable intransigence – requiring further confession. (In this as in all else he follows his late master, whose final action was to instigate unsuccessful libel proceedings in an effort to re-establish his own innocence.)

Nevertheless, according to Doyle, in the course of Stevens’s account ‘the narrator slowly becomes an other to himself by distancing himself from his own discourse, from his own truths, and his own lies, from his own self-image, from his simulacrum’ (70). Where narrative traditionally moves towards a unification of narrating and narrated selves – a movement particularly noticeable in the confessional mode – Remains enacts the opposite movement, ‘invoking an ethical and aesthetic space between two parts of the self, between the observer and observed...between narrator and narrated, between self and other’ (Doyle 75). The process, in fact, sounds remarkably like Frank Bascombe’s description of his climactic moment, when he finds himself ‘neither the seer nor the thing seen’. And, again, it suggests a deconstruction of the binary at the heart of all confession (and indeed all language), by which premodern and modern versions distinguish themselves.29

From the resulting ‘neutral point...between identity and otherness’ (Doyle 75), it becomes apparent that one cannot simply say one view of reality is right and the other wrong. Each is
valid within its frame of reference. In eventually conceding this, Stevens abandons the
essentialist, universal pretensions of his former world – the world of post-Enlightenment
modernity – and acknowledges the postmodern values of plurality, contextuality and
relativity. His final acceptance of bantering can therefore be read on two levels. On one
level it is further evidence of his recognition of the altered circumstances in which he now
finds himself, and his willingness to engage with this new world on its terms. On a deeper
level, bantering suggests the ‘play of the signifier’ free from any direct, necessary relationship
with meaning, as theorised by the poststructuralist branch of postmodernism; and Stevens’s
speculation that ‘in bantering lies the key to human warmth’ (Ishiguro 245) suggests the
positive potential of such multivalency. After his failed struggle to eradicate ambiguity and
subsume experience within a single monolithic interpretation, the narrator now realises that
accepting multiple valid points of view enables new possibilities for self-definition, and is a
precondition for meaningful interpersonal relationships. (It should be noted, however, that
in keeping with the hermeneutics of suspicion the novel does not uncritically celebrate
pluralism; the butler’s last defence, that ‘I simply confined myself, quite properly, to affairs
within my own professional realm’ (Ishiguro 201), reminds us how the designation of
particular areas of concern as Other can easily become abdication of responsibility.)

This straightforward reading of Remains within a modern confessional framework thus
illuminates significant aspects of postmodern thought within the novel. It fails, however, to
do justice to Ishiguro’s subversive use of modern confessional tropes. In the previous
chapter, I noted how the possibility of irony in Sportswriter – from the standpoint of either
the narrator or the implied author – produced the reverse effect of irony in earlier, modern
confessional novels: rather than offering access to an essential hidden truth, it highlights the
impossibility of such access (or, perhaps, of such truth). In contrast to Frank Bascombe
(and in keeping with the thirty-year difference between the settings of the two novels), Stevens seems to have great difficulty dealing with irony: ‘For one thing, how would one know for sure that at any given moment a response of the bantering sort is truly what is expected? One need hardly dwell on the catastrophic possibility of uttering a bantering remark only to discover it wholly inappropriate’ (Ishiguro 16). Given a passage like this, any attempt to read Stevens as an ironist would be simply perverse. However, as Hutcheon points out, such remarks do more than characterise the narrator and his milieu; they also provide a ‘kind of early and overt meta-ironic framing’ that ‘constitute[s] a reflective mise en abyme that functioned to trigger…this reader’s worries about irony’ (Irony’s Edge 157).

According to Hutcheon, paraphrasing several other critics, a “meta-ironic” function [is] one that sets up a series of expectations that frame the utterance as potentially ironic. Signals that function meta-ironically, therefore, do not so much constitute irony in themselves as signal the possibility of ironic attribution’ (Irony’s Edge 154, emphasis added). Thus Ishiguro exploits his narrator’s incapacity for irony to signal the possibility of an ironic reading, without indicating the extent to which such a reading is called for.

A related strategy, and one of Ishiguro’s most potent, is his use of narrative discourse to critique identity. Just as he invokes a premodern framework to reveal external reality as a compromised and unstable category, so too the author pushes questions of identity to an extreme – beyond a modern, epistemological focus into the realm of ontology. In her influential article on Remains and unreliable narrative, Wall argues that

the novel challenges our usual definition of an unreliable narrator as one whose ‘norms and values’ differ from those of the implied author, and questions the concept of an ironic distance between the mistaken, benighted, biased, or dishonest
narrator and the implied author, who, in most models, is seen to communicate with the reader entirely behind the narrator's back. (18)

Whereas traditional unreliable narratives (as analysed by Chatman and Rimmon-Kenan) rely on a ‘conflict…between story and discourse, events calling into question what we are told about them’ (Wall 19), Stevens’s discourse itself plays a vital role in undermining his credibility, eventually forcing him to confront the very facts he wished to avoid. The narrator’s verbal tics, extended commentaries, patterns of association, and narrative ordering all reveal aspects of his character and situation that he cannot articulate directly – as if illustrating the deconstructive process by which a text is discovered to confess its irreconcilable, incoherent nature. Indeed Wall concludes that Ishiguro’s work reflects a broader change in literary and intellectual ‘fashions’: ‘The preoccupation…with the “norms and values” of the author is certainly adequate to the work of Henry James or Joseph Conrad, to a period when truth seemed less problematic. Moving to the end of this century, however, writers may be far more concerned with the causes and consequences of split subjectivity than with values’ (38).

