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Abstract

Within political theory, it is Jean-Jacques Rousseau who is often associated with the idea that humans have an intrinsic response to the pain of others. Yet, this article argues that he should also be understood as a theorist of the paralyzing effects of guilt and that it was his guilt, not sympathy, which marked the most intense interpersonal moments in his life. As a counterpoint to Rousseau's assessment, the second part examines the guilt felt by Afrikaner journalist Antjie Krog in her memoir of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, *Country of My Skull*. Her reflections on the guilt connected to apartheid and to the experience of an extra-marital affair reveal the dynamics of (1) pleasure and (2) paralysis through guilt that seem to animate Rousseau's writing but that he fails to address directly. Moreover, Krog's attention to the two variants of guilt and their relationships to the possibility of repair shed light on the gaps and silences in Rousseau's writing.

Keywords

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Antjie Krog, sympathy, confessions, guilt, repair, pleasure, adultery, apartheid, truth commission, South Africa

What is the relationship between guilt, sympathy, and repair? How does it manifest itself in political and private life? Within political theory, it is Jean-Jacques Rousseau who is often associated with the idea that humans have an intrinsic response to the pain of others. Yet, this article argues that he should also be understood as a theorist of the paralyzing effects of guilt. Examining his *Confessions* in light of his reflections in the *Second Discourse* shows that it was his guilt, not sympathy, which marked the most intense

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interpersonal moments in his life. As a counterpoint, the second part of the article examines the guilt felt by Afrikaner journalist Antjie Krog in her memoir of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), *Country of My Skull*.¹ Her reflections on the guilt connected to apartheid and to her experience of an extra-marital affair reveal the dynamic of (1) pleasure and (2) paralysis through guilt that seem to animate Rousseau's writing but that he fails to address directly. Moreover, Krog's attention to the two variants of guilt and their relationships to the possibility of repair shed light on the gaps and silences in Rousseau's writing.

I was drawn to examining Rousseau's guilt in the *Confessions* because of an interest in the confessional aspects of the South African TRC where, between 1996–1998, over 2,000 people gave testimony in public about violence they had experienced under apartheid.² Witnesses at the Human Rights Violations Committee hearings at the TRC spoke, for example, about torture, gun violence, and rape in the context of both the white Security forces and the anti-apartheid revolutionary movement. The testimonies and report that followed also addressed the ongoing psychological problems that remained from violence that happened years ago. Truth commissions highlight the challenge of responding to suffering in a political rather than personal context, and Krog's writing brings to the fore the relevance of Rousseau's observations. A more nuanced understanding of his canonical idea of sympathy (along with its blindness to guilt) can influence future theorizing about the role of such commissions as spaces for the communication of pain.

I. Sympathy in the *Discourse on Inequality*

In his well-known discussion of sympathy in the *Discourse on Inequality* (*Second Discourse*), Rousseau presents an idyllic state of nature where sympathy for the suffering of others is intrinsic for all.³ Although Rousseau argues that the fear of pain, along with the fear of hunger, is primordial in the hierarchy of human needs, it does not prevent an individual from ameliorating the suffering of another when he or she encounters it. In fact, the instinct to self-preservation (*amour de soi*) can exist alongside a type of sympathy for others, and the balance between the two contributes to a stable and harmonious world of individuals before the rise of the state.⁴

Rousseau states that *pitié*, translated here as sympathy, has both a social function as well as a regulatory one. Socially, it forms an unspoken bond based on the shared experience of human suffering and it is one of the intuitive ways in which humans interact with

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1. Antjie Krog, *Country of My Skull: Guilt, Sorrow, and the Limits of Forgiveness in the New South Africa* (New York: Times Books, 1998).
 2. Richard A. Wilson, *The Politics of Truth and Reconciliation in South Africa: Legitimizing the Post-Apartheid State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 21.
 3. The *Discourse on Inequality* (also known as the *Second Discourse*) was published in 1755 while the *Confessions* was published in 1770, eight years before Rousseau's death.
 4. Rousseau's term *pitié* is translated as both "pity" and "sympathy;" terms that have slightly different connotations in English but which evoke the sentiment of feeling sorry for the one in pain, rather than the idea of experiencing the pain of another as one's own as captured by the term "empathy."

