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The Circular Pilgrimage

**An Anatomy of Confessional
Autobiography in Spain**



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Preface	vii
Introduction	
Metamorphosis and the Quest	1
Chapter One	
Words and Worldliness: Santa Teresa's <i>Vida</i>	25
Chapter Two	
Lázaro de Tormes and the Double Discourse of Confession	53
Chapter Three	
Romantic Fragments and Mirrored Myths: The Confessional Double	91
Chapter Four	
"Una peregrinación sin destino": Bradomín's Confessions of an Aesthete	121
Chapter Five	
The Framed Autobiographer: Pascual Duarte and His Transcriber	145
Conclusion	171
Notes	179
Bibliography	193

Preface

During the last twenty years critics have invested considerable effort in the construction of a theoretical framework from which to view the phenomenon of autobiography and its subset, literary confession. The works of artists from England, France, and Italy, in particular, have been scrutinized and reevaluated in light of new theoretical perspectives. Unfortunately, not until recently have Hispanists kept pace with their comparativist colleagues in the analysis of Spain's confessional tradition. In the pages that follow, I shall not attempt an exhaustive review of the confessional mode from the Middle Ages to the present; rather, my approach will be to define the salient characteristics of this literary tradition and to demonstrate how these traits, when applied to a series of fundamental Spanish texts, can provide an opportunity for fresh readings of well-studied material. As a result of these close readings, I hope to be able to make important generalizations regarding the experience of writing about one's self and to highlight transformations that occur as artists attempt to represent themselves with words. Confession in narrative form, whether nonfiction, like Teresa's *Vida*, or fiction written in the autobiographical format, provides a logical point of departure for the study of the confessional voice. A close analysis of these same discursive tendencies in poetry and theater, though equally fruitful, is beyond the scope of this study.

Modern literature in the Western Hemisphere owes much to the writers of the late Middle Ages who first explored the territory of the self as artistic subject matter. John of Salisbury uses a well-known metaphor:

Bernard de Chartres used to compare us to puny dwarfs perched on the shoulders of giants. He pointed out that we see more and farther than our

predecessors, not because we have keener vision or greater height, but because we are lifted up and born aloft on their gigantic stature.¹

The topics discussed in the following chapters derive to a large extent from the rich and expansive poetic legacy left by one of these giants, Francesco Petrarca. His work, which has had a singular impact on Western literature, explored early on the notion of the confessional mode in art. His sonnets and *canzonieri* follow Augustine's *Confessions* and Dante's *Vita Nuova* as the first great confessional works that attempt to understand self-consciousness in both moral and aesthetic terms. From his poetry we may distill many of the characteristics and concerns that define the anatomy of the modern confession.

Petrarca's Sonnet I introduces the confessional tone of the *Canzonieri*.

Voi ch' ascoltate in rime sparse il suono
di quei sospiri ond' io nudriva 'l core
in sul mio primo giovenile errore,
quand' era in parte altr' uom da quel ch' i' sono.²

[You who hear in scattered rhymes the sound of those sighs with which I nourished my heart during my first youthful error, when I was in part another man from what I am now.] (36)

Recognition of past folly and claims of conversion are implicit in the first half of the octave. The poet transgressed, but now, in a redeemed state, he finds himself capable of looking back on the past and perceiving his personal metamorphosis. In the sestet he alludes to his heightened vision:

Ma ben veggio or sì come al popol tutto
favola fui gran tempo, onde sovente
di me medesimo meco mi vergogno;
et del mio vaneggiar vergogna è 'l frutto,
e 'l pentersi, e 'l conoscer chiaramente
che quanto piace al mondo è breve sogno.

[But now I see well how for a long time I was the talk of the crowd, for which often I am ashamed of myself within; and of my raving, shame is the

fruit, and repentance, and the clear knowledge that whatever pleases in the world is a brief dream.]

However, Giuseppe Mazzotta warns against accepting the appearance of conversion and redemption in the *Canzonieri*:

The implied link between beginning and end gives the poetic sequence a circular structure which challenges the possibility of renewal and leads the reader to suspect that the moral claim is the ambiguous expedient by which the poet attempts to constitute his own self as an authority.³

Petrarca, like Augustine, gives the illusion of conversion and of the ultimate authority of the self, only to discover and reveal eventually that the journey remains incomplete: the pilgrim never arrives at the destination and must remain in a fertile yet infinite exile.

This sense of creative exile intensifies in Petrarca's reflections on the tenuous relationship between language and its referents. Unlike Dante, who relies on the transcendency of the word, Petrarca constantly stumbles on its imperfection. In Rime CXXXV he laments art's impotency to capture the essence of the ineffable Laura:

Però ch' Amor mi sforza
et di saver mi spoglia,
parlo in rime aspre et di dolcezza ignude;

. . .

ch' aver dentro a lui parme
un che Madonna sempre
depinge et de lei parla;
a voler poi ritrarla
per me non basto et par ch' io me ne stempre:
lasso, così m'è scorso
lo mio dolce soccorso. (241)

[Since Love forces me and strips me of all skill, I speak in harsh rhymes naked of sweetness . . . for it seems to me that I have someone within who always portrays my lady and speaks of her: I am not sufficient to describe her by myself, and I come unturned because of it; alas, so has my comfort fled.] (240)

Petrarca's realization that language resists the reconstruction of history or the definition of the artistic subject continues in our century and in fact reaches its apotheosis in structuralist and poststructuralist theories. Confessing autobiographers, attempting to obtain a type of redemption, struggle with the paradox of the saving grace of a language that is itself in a fallen state.

Robert M. Durling notes that in this poem (CXXV) "the poet's frustration has created a split between the inner poignancy of his feelings and his capacity to express them" (21), and Mazzotta adds, referring to yet another piece, that "Petrarca is at the same time both Acteon and Diana but he is also neither, a double, like the two foci of an ellipsis always implicating each other and always apart" (283–84). This doubling goes beyond Petrarca's situation. All who attempt to write about themselves experience the inescapable tension of the divided self that seeks to restore wholeness. In the effort, as Petrarca discovered, a fundamental paradox exists: the writer is "doubled" by the act of writing at the same time that he or she manipulates the art in order to regain integrity.

Critics often read the *Canzonieri* as an account of a divided self who has lost faith in the redemptive power of grace and seeks salvation in aesthetics.⁴ Mazzotta notes that many view the *Canzonieri* "as a narcissistic and idolatrous construct because it tells the story of a poet who loves the work of his own hands and manufactures his own grace" (272–73). Again, Petrarca anticipates a modern point of view as he appropriates an inherently religious form (the confession) and a sacred subject matter (redemption) and translocates these concepts to a secular sphere. By doing so, he deemphasizes the metaphysical aspects of his work and exalts the importance of the artistic questions involved.

Within this artistic context, Petrarca "has an acute awareness that writing poetry involves a kind of death" (Durling, *Lyric Poems* 33). Mazzotta compares the poetic experience to the death suffered by Narcissus, who, transformed into a flower, could live forever only by repeatedly dying (280). I will demonstrate in later chapters how the Narcissus myth implicates itself in most confessional situations.

The notion of poetic death is ambiguous in that it simultaneously signifies an end and a rebirth, a final stagnation and an