One of the most radical manifestations of this latter approach is that, ‘while Ishiguro has been quite careful about making Stevens’s unreliability fairly obvious, he has also problematized the process of arriving at definitive versions…perhaps challenging us never to figure out “what really happened” ’ (Wall 30). Stevens, like Frank Bascombe, is a narrator who thwarts attempts to ‘see around the sides of’ him. In effect the discursively generated ambiguity in his account, analogous to Frank’s insistence on the impossibility of full disclosure, ‘not only refocuses the reader’s attention on the narrator’s mental processes, but
deconstructs the notion of truth, and consequently questions both "reliable" and "unreliable" narration and the distinctions we make between them' (Wall 23).

To extrapolate, Stevens’s account may be that of a narrator whose psychological defence mechanisms are so secure at the outset that he is genuinely unconscious of any motivations and concerns beyond those he articulates; a narrator who in the course of – and through the act of – narrating comes to recognise the true state of affairs, that which he must confess. It may, however, be the account of a narrator who understands only too well those areas he would rather not acknowledge, and whose attempts to manipulate his discourse to this end ultimately come undone. The difference between the two positions is simply the degree of the confessant’s awareness, and Ishiguro might be referring to either when he says his protagonists ‘know what they have to avoid and that determines the routes they take through memory…But of course memory is this terribly treacherous terrain’ (qtd. in Shaffer, *Understanding* 9).

The butler’s previously noted textual self-consciousness and his practiced equivocations (such as in the two episodes where he tells ‘white lies’ (Ishiguro 126) to avoid acknowledging his association with Lord Darlington) might lead one to suppose his ‘knowing’ is to some extent conscious. If so, however, can we assume that Stevens’s slips – which seemingly compel him to full-fledged confession – and indeed his reluctance to confess are not also in some sense deliberate, even a calculated extension of his performance? (Ishiguro has also said he follows his protagonists’ ‘thoughts around, as they try to trip themselves up or to hide from themselves’ (qtd. in Mason 347, ‘An Interview’, emphasis added).)

Several reasons for such a strategy present themselves. To begin with, an inadvertent confession, although morally more dubious, is less open to question than a deliberate one. Another possibility is raised by Wood’s remark that ‘it’s hard to believe that Stevens’s
repressions aren’t a lot more fun than anything he could be repressing”; that he is ‘having such a high old time being a butler that you can’t imagine him swapping the life for anything, least of all a dingy romance with that nice housekeeper’ (176). Though deeply unsympathetic, this view does capture the sense that the narrator is temperamentally predisposed towards indirection. As Miss Kenton herself puts it, ‘Why, Mr Stevens, why, why, why do you always have to pretend?’ (Ishiguro 154).

Furthermore, *Remains* makes it hard to ignore the fact that the tropes and conventions of confession are available not simply as aids to truth-telling. Their usefulness in other ways is suggested by Stevens’s initial confession, ‘I have been responsible for a series of small errors’ (5), intended to allay the suspicion of ‘unprofessional’ intentions towards Miss Kenton. In this case, as noted in Part I, confession performs the opposite task to what it purports, concealing rather than revealing. Similarly, Gallagher observes that confession may also be used in the service of narcissism and self-aggrandisement (xiv), a possibility Scanlan raises in Stevens’s case, pointing out the butler’s eagerness to see himself at the ‘hub’ of great events although ‘it would be hard even in Lord Darlington’s case to say how much damage his willingness to entertain Oswald Mosley to dinner actually did…In the case of his butler the issue is even more tangled. Has Stevens’s finely polished silver actually added to the harmony of meetings where aristocrats spoke of the need for forceful leadership?’ (149). From certain perspectives the assumption of culpability may appear more attractive than the acknowledgement of one’s insignificance.

A more radical reading involving the utility of confession hinges on the nature of Stevens’s repressions. As Shaffer notes, commentators such as Wong, following Ishiguro himself, have suggested that the butler represses his emotional and political sides in order to be a more exemplary professional (*Understanding* 76). In this view Stevens is wracked by
conflicting impulses, manifestations of a more complex identity he feels bound to disavow but that nevertheless increasingly finds expression in the text; he is a genuinely high-minded individual who mistakenly sacrificed the possibility of personal happiness to a higher cause. However, Shaffer (following Wall and in company with Parkes) argues for the opposite view: that the butler’s professionalism is ‘an excuse to remain sexually and politically disengaged’ (Understanding 75), thus avoiding the complications these areas might present. If this interpretation is correct, then Stevens’s confession is as much a realisation of what might have been – the self he rejected through mere cowardice – as what was. Even his sadness at the end may be nothing but the self-indulgent sentimentality of one who is no longer in danger of being able to act on his feelings. Confession in this instance becomes a Foucauldian ‘technology of the self’, bringing into being what it purports to reveal. The truth of his confession does not pre-exist its articulation.