others. Of *pitié*, Rousseau writes: "It is, in a word, in this Natural sentiment rather than in subtle arguments that one has to seek the cause of the repugnance to evil-doing which every human being would feel even independently of the maxims of education."⁵ The Oxford English Dictionary defines sympathy as both the general sense of "conformity of feelings, inclinations, or temperament," which makes persons agreeable to each other, where shared feelings can be both negative and positive, and the more specific version of sympathy that entails being "affected by the suffering or sorrow of another; a feeling of compassion or commiseration."⁶ The way Rousseau understands *pitié* fits with the second definition of sympathy and is primarily concerned with the affinity others feel for our misfortune.⁷ I use sympathy rather than *pity* because *pity*, in its contemporary interpretation, carries a sense of condescension or contempt that is inconsistent with Rousseau's usage. As a regulatory function, sympathy acts as a restraint against the violence and chaos that can arise in a society without law or a social contract. Since Rousseau's conception of sympathy in the state of nature is visceral and prelinguistic, it is not mediated by culture, nor formally taught, and appears to be innate to humanity.

At this earliest stage of human sociality, he does not see the potential for conflict between the two intrinsic responses of self-preservation and sympathy, nor does he see the possibility of guilt in the aftermath of a failure to act. The identities of the "innocent victim" in need of sympathy and the "agent" who can offer it are clear. He writes:

It is therefore quite certain that pity is a natural sentiment which, by moderating in every individual the activity of self-love, contributes to the mutual preservation of the entire species. It is pity that carries us without reflection to the assistance of those we see suffer.⁸

Like distressed animals seeing another member of their species being beaten, humans have a visceral response to the suffering of others.⁹ Rousseau uses the examples of a mother responding to the cries of a child and horses refusing to stampede (and trample

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5. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Discourses and other Early Political Writings*, ed. Victor Gourevitch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), Second Discourse, Part I, p. 38.
 6. Oxford English Dictionary Online, <http://www.oed.com> Accessed April 15, 2012.
 7. I am persuaded by Boyd's argument that, for Rousseau, pity in the contemporary age cannot have the egalitarian quality that it had in the state of nature, it is always accompanied by a salient awareness of difference. He writes, "Between the denatured selves of civil society whom Rousseau describes as having attained 'self-consciousness,' the next and inevitable recognition must be that everything else that constitutes that self is conventional, particular, and alien." Richard Boyd, "Pity's Pathologies Portrayed: Rousseau and the Limits of Democratic Compassion," *Political Theory* 32, no. 4 (2004).
 8. *The Discourse on Inequality* (also known as the Second Discourse) was published in 1755 while the *Confessions* was published in 1770, eight years before Rousseau's death. Rousseau, *The Discourses and other Early Political Writings*, p. 154. Jean-Jacques Rousseau and J.M. Cohen, *The Confessions of Jean-Jacques Rousseau* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1977).
 9. See Gourevitch's introduction for the assessment that self-preservation and pity are coeval in Rousseau's construction of the state of nature. He writes, "By speaking about self-preservation and pity as 'principles,' Rousseau is calling attention to the fact that they manifest themselves in different forms at different stages of the development of individuals and the species." Rousseau, *The Discourses and other Early Political Writings*, p. xvii.

other horses) as paradigmatic moments in his schematic of the worthy and innocent victim and the compassionate responder.¹⁰ His examples are meant to speak to the visceral response we have when we see the suffering of another human being, but they also evince that the other must be acutely vulnerable and free of blame.

However, the destructive consequences of the rise of modernity place such strong constraints on the sympathetic instinct that they muffle its visceral nature. In the rest of the *Second Discourse* Rousseau tracks the decline of the instinct as self-love emerges as a new force. This is *amour-propre*: a concern with vanity and status that prohibits individuals from acting on their instinct to compassion.¹¹

I The Corruption of Sympathy through Reason

While Rousseau does not talk about guilt in relation to sympathy in the *Second Discourse*, a line of thinking within the work prefigures it. From the callous disregard of the tyrant to the disregard of the philosopher who should know better, Rousseau shows the ways in which reason and *amour propre* work together to supersede the instinct for sympathy, a move that will eventually give rise to guilt. With the rise of industrialization, culture, and formal political structures, Rousseau notes that the instinct to sympathize is not lost abruptly, but first begins to exist hypocritically alongside greed and corruption. He writes, “since we see everyday in our theatres the kind of man who is moved and cries over the misfortunes of an unfortunate, but who, if he were in the tyrant’s place, would even increase his enemy’s torments.”¹² Two points are worth noting here. The first is the idea that an ability to perform a type of sympathy in reaction to aesthetic depictions will NOT be transferred to a real situation. The second is that of the corrupting influence of power on compassion. The tyrant believes he must use all means necessary to hold on to his power, which is undeserved and illegitimate, even when its demands conflict with visceral human reactions. Thus, for the tyrant in the age of political consolidation, sympathy based on common humanity is a luxury from a different era.