If the above hypothesis seems far-fetched, this is at least partly because the reader is encouraged to project a more fully realised character behind those few, minuscule ‘clues’ to Stevens’s humanity, such as the tears he reportedly sheds whilst performing his duties as his father dies upstairs (Ishiguro 105). But almost the entire narrative, even the great majority of the ‘present day’ framing narrative, is presented retrospectively, with the narrator already aware of what the reader is yet to discover. In a novel preoccupied with the selective quality of memory, this seems highly suspect. One might also note that from the outset the butler is aware that irrespective of his chances with the former Miss Kenton, his new American employer, Mr Farraday, requires of him a quite different approach to the one he had taken with Lord Darlington. Stevens’s habitual reticence, which seems to have been patterned on that of his late master, merely perplexes the casual, forthright Farraday, who Stevens suspects is ‘urging me...to respond in a like-minded spirit’ (17).
It is therefore very convenient that Stevens’s final confession discovers the requisite ‘human’ qualities. And his response in the aftermath – as he dwells upon the response of his confessor, the retired manservant – is telling. He admits, ‘Perhaps, then, there is something to his advice that I should cease looking back so much, that I should adopt a more positive outlook’ (244). But this is nothing more than what he has been counselling himself throughout; he entirely ignores the more disturbing observation that ‘[w]e’ve all got to put our feet up at some point’ (243). Having spent his entire account manipulating facts and memories to support his desires, this is the coup de grâce. Rather than disengaging him from his profession as recommended, the experience becomes a path to re-engagement – and a new, more relevant if not necessarily more genuine, persona.

The final move in this analysis of Stevens’s indeterminate identity brings us full circle, from the extreme of the modern focus upon the *autos* back to the premodern *bios*. For there is no reason to privilege the narrator as the author of his new (or old) self. If the narrator employed by both Ford and Ishiguro is the white male self identified by postmodern theory as the centre of classical Western constructions of subjectivity (Currie 109), both novels present their narrators in such a way as to undermine that ‘existential authenticity most compatible with traditional liberal principles of independence and critical lucidity’ (Altieri qtd. in Bertens 105). In the case of *Remains*, the evidence of Stevens’s conflicting impulses may indicate not a hidden, more authentic self but rather a decentred subjectivity, a site of irreducible discourses and externally conditioned responses – in Derrida’s phrase, ‘always already split’ (*Of Grammatology* 112). Even his final sorrow over Miss Kenton may be ‘mere biology, or perhaps it is simply the product of another cultural influence represented by the Victorian family in which Stevens must have grown up or by those romance novels that he read to perfect his command of English’ (Scanlan 150).
Likewise, the intermingling of other texts throughout the butler’s narrative may identify him not as an autonomous user of texts but rather an ‘almost parodically Deconstructed Man...lacking the illusion of self-presence, of transparent spontaneous communication’ (Scanlan 146). According to Scanlan, ‘People often do not know their own minds; the prevailing discourse speaks through them; they feel most authentic when they are most thoroughly inserted into the dominant ideology’ (153). And in *Remains*, as previously noted, the point is perfectly illustrated by the two major crises before the climax – the death of Stevens’s father and his final break with Miss Kenton. In both instances his eminently Victorian stoicism is tested to the utmost and found all too successful, producing in Stevens a sense of epiphanic satisfaction – the former as ‘the moment...when I truly came of age as a butler’ (70) and the latter as ‘a sort of summary of all that I had come to achieve thus far in my life’ (228).

The fact that only a limited number of subject positions are available within any discourse is expressed acutely in the butler’s final admission: ‘I can’t even say I made my own mistakes’ (243). There is nothing he can truly call his own; he is unable even to articulate his condition except in terms of what cannot be said. But this epiphany too is of questionable value. To begin with, the butler uses it to distinguish between himself and Lord Darlington, who he insists ‘wasn’t a bad man’ and was at least ‘courageous’ enough to choose his own path in life (243). In so doing he endeavours to contest the simplistic essentialist view of his former master as a Nazi collaborator by urging an historicist re-evaluation (a technique much favoured by postmodernism itself during the 1980s). Yet ultimately he cannot avoid returning the issue to the realm of transcendent values. In celebrating Darlington’s self-determination as he condemns his own lack of it, Stevens overlooks the socio-historical fact that the world they inhabited encouraged and enabled this quality in his aristocratic master.
while offering people like him considerably less incentive or opportunity. Indeed, by valorising the capacity for self-determination he reinscribes the distinctions on which the system is founded, from which it draws its imaginary authority. Furthermore, this last, apparently most personal confession may ironically signal his successful insertion into the newly dominant American ideology of frankness as Victorian England’s stranglehold loosens. The narrator will remain both in literal subjection within Darlington Hall, and alienated from any kind of authentic individual subjectivity.

It is obvious from the range of possible interpretations examined above that positing a definitive conclusion about the novel’s meaning is a dangerous venture. If, as Ishiguro has said, ‘it’s almost impossible now to write a kind of traditional English novel without being aware of the various ironies’ (qtd. in Vorda and Herzinger 139), he has nevertheless constructed one in which it is impossible to be sure where irony is applicable, and to what degree. Thus Shaffer can assert that ‘[t]he journey…fails to accomplish its purpose, culminating not comically, in his new-found ability to cast off his “professional suit,” but pathetically, in his reaffirmation of the necessity of wearing it at all times. The nearly (spatially and temporally) circular novel closes on a note of “sorry disappointment”’ (Understanding 66). Yet Doyle, also citing a conjunction of geographical and psychological terrain, insists that the novel ends with a genuine and positive transformation brought about by a linear progression from a point deeply embedded within the butler’s immediate context and sense of selfhood, to a ‘point of débâcle’ outside both (75).

The reader may hypothesise but ultimately must acknowledge that we are in no better position than Stevens’s hapless intradiegetic confessor,32 the retired manservant to whom he offers his final (and only externalised) confession. Clearly at a loss in the face of Stevens’s fragmentary and truncated explanation, the nameless auditor – who clearly resembles the
implied addressee of the narrative as a whole – has to admit ‘I’m not sure I follow everything you’re saying’ (Ishiguro 243). Nor can we, despite our access to a considerably more detailed text, be certain we possess all the necessary data to form a comprehensive judgement.

Raphael merely scratches the surface in concluding, ‘There is finally no one who can resolve some of the questions about what the butler knows or feels’ (203). Not only what he knows and feels, but how (in what manner) and why (from what relationship with reality) also. By simultaneously exploiting and exposing its textual status and conventions, the novel raises insoluble questions about the relationship between text, narrator and narrated. As in *Sportswriter*, the epistemological issue of determining a particular truth, pushed to its limit, reveals the multiplicity of ways truth can be predicated, encouraging an acceptance of radical indeterminacy and a shift in focus towards the ontological issue of Being. Not ‘How can I interpret this world? And what am I?’ but rather ‘Which world is this? And which of my selves?’ (McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction 1*).

To return, then, to the question that Stevens leaves unanswered: *Why do you always have to pretend?* One possible answer, in light of the above, is that there is nothing available that is unproblematically genuine. We are always held at an unbridgeable remove from truth, reality and authenticity by the very tools and mechanisms that purport to reveal it. The danger illustrated by the butler’s troubled narrative is that of succumbing to the desire for certainty by investing utterly in, and identifying completely with, one particular version of ‘the truth’.
In Conclusion: Inconclusion

As I reached the final stage of preparing this exegesis for submission, Routledge published a collection of essays edited by Jo Gill, entitled Modern Confessional Writing. I read it with trepidation, worried it might contain material that would necessitate, if not a complete reappraisal of my argument, then at least an overhaul of my manuscript to incorporate its insights.

Certainly, to quote the editor’s introduction, the collection ‘rethinks the meaning and possibilities of “confessional writing” – often in the light of poststructuralist and/or postmodern challenges to our sense of the reliability of language, the coherence and authority of the subject, and the accessibility and desirability of authentic truth’ (Gill 3). Indeed it represents probably the first attempt to consider contemporary confessional texts within the framework of postmodernism – the lack of which originally prompted my own research.

To my relief (I confess), I found that the collection both shared a similar sense of our common interest and confirmed many of my observations. Gill, like me, argues that in ‘this contested and continually evolving subject’ it would be a mistake ‘to impose a determinate definition of “confession” although most [of the essays in her collection] do posit characteristic features, or contexts, or effects’ (2). She goes on to note that across a range of confessional texts from the post-World War 2 period, ‘[t]ime and again we come across strategies of evasion, displacement and obfuscation…the possibilities of non-disclosure or of self-invention are as important as, if not more important than, “expressions of personality”.

There are multiple “barriers” in this writing, and primary among these is the barrier of
language’ (7), with the result that ‘to think about confession is to abandon conventional and hitherto dependable notions of reliability, authority and authenticity and to embrace, and find new ways of embracing, the difficulty and slipperiness – which is also the fascination – of modern variations of the form’ (1).

In short, Gill suggests, ‘it is precisely the uncertainty and strangeness of its own endeavour which is modern confessional writing’s major preoccupation’ (4) – a statement with which I would wholeheartedly concur if by ‘modern’ we mean contemporary. The crucial point of difference between Gill’s hypothesis and the model advanced in this study is that in Gill’s view there is no clear demarcation between those confessions I have called ‘modern’ and the contemporary variety. Indeed, she considers Rousseau’s Confessions ‘as an early exemplar of the strategies of evasion, denial and self-conscious artfulness to be found in much recent confessional writing’ (5), and agrees with Brooks that present-day confessions, like their Romantic predecessors, are predominantly a mode of self-expression (6).

Nevertheless, Gill later acknowledges that the confessional writing surveyed in her collection ‘both emulates and diverges from its precedents’ and she contrasts Rousseau’s self-consciousness with the ‘distinctive…foregrounding of such knowledge’ in more recent texts (8). It is precisely this distinctiveness, I would argue, that signifies a specifically postmodern sensibility and approach to the confessional mode.

At this point the author will turn aside from what seems likely to be an ongoing debate to offer a more personal confession regarding the relationship between the preceding exegetical study and its associated creative project. Central to this confession is the fact that my primary aim, in my creative project, was not to write a postmodern confession as such. Indeed, at the commencement of my candidature I had only a hunch about how a postmodern confession might be defined. As far as the novel was concerned, I simply
wanted to develop my initial premise (‘a protagonist whose inability to distance himself from a doomed relationship eventually destroys a chance at real happiness’) into a good story. And as I noted in the introductory chapter to this study, I suspected that closer analysis of *Sportswriter* and *Remains* would provide insights into the nature of such stories and the techniques that might be applicable.

As it turned out, this suspicion proved correct. However, as will become evident, my approach in the creative project was to prioritise narrative efficacy above theoretical implications; to develop whatever dramatic potential I discovered within the material, rather than remain loyal to any particular dramatic device; to proceed on faith, without a fixed goal, at different times allowing the material to suggest the appropriate formal techniques, and formal considerations to dictate the appropriate material.

In contrast to the relatively orderly progress of my exegesis (in which I felt constrained by the more rigid conventions of academic writing), my greater openness to possibility in the writing of the novel resulted in a process that seemed far less clear. This experience is reflected, to some degree, in the tone and terminology of the following account, which differs somewhat to the rest of the exegesis. My approach to the works of Ford and Ishiguro was based on analysis; my own work, based on synthesis. Rather than re-presenting the latter in the manner of the former, I have preferred an approach that more closely expresses the actual process.