While the callous actions of the tyrant are disappointing, Rousseau is even more disheartened by the lack of compassion a citizen will display toward his peers. He predicts that individuals will use reasoning to separate themselves from the suffering of their fellow man, such that even when self-preservation or political power are not at stake, they will enjoy the feeling that they are in a relative position of strength in comparison to the one in pain. This is a source of satisfaction that will eclipse the sense of responsibility to another. He writes, “It is reason that engenders self-love, and it is reflection that

10. “I speak of Pity, a disposition suited to beings as weak and as subject to so many ills as we are; a virtue all the more universal and useful to man as it precedes the exercise of all reflection in him, and so natural that even the beasts sometimes show evident signs of it. To say nothing of the tenderness mothers feel for their young and of the dangers they brave in order to protect them, one daily sees the repugnance of horses to trample a living body underfoot.” *Ibid.*, p. 152.

11. On the question of whether the dichotomy of nature (good) and society (evil) holds up in Rousseau’s thought as a whole, see Jonathan Marks, “Who Lost Nature? Rousseau and Rousseauism,” *Polity* 34, no. 4 (2002).

12. Rousseau, *Second Discourse*, p. 28.

strengthens it, it is reason that turns man back on himself and that separates him from all that annoys and afflicts him. It is philosophy that isolates him, it is philosophy that allows him to say privately, at the sight of suffering man: Perish if you will, I am safe."¹³ Thus, the obstacle to offering sympathy is, for most men, not the seduction of power, but rather the manipulative possibilities offered by the process of reasoning for self-acquittal. Reason, narrowly defined here as an instrumental consideration of self-interest, allows one's tendency toward comparison to dominate consideration of how to act when a peer suffers misfortune. Yet, this same type of reason might also lead to discomfort at failing to recognize the common humanity of the other. The quotation indicates that while reason is effective at mitigating the instinct to compassion, there is still some cognitive dissonance in the reasoning man. It is not that he fails to understand that there is a claim to sympathy at play. It can be minimized, however, with effort. The outcome of this effort is that the individual can feel comfortable with his lack of action, if only momentarily. It is notable that Rousseau does not describe the guilt that may follow, but his description brings the reader right to its cusp. Nonetheless, from early in the rise of *amour propre* and the concerns of modern life, Rousseau notes that when confronted with the suffering of another, reason is more readily harnessed for the purpose of absolving oneself of responsibility, rather than responding to the suffering of another.

Rousseau provides an even more dramatic example of the failure of compassion between fellow citizens that accompanies the rise of culture when he draws a comparison with the natural instinct to sympathy in "savage" man. He writes, "His fellow man may have his throat slit with impunity under his window; the philosopher has only to put his hands over his ears and argue with himself a little to prevent nature, which rebels within him, from making him identify with the one being murdered."¹⁴ Even in the case of someone being murdered nearby, Rousseau posits that the philosopher will be able to remove himself from any interpersonal obligations by covering his ears. The perverse outcome of this situation, which occurs after the philosopher's internal deliberation, reflects the consequence of an emphasis on reason and the privileging of a type of philosophical thought over sympathy. It is worth noting that Rousseau does not think that reason may have the effect of leading to intervention: for instance, the idea that the murder taking place at the window has indirect effects on the inhabitants inside and others who live nearby and therefore necessitates action. The two examples Rousseau gives of modern scenarios of the philosophers' impoverished sense of sympathy have different emphases. The first is a type of *schadenfreude* and closely related to the obsession with status that constitutes *amour propre*. The second is a variety of narcissism in which the experiences of others never reach such a level of importance that they can affect the insular world of one's own experience. Why stopping the murder would be difficult on a practical level is not significant for the philosopher, nor is the future cost to his reputation as a bystander to injustice. All that is important is the distaste that the philosopher experiences in response to the situation, including frustration at having to make a decision about sympathetic action at all. While not acknowledged directly, his frustration may then be followed by regret at having made the wrong decision. Although Rousseau does

13. Rousseau, *Second Discourse*, p. 53.

14. Rousseau, *Second Discourse*, p. 29.

not recognize it, guilt will become the quintessential act of “seeming” rather than “being” that defines *amour propre* in his own life: he can, in public, appear to be a person capable of sympathy through the performance of guilt without having to act in a sympathetic way toward someone else.

Examining *amour de soi* and *amour propre* together in Rousseau’s *Second Discourse* reveals that it is not as if humans lacked self-interest or the visceral instinct of self-preservation in the idealized state of nature. They did, but it did not interfere with urgent moments of responding to the pain of others. The examples he gives of the decline over time of the sympathetic, namely of the tyrant and the philosopher, illustrate the shifting balance of sympathy and self-love. The influences of power and reason further complicate the shift and make the calculation between responding to the pain of another and considering the costs to one’s own ego more difficult. In the cloud surrounding one’s decision to offer sympathy to another or withhold it, I suggest that guilt becomes the salient outcome. For Rousseau, even with the rise of *amour propre*, the instinct to help may still be strong. The decision to *override* this instinct, an instinct that had previously been visceral and strongly motivational, will not go unnoticed within the psyche. The detritus of this process will become guilt, a dynamic that will later have a powerful effect on his framework for thinking about sympathy and interpersonal communication.¹⁵

II. The Confessions

While the *Second Discourse* examines the question of sympathy through the eyes of another, Rousseau’s memoir, the *Confessions*, written between 1765 and 1769, provides a rich depiction of the pain he witnessed and the guilt he experienced firsthand. Most prominently, it is a presentation of Rousseau’s own suffering, including the emotions of shame, anger, and despair, alongside his hopes for how others might respond to these emotions in a way that he finds satisfactory. It thus provides a type of immanent critique of the theory of sympathy found in his other works. Even when his recollections very clearly include the sufferings of others, Rousseau is not able to imagine how he could have acted in a sympathetic way in such situations. He cannot forget these moments and his guilt about his failure to act is amorphous and longstanding, but it is never connected to the need to respond to the suffering of others. Without such an interpersonal understanding of how suffering is communicated and precipitates a response, his interest in communicating pain is only self-referential. In short, Rousseau’s quest to display the “authentic self” is mired in the expression of guilt without attention to the sympathetic needs of others. This reading is sympathetic to the influential interpretations of the *Confessions* offered by Paul deMan and Peter Brooks. Brooks writes that Rousseau’s

15. Cooper suggests that the desire “to extend our being” is the highest goal for Rousseau and comparable to eros in the Platonic framework. Although Cooper only briefly discusses the role of compassion as a second-order good, I would suggest that fully responding to the pain of another could be considered to be a profound version of such an extension of being and thus consistent with his reading. Laurence Cooper, “Between Eros and Will to Power: Rousseau and the Desire to Extend our Being,” *American Political Science Review* 98, no. 1 (2004).

confessions have two simultaneous goals: “to avoid punishment (to obtain absolution) and to assure punishment (to produce the scene of shame and guilt).”¹⁶ Not only do the speech acts of confessions carry these contradictory longings in relation to punishment, they also, he argues, feed the drama of performance necessary to bring them about. Rousseau had to first be haunted and constrained by the weight of a guilty conscience in order to provide fodder for the drama of future confession.

Self-consciously referencing Augustine’s famous work of the same title, Rousseau aims to provide an honest account of his life and wants to be declared a decent and worthy human being by his peers.¹⁷ His candid style and his emphasis on psychological and sexual development and experiences have prompted scholars to declare that Rousseau’s *Confessions* marked the beginning of modern autobiography.¹⁸ He wants to be judged in a sympathetic way and he wants others to affirm his decency and humanity. On the question of Rousseau’s motivations for composing his memoirs, Jean Starobinski writes, “Do not judge me, he says, but do not stop looking at me either. In fact, Rousseau both wants and fears to be misunderstood. He does not want to be understood, inasmuch as being understood means being caught, that is, finding a readymade place in the system of inauthentic values by which the world is governed . . . Jean-Jacques’s sense of himself is that he is absolutely unique. While hoping that others will recognize his uniqueness, he refuses to be recognized as one of them.”¹⁹ Rousseau’s preoccupation with his own uniqueness, in Starobinski’s assessment, suggests another reason why responding to the pain of others carries no weight within Rousseau’s recollection; his own pain is the only one worth examining. Yet his experience suggests a phenomenon that is more broadly relevant for political theory: one’s own need for understanding and empathy does *not*, as a matter of course, give rise to the ability to respond to the pain of others, in part because of the impact of guilt. Therefore, a theory of responding to pain must be considered separately from the ability to describe or explore one’s own similar experiences.