My first draft of the story was substantially longer than the final manuscript, although it included only the events that would eventually become Part Two. A major reason for this was that it unfolded in epistolary form, via a series of letter sent by Jake to Penny from the time of his arrival home from India, to just after he and Mitsuru spend a night together. (In
the original version Jake decides against pursuing Mitsuru, only to discover that Penny has had a similar experience overseas but has followed her new romantic interest.)

My belief that this might form the basis for a postmodern confession derived from a vision of the story as balanced precariously between deliberate and involuntary confessions. On the one hand, Jake’s letters would constitute an attempt to use the confessional tone as a means of seduction – to win back Penny’s love. On the other hand, his interpretation of events would become increasingly suspect, open to a variant reading, as his ‘friendship’ with Mitsuru becomes more romantically charged. The reader – and, by implication, Penny – would be faced with the question of which interpretation was correct, and, if Jake’s version of events was disingenuous, whether this was conscious or a mark of self-deception. And while the ending would take the form of an overt confession, this too would raise further, unresolvable questions about the narrator’s motives and the ultimate meaning of the entire correspondence.

While I found the concept intriguing and challenging, I realised it posed a major storytelling problem: the narrator’s account quickly felt contrived and overdetermined; the result, for the reader, was a sense of claustrophobia and frustration, without any sense of intimacy with the protagonist. Ford’s and Ishiguro’s narratives raise the possibility of their being ‘creative reconstructions’ of events. However, in both cases there is no clear intradiegetic confessor/addressee, beyond the confessant himself, for whom the confession must be shaped. To contain the reader within Penny’s point of view was simply too constrictive.

The obvious solution was to recast the narrative in a less restrictive form. I rewrote the entire story in the past tense. The result was much lesscrippingly self-conscious, though it was also the first in a series of steps away from my postmodern confessional models,
towards a more traditional variety of confession. Nevertheless, while my new presentation evoked the premodern confession, the subject matter and the narrative arc (focussing as they did on an individual’s quest for self-understanding, and eschewing external redemption) were closer to those found in modern confessions. At this point I hoped to use the strategy described by Lodge – exploiting the tensions between the two traditional forms, playing form against content to confound expectations and thus move beyond the epistemological issue of Jake’s veracity, to a deeper, ontological indeterminacy.

The next problem involved what was at stake in the story. As I saw it, the narrator had two central preoccupations, conveniently aligned with the two original aspects of confession. In Jake’s case the first aspect, the acknowledgement of error and guilt, relates initially to his sense of the inappropriateness of his continuing attachment to Penny, and later shifts to a sharper sense of culpability when he betrays Penny with Mitsuru. The second aspect, the profession of belief, involves his fascination with the Teachings and his efforts to apply them to his life.

In the story as it then was, Penny had faded to a ghostly absence, and the Teachings appeared extraneous to Jake’s immediate situation – an exotic distraction. Neither aspect was coming across with enough directness and immediacy for the reader to feel the reality of what was at stake. With some trepidation, I wrote a new beginning for the story. This new section, comprising an extra fifty per cent of the existing manuscript, extended the story backwards to the moment at which Penny first proposes a separation, letting the reader see the dynamic between Jake and Penny during the ensuing days and weeks, as well as chronicling the former’s gradually developing interest in the Teachings as a way of dealing with the deteriorating situation.
My trepidation was due to an awareness that this new strategy flew directly in the face of Ford’s and Ishiguro’s models – both of which fix their narrative frameworks within the aftermath of a major trauma, backgrounding the actual crisis and presenting their narrators’ values and actions as a fait accompli. Such a set-up is crucial to dramatising the necessity and difficulty of deconstructing one’s own situation from within it. By drawing previous events into my linear narrative, I was denying myself the material that, until then, had contributed most to a sense of the weight of the past upon the present. This also had the effect of shifting the narrative focus onto the events themselves, away from the narrator’s consciousness. Still, in more general storytelling terms it succeeded in building up the reader’s emotional investment, making Jake a more sympathetic character and injecting his confession with a much-needed feeling of urgency. It also produced a pleasing sense of formal unity with its circular movement from the collapse of one relationship to the collapse of another (owing to the narrator’s inability to acknowledge the truth about the first).

I had begun to feel uncomfortably like my protagonist: having set out with a vision that increasingly seemed simplistic and ill-founded, only to be faced with new possibilities that might well prove to be equally unreliable, and oscillating confusedly between them. At this stage, however, I resigned myself – prematurely, as it turned out – to the probability that I was in fact writing a premodern confession in contemporary clothing. With that in mind I turned my attention to the story’s conclusion. I knew that some sort of dramatic pay-off was required, but remained undecided between two alternatives. In the first alternative the narrator, having lost both his former dream of happiness and the obvious opportunity for a new start, nevertheless finds that he has succeeded in building up the habit of hope, and can face the now-empty horizon without despair. While overtly up-beat, this ending remains open to an ironic reading of the narrator as basically unchanged and therefore liable to
continue repeating the same mistakes. In the second alternative the narrator’s experiences produce a final epiphany that leaves him disillusioned and painfully aware of his previous naiveté. While this ending is overtly down-beat, it also conforms to the classic Bildungsroman formula, implying a growth in understanding that better equips the narrator to confront future problems.

Both alternatives seemed plausible; neither, wholly satisfactory. I realised that the story now possessed a strong dramatic opening but tapered off as Jake’s opportunities for positive action were progressively eliminated. His last-ditch attempt to reassert his loyalty to Penny by relinquishing Mitsuru reeked of bad faith and inertia, which might justify confession on the narrator’s part but hardly justified the reader’s attention, merely to receive confirmation that all the narrator’s attempts at change were superficial. One could reasonably imagine the reader feeling a corresponding sense of disillusionment and dismay as Jake proves himself unequal to both the task of staying true to his original goal and the task of re-evaluating it.