The genre of autobiography is, however, particularly attuned to the exploration of guilt felt by its author. Put more forcefully, the *raison d’être* for the genre is the exposition and expurgation of guilt. J.M. Coetzee draws attention to the motivation of absolution in confessional texts, a perpetually futile goal because the audience that offers absolution lacks the authority to do so.²⁰ Yet, the promise of memoir as the secular space

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16. Peter Brooks, *Troubling Confessions: Speaking Guilt in Law and Literature* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2000), p. 23. Paul deMan, *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1979). See also Robert J. Ellrich, “De Man’s Purloined Meaning,” *MLN* 106, no. 5 (1991).
 17. Christopher Kelly, *Rousseau’s Exemplary Life: The Confessions as Political Philosophy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987), p. 10.
 18. Huntington Williams, *Rousseau and Romantic Autobiography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 3. Susan K. Jackson, *Rousseau’s Occasional Autobiographies* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 1992).
 19. Jean Starobinski, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: Transparency and Obstruction* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1988), p. 124.
 20. J.M. Coetzee, “Confession and Double Thoughts: Tolstoy, Rousseau, Dostoevsky,” *Comparative Literature* 37, no. 3 (1985).

for confession and absolution enacted a strong hold on Rousseau's imagination and those who followed his path. The confessional autobiography does not care about truth so much as the authenticity of the author's voice as detected through language. Writing about the depth and persistence of his own guilt, Rousseau believes he displays a type of authenticity unique to the genre and at odds with the preoccupation with superficial concerns of status that constitute *amour propre*.

Coetzee's observation that the confessional genre is vulnerable to a regression to the "infinity of self-awareness and self-doubt" may help explain why guilt is so paralyzing for Rousseau and cannot lead to restitution or repair.²¹ The process of confession, it is feared, can exist *ad infinitum*. The charge of infinite regress of understanding one's action, the guilt of those actions, the reasons for such guilt, the reasons for writing about guilt, etc. can be paralyzing and the author must, at some point, close off the possibility of more questions and even greater self-awareness. While this mandate for closure may be inevitable, it is ironic that it happens for Rousseau at the moment when the pain of others becomes salient, a phenomenon that he considers to be a peak human experience in the *Second Discourse*. His capacity for self-awareness ends just when he has the opportunity to practice sympathy, and his paralysis is another manifestation of the dominance of reason and *amour propre*.

III. Two Moments of Guilt

In two self-proclaimed "central confessions" found in the first part of his memoir, Rousseau's guilt is longstanding and evinces the desire for authenticity particular to the genre described above. The first incident occurs when Rousseau, then a 16-year-old servant, steals a ribbon and places the blame on the maid Marion, to whom he is sexually attracted. He had planned to give the ribbon to her as a gift and his blame, precipitating both of their dismissal, is a desperate attempt to link their fate.²²

I boldly accused her. She was confused, did not utter a word, and threw me a glance that would have disarmed the devil, but my cruel heart resisted . . . The poor girl started to cry, but all she said to me was, "Oh, Rousseau, I thought you were a good fellow. You make me very sad, but I should not like to be in your place."²³

This incident, more than any other, continues to haunt him, possibly because he betrayed someone, a woman he desires, in a face-to-face interaction. He realizes that he has made a mistake and that she will suffer its consequences (as will he), but he does not yield. In a clear reversal of the instinct to recognizing the humanity in another, Rousseau appears

21. Coetzee, "Confession and Double Thoughts," p. 215.

22. Starobinski suggests that Jean-Jacques' mistreatment could be considered "ambivalent. By slandering her Rousseau proved that he loved her and almost declared his love openly." She was the object of his thoughts and attention at the time of the incident and through blaming her, they became connected in an inexplicable way. Starobinski, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: Transparency and Obstruction*, p. 172.

23. Rousseau and Cohen, *The Confessions of Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, p. 87.

to deny her sympathy, even when she asks for it directly and even though he wants to be erotically linked to her. Brooks draws attention to the narrative of desired friendship that Rousseau describes in relation to Marion; the false accusation serves as a testament to a fervent desire for a type of binding experience, rather than cruelty.²⁴ The binding experience of the false accusation stands as a parallel for the unrealized affair and Rousseau's description of Marion further evokes romantic loss when he writes, "I have ruined a nice, honest, and decent girl, who was certainly worth a great deal more than I, and doomed her to disgrace and misery."²⁵ As his betrayal lingers in his consciousness, Marion becomes a caricature of the innocent victim and unworthy of the disgrace Rousseau forced upon her, but the question of a reconciliation with her is not broached. It is as if he has a sympathetic attachment to the doomed romance, but not to Marion herself. Even when Rousseau can admit that his "inner feeling" of affection for Marion is not obvious from the turn of events surrounding the ribbon, he cannot consider communicating this feeling to her. Instead, the act of writing the *Confessions* brings to the fore, not the friendship, but Rousseau's deathly fear of "the public exposure" of the secret and the drama of its eventual disclosure.²⁶

The fear of shame as it was experienced by Rousseau at the time of the theft and in his recounting of it is the most intense sentiment to which we are privy. He seems both bothered and unusually curious about the way such shame has played a force in his life and how it has affected the way he thought about petty criminality since. "My invincible sense of shame prevailed over everything," he wrote and "I saw nothing but the horror of being found out, of being publicly proclaimed, to my face, as a thief, a liar, and slanderer. Utter confusion robbed me of *all other feeling*."²⁷ Included in these other feelings was the attachment and affection he felt for Marion, the sentiment that catalyzed the incident itself. More compelling to Rousseau, psychologically and in his writing, is the experience of shame and the cathartic release of disclosure. While being considered a "thief, a liar, a slanderer" was terrifying for Rousseau, it is consistent with the will to authenticity that frames the *Confessions* itself.

The second notable incident is when Rousseau recalls the time he abandoned a traveling companion who was having an epileptic seizure. M. le Maître was a cellist and *bon vivant*, always good company in Rousseau's estimation but prone to taking slights to heart. On one such occasion, M. le Maître became so insulted by a clergyman's actions that he abandoned his musical responsibilities during Easter Week and took refuge in another town. Rousseau agreed to accompany him and they enjoyed food, drink and laughter before Rousseau noticed that his friend was prone to epileptic fits. One day as they are walking on the street M. le Maître suffers from a seizure. Rousseau initially cries out to others on the street for help but then he cannot wait for help to arrive. With much distress Rousseau recalls, "Then, whilst the crowd gathered and pressed round him where he had fallen insensible and foaming in the middle of the street, the poor man was abandoned by the sole friend upon which he might have counted. I seized a moment

24. Brooks, *Troubling Confessions: Speaking Guilt in Law and Literature*, p. 20.

25. Rousseau and Cohen, *The Confessions of Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, p. 86.

26. deMan, *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust*.

27. Rousseau and Cohen, *The Confessions of Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, p. 88. Emphasis added

when no one was looking and dodged round the street corner and disappeared. Heaven be praised that I have finished this third disgraceful confession!”²⁸ Rousseau acknowledges that he abandoned his responsibility and attributes this to his immaturity and being of an age “when great griefs have little hold.”²⁹ He suggests that with the passage of time he became even more acutely aware of his betrayal of his friend, yet he cannot think of contacting M. le Maître to apologize or even to ask how he is faring (Rousseau heard about a significant professional setback that befell him shortly after the incident). Rousseau consoles himself with the knowledge that “I had been useful to him in his escape, and that was the only service incumbent upon me . . . I should not have cured him of his complaint.”³⁰ While the relational component of this “confession” again falls out of his self-narrative, Rousseau reckons with an earlier version of himself and adjudicates conflicting impulses to accept and repel blame for the incident. Even in his recollections years later, it is not clear why Rousseau was so disturbed by this sight that he could not offer the help that he knew was required. An epileptic seizure fits even the narrowest definition of physical pain and necessitates the practical need for medical help even prior to the question of offering comfort. What were the emotions that prevented Rousseau from acting on the sympathetic impulses that he considered to be universal in the *Discourse on Inequality*? He cannot answer this question and does not explain why sympathy failed to manifest itself in him during this particular incident, but his own guilt about the incident lingers. One way to understand his reaction is as a symptom of the corrosive nature of *amour propre*; even when there were obvious invitations to consider the pain of the other, the pain of the self, in the form of Rousseau’s unease and fear, still trumped. The power of *amour propre* comes, in part, from its ability to be a great shape-shifter – the modern individual thinks he is able to offer sympathy to another and feels the weight of this responsibility, but this impulse only serves to deepen his narcissistic preoccupation.