These reflections led me to devise a new ending in which Jake does decide to abandon his hopes for Penny and pursue a future with Mitsuru. This event in and of itself could not serve as a dramatic climax since such a development, while intended to convey significant change, might just as easily undercut the significance of the original desire. A new dramatic arc was needed. I decided to persist with the circular form that had emerged, but to expand it with a new end section (Part Three in the current manuscript) in which Jake’s attempts to develop a relationship with Mitsuru quickly founder and lead to a situation similar to the one that began the story. At this point the narrator is forced to recognise that both crises were caused, at least in part, by a flaw in his own character: his unwillingness to confess his deepest emotions. It is this flaw that retrospectively informs his entire narrative, that provides an opportunity for him to demonstrate positive change in the final scene with
Mitsuru, and that might also serve as a metaphor for the dilemma facing the postmodern confessional subject faced with the task of confessing the limitations of one’s own confession. (Although the form of my novel was now resolutely premodern, I still relished the possibility of incorporating aspects of postmodernity at the thematic level.)

The manuscript now seemed to me to possess all the necessary ingredients of a satisfactory story. But I was concerned that, having grown a new head and a new tail, it was now dangerously attenuated. Since the narrator no longer held steadfastly to a single, consistent goal, his progress appeared meandering in the story’s mid-section, before the circle was closed. With this in mind I prepared yet another draft – the penultimate version, which turned out to be the closest to my original models. I realised that both Ford and Ishiguro were able to encompass their long and fragmented backstories by containing them within a narrative framework that spanned a much shorter period (in *Sportswriter*, three days; in *Remains*, six). It struck me I could do likewise by beginning the story, in the present tense, at the start of Part Three as Jake’s new relationship shows its first signs of coming apart. I could use the remainder of Part Three as a framing narrative that incorporated Parts One and Two. The reader would thus learn about the events that had led from Jake and Penny’s separation to the start of his relationship with Mitsuru as a series of flashbacks during the week leading up to Mitsuru’s audition as Jake’s misgivings grow, culminating in their falling-out, his reunion with Penny, and the moment of self-discovery that prompts the novel’s climax.

It almost worked. Certainly, this version was the most successful to that point, as well as displaying the key elements I have explored above in relation to the postmodern confession. Why, then, did I feel it necessary to write another draft that again veered away from this model? Although the framing narrative gave the story a strong sense of focus and
concentration, it also created unwanted disjunctions and conjunctions. The former occurred mostly at the start, where a relatively short exchange between the narrator and Mitsuru was followed by a flashback, much longer, involving Jake and Penny in India. This first extended flashback was simply too distinct from the framing narrative; Mitsuru faded completely from view, and by the time she reappeared the significance of her narrative thread had been broken. The unwanted conjunctions occurred subsequently, as other flashback sequences, involving the start of Jake’s acquaintance with Mitsuru, were juxtaposed with framing scenes involving their faltering relationship. Given that the time periods were so close together, there was too great a possibility of confusing the reader. (Ford avoids this problem by a much higher proportion of framing narrative to flashbacks, while Ishiguro’s flashback sequences are located in the distant past and revolve around a single relationship.)

Hence the final manuscript, in which I dispensed with a great deal of material involving Penny and India, retaining only a few brief flashbacks, and reconstructed the rest of the story in chronological order. Ironically, given the intervening major structural changes, the story begins at the same point it began in the first draft. Beyond the initial couple of chapters, however, the rest of the manuscript is far removed from its original conception.

This, then, is the author’s confession: whatever the strengths and weaknesses of his creative project, it cannot be said to be a postmodern confession. Like Sportswriter and Remains, my manuscript presents a protagonist-narrator who has responded to an earlier crisis by taking refuge in a value system that he uses for self-serving ends, to justify his own instinctive responses. Like those two novels, mine shows that value system subjected to increasing pressure, both from within and without, until the protagonist is forced into re-evaluation and the acknowledgement that his previous responses are susceptible to more than one interpretation. And as in Sportswriter and Remains, while the protagonist’s values and
actions are found to have caused as much trouble and damage as they have averted, they cannot be judged inherently right or wrong, and the narrative ends on a note of fragile but genuine hope, with a broadened understanding of life’s possibilities. Crucially, however, my story does not dramatise the process of confession – the negotiations between self and world via the text. While its theme and content display clear traces of postmodernity, its narrative form adheres to the premodern confessional model, in which a confessor describes past errors from a more enlightened point of view. (Indeed, it may be considered an exemplary premodern confession, since by chronicling the narrator’s deepest feelings it confirms that he has learnt his lesson.)

One may learn more from failure than from success. In hindsight it seems both ironic and appropriate that my attempt to develop a story engaging explicitly with the process of articulating one’s own interpretive framework – that is, a postmodern confession – revealed instead that my habitual choice of subjects and techniques was more deeply rooted in a premodern sensibility than I had realised. For if postmodern theory exposes the limitations of previous interpretive frameworks and narrative strategies, it must also allow that they remain available to authors whose preoccupations run in their direction. This in turn leads to one of the basic paradoxes of postmodernism: in recognising the validity of other frames of reference, it may legitimise and reinscribe precisely those values it reacts against; yet it cannot avoid doing so without falling into the same hegemonic practices. With this in mind, one might also choose to read Refrain as an allegory of postmodernism itself: the story of a character forced to realise that his new approach to life may be as much an extension of the past as a definitive break with it.

Within the terms of reference set up for this exegesis, however, Sportwriter and Remains are clearly different. As I have attempted to show in the preceding study, while they can be
viewed as (among other things) examples of confessional narrative, they also display equally strong links with postmodernism: broadly in their strategies of simultaneous ‘complicity and critique’ (Hutcheon, *Narcissistic Narrative* 11) and their demand for an ontological rather than an epistemological approach (in accordance with McHale’s formulation); and more specifically in belonging to that group of ‘closed texts that reveal an open reality’ that Elias identifies as Postmodern Realism or ‘meta-mimesis’ (22). But it is in their combination of these two elements – as *postmodern confessions* – that they derive a substantially greater significance. By depicting the difficulties and paradoxes confronting confession within postmodernity – indeed, by making these issues a major driving force for the narrative – Ford and Ishiguro dramatise and illuminate some of the central questions facing contemporary theory and practice.

To return to Tambling’s observation, previously noted in the introduction to this exegesis, ‘All suspicion of finding deep grand narrative-like truths connecting parts of a text: refusals, indeed, of confession, and the motives behind its being set up: these things mark out post-modernism as…a mode of understanding…which is available at all moments of resistance to the will to truth’ (186). Yet he continues, ‘A sense of the life as a text, where the question of who interprets is dominant: this issue confronts post-modernism and confession alike’ (192).

Ironically, postmodernism’s rejection of transcendent points of reference makes the obligation to confess as urgent as in previous ideologies. If all truth-claims and interpretations are informed by the context of their utterance (including the discursive framework itself), it becomes imperative for the subject to articulate his or her frame of reference. It would be contrary to the anti-essentialist stance of much postmodern theory to
suggest that postmodernism is inherently or intrinsically confessional. But certainly significant strands of postmodernism exhibit a strong confessional impulse.

On the other hand, without a fixed point of reference, faced with the indeterminate nature of reality and the existence of irreducible interpretations, the confessant’s situation is highly problematic. The elements that enable confession – the concepts of individual subjectivity, of the distinction between subject/narrator and object/narrated, of representation, of the will to truth itself – are precisely those elements that must be confessed. How can one comprehend one’s mode and means of comprehension?

Thus the confessional aspect of postmodernism demands that the latter acknowledge its socio-historical-cultural underpinnings; postmodernism’s influence on the confessional mode demands that the latter acknowledge its provisionality, given the absence of any objective position or transparent discourse from/through which to operate.

If I were to offer a final image of the relationship I have attempted to sketch out in this study, it might be that of the confessional mode and postmodernism as two mirrors facing each other, with the primary texts situated somewhere in between – a product of their dialectical interplay. In different ways, both novels expose the inadequacy of their own attempts to achieve certainty and closure; yet they also demonstrate the adaptability of narrators and narratives, enabling at least a provisional sense of hope.

Tempting as it is to end on such a reassuring note, however, I feel it would hardly do justice to the scrupulousness demanded by both confession and postmodernism. One ought surely to extend the postmodern confessional enterprise to the critical text itself. For is this not also the product of two facing mirrors – the authorial subject and the textual object?

From one perspective, this critical study is an attempt to situate and explicate my two primary texts within the broader theoretical, cultural and historical context of which they are
a part. Yet if, on the basis of my reading, these texts seem to authorise a particular theoretical position or framework, it is possible they do so only by virtue of my active intervention. That is, perhaps I find these elements within the texts not because they are immediately present and available but because they are produced (rather than discovered) by the critical tools and terms of reference I bring to bear on the texts. Like the fictional confessants I have examined, I may equally be projecting my own concerns on the material that comes before me. In this case, I am obliged to confess that I may have manipulated or coerced my material into simultaneously authorising my role as their confessor, and confessing the meaning I desire from them. Or to put it a slightly different way, my reading of the texts is as much an indirect, displaced confession of my own agenda and position.

From another perspective, though, can this position truly be said to be mine? Do my agenda and my choice of critical methodology emanate from my self? Or have they in turn been dictated by the surrounding discourse – the context of which I am a part, which constructs my frame of reference and delimits the horizons of my subjectivity? In this case, one might say that the world is confessing itself through me as I confess myself through my interpretation of it.

And so on, in an infinite regress that denies any possibility of fixing a definitive point of origin.
1 Henceforth I will refer to this text as *Remains*.

2 As well as playing a crucial role in Olney’s model of autobiography, which will be discussed in Chapter 4, the image has been used by (among others) Derrida in ‘Psyche: Inventions of the Other’; Gasché in his reading of Derrida; Harvey to describe the ‘overwhelmingly present’ and ‘self-referential’ aspect of postmodernity (336); and Currie in his deconstructive reading of *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (117-34).

3 As with almost everything else pertaining to the creative project, this premise would change as the project developed – a process I will detail below.

4 Henceforth I will refer to this text as *Sportswriter*.

5 Durante’s remark – ‘Writer Frank Bascombe creates a postmodern confession which allows him to move beyond the kind of naivete and cynicism that had earlier defined him’ – serves simply as the preamble to a plot synopsis, followed by a discussion of the story’s postmodern ‘narrative landscape’ (49), and concluding with the argument that ‘[s]elf-consciously calling attention to the artifice of fiction…can be regenerative rather than destructive’ (50). There is no further mention of confession, nor any insight into the nature or operation of a specifically postmodern variant.

6 Important studies include Tambling’s genealogical, Foucauldian account of the form from Augustine to Nietzsche; Root’s analysis of medieval confession manuals and their early fictional offshoots; Coetzee’s essay on the confessions of Rousseau, Tolstoy and Dostoevsky; and Currie’s exemplary postmodern reading of *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*. 
Gallagher explicitly champions a ‘soft’ postmodernist approach against what she views as the reactionary scepticism of ‘hard postmodernism’ (14-16).

The degree to which this is so remains in dispute – compare, for example, accounts by Root and Gallagher.

Although Axthelm identifies Rousseau’s optimistic, rationalist humanism with earlier confessants and situates the origin of the modern confession with Dostoevski’s anti-rationalist, pessimistic Notes from the Underground (8), I would agree with Gallagher (following Toulmin) that rationalism, romanticism and their despairing offspring were all crucially premised upon a transcendent subject – the ‘idealization of a private, completely unfettered self’ (xix).

Since the term ‘confessor’ may refer either to one who offers a confession or one who receives a confession, I will follow Coetzee in using the term ‘confessant’ for the former.

Duff notes that the study of genre is ‘enjoying renewed currency in literary discourse’; nevertheless, it is by no means universally accepted, and ‘Foucault’s “archaeology of knowledge” still in effect competes with the “sociology of genres” ’ (2, 17). For a post-structuralist/deconstructivist critique of genre theory, see Derrida’s ‘The Law of Genre’.

The point is made by Walker (9), Hornby (97) and Hobson (94); and Ford admits the influence in Guagliardo, ‘A Conversation’ (182).

Waugh, in ‘Postmodern Fiction and the Rise of Critical Theory’, makes a similar distinction between ‘strong’ and ‘weak’ versions of postmodernism, citing Remains as a favourable example of the latter (77). While concurring with her positive evaluation of the novel, I will argue for a more radical reading.
14 Nonetheless, it should be clear that the relationship established in Part I – between the modern confession and the post-Enlightenment project of modernity – implies a conception of postmodernism much broader than any relating specifically to the early-twentieth-century artistic movement known as modernism.

15 My point is not that these writers necessarily concur on theoretical matters, but that they choose to examine a similar range of authors and texts – for example, John Barth and Robert Coover.

16 For example, Disher’s analysis of Ford as a ‘dirty realist’ and Parkes’s positioning of Ishiguro within the psychological realist tradition pioneered by Henry James and Ford Madox Ford.

17 The point is also made in passing by Hobson (94) and Durante, from whom I take the term ‘postmodern confession’ (47).

18 The fragmentation of ‘grand’ narratives into ‘little’ narratives is one of the cornerstones of Lyotard’s model of the postmodern condition.

19 See, for example, Eco’s ‘Postmodernism, Irony, the Enjoyable’, and Jencks’s ‘Post-Modernism Defined’.

20 The term, taken up by Petry in his analysis of Remains (14), also appears in Guinn’s study of Sportswriter (xvii).

21 Sportswriter also follows Elias’s observation that postmodern realist texts centralise their critique ‘by depicting a protagonist facing a personal catastrophe that is so cataclysmic or psychologically shocking that the protagonist’s essentialist world view is shattered and replaced by a postmodern conception of reality’ (14). The death of Frank’s son and the failure of his marriage are just such catalysts.
22 In *Remains*, Stevens’s crisis at Weymouth pier following his disappointing reunion with Mrs Benn is another such instance.

23 Ford himself has referred to ‘those double reflecting mirrors’ in an interview about *Sportswriter* (Bonetti 32).

24 Ford highlights the issue of language from another angle in his remark that, ‘sports is so much the language of modern America’ (Bonetti 29).

25 For discussions of the term ‘implied author’, see Booth (67-76), Chatman (151) and Rimmon-Kenan (86-90).

26 Doyle, for instance, describes Stevens’s use of ‘you’ as a ‘stylistic device for conveying to the reader a feeling of otherness within the narrator and perhaps even within the reader himself’ (74).

27 While acknowledging their positive influence on his career, Ishiguro has repeatedly distanced himself from such readings (see interviews with Mason, Vorda and Herzinger, and Oe).

28 Nevertheless, the anxiety displayed by Stevens’s new master, the American Mr Farraday, in maintaining the signs of authenticity and continuity (6-7, 123-25) suggests a movement into the postmodern world of what Baudrillard terms simulacra.

29 Echoes of both deconstruction and Olney’s model of autobiography may also be found in Carpi’s observation that Stevens desires ‘to turn himself into a mirror’ (170) and Guth’s description of the novel as ‘an endless jeu de miroirs’ (137).

30 See Paulos 52, Goffman 44-6, Hermerén 73 and Karstetter 175.

31 Indeed, a similar usage of the phrase occurs in *Remains*, in the opening passage when Stevens’s new employer points out that the narrator has never had the opportunity ‘to see
around this beautiful country’ (4) – an observation that is true not only literally but also metaphorically in the sense that his individual point of view is uncritically embedded in its ideological surroundings.

32 Doyle notes that this term, extended by Greimasian semiotics from Jakobson’s notion of shifting, can be re-translated into English as disengagement.

33 The term ‘inradiegetic’ – referring to characters within a narrated story – is taken from studies of narrative typology by Genette (265) and Rimmon-Kenan (105).

34 The Nietzschean ‘will to truth’ is that which, ‘despising polytropism, produces a conviction of truth as lying out there waiting to be discovered in all its clarificatory force’ (Tambling 186).

35 In this I follow Currie’s postmodern literary analysis of another confession, Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde (131-134).
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