In his own words, the memoir acts as a way for Rousseau to reveal his authentic self – the truest manifestation of himself without the distortions of modern society. Pain, both physical and psychological, and sexuality emerge from these anecdotes as essential to the representation of the authentic self. The phenomena of both pain and sex are self-regarding; the sexual partner, the traveling companion, and the friend are all incidental. Even in the case of the purloined ribbon, the framing and betrayal felt by the maid are not as important as Rousseau’s guilty conscience and he does not feel the need to rectify the relationship. By not actually engaging with the needs and expectations of others, Rousseau’s understanding of sympathy remains far removed from his own failings, moral lapses, and guilt. Moreover, a protracted discussion of these failings, and all of their shades of self-involved meaning, becomes a distinct source of pleasure for him. The multiplicity of interpretations is, Brooks argues, central to the task of confession itself. Rather than a conduit to truth, or even to punishment, confessions generate a surfeit of psychological responses where they “cohabit with both truth and lie.”³¹ As much as

28. Rousseau and Cohen, *The Confessions of Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, p. 128.

29. Rousseau and Cohen, *The Confessions of Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, p. 130.

30. Rousseau and Cohen, *The Confessions of Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, p. 131.

31. Brooks, *Troubling Confessions: Speaking Guilt in Law and Literature*, p. 49.

Rousseau fears judgment, his writing also suggests that there is something satisfying in verbalizing his transgressions. He does not acknowledge this directly, instead emphasizing the risk and potential pain of the act of confessing, but, as Krog's work will show, a denial of the pleasure associated with confessing may lead to blindness about the ramifications of a preoccupation with it.

IV. Guilt in *Country of My Skull*

Antjie Krog's memoir *Country of My Skull* weaves testimonies from people who suffered violence during the apartheid era and spoke at the TRC with her own experiences listening to these testimonies as a white woman, poet, and journalist.³² When I teach this text, I find that students are particularly drawn to passages about her feelings of guilt, including her guilt at the ways in which her family benefitted from the apartheid regime and how they directly supported its racist order through their obedience, armed protection of property, and enjoyment of the cultural capital afforded to whites in South Africa. These passages are moving for my students, I think, because they are intrigued by her willingness to consider her own responsibility for apartheid, even though she is not criminally liable. While Krog's guilt in relation to apartheid exhibits some of the same characteristics as Rousseau's guilt in the *Confessions*, her presentation of guilt in relation to her extramarital affair takes on an entirely different valence. Crucially for my analysis, she is motivated to repair the betrayal of trust felt by her husband. The juxtaposition of guilt and repair in Krog's work provides clues as to what may be necessary for an individual to hold guilt at bay in order to act on behalf of a relationship with another. It is not sympathy that motivates repair but the desire for a shared future.

Krog's writing, in part because of its accessibility and lyricism, has been frequently cited in the scholarship on the South African TRC and this prominence has invited greater scrutiny of her work.³³ She has been criticized for using excerpts from witness testimonies without providing context for these testimonies or indicating her own editorial decisions. One witness, Yazir Henry, publicly proclaimed his anger at Krog's depiction of his testimony after he had been evoked in Krog's memoir.³⁴ The self-referential quality of her writing, in contrast to the large-scale violence of apartheid, has also been the source of criticism. For example, Catherine Cole writes that Krog's description of the brutal form of torture known as "necklacing" reveals "much about Krog's psychological state as narrator

32. See also Carli Coetzee, "They Never Wept, the Men of my Race: Antjie Krog's *Country of My Skull* and the White South African Signature," *Journal of South African Studies* 27, no. 4 (2000). Taiwo Adetunji Osinubi, "Abusive Narratives: Antjie Krog, Rian Mala, and the Transmission of Violence," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 28, no. 1 (2008).

33. For example, Michiel Heyns references her memoir first when speaking about the prominence of "confessional literature" by white South Africans. Michiel Heyns. "The Whole Country's Truth: Confession and Narrative in Recent White South African Writing," *Modern Fiction Studies* 46, no. 1 (2000), 42–66.

34. Yazir Henry, "A Space Where Healing Begins," in *Looking Back, Reaching Forward: Reflections on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa*, ed. Charles Villavicencio and Wilhelm Verwoerd (London: Zed Books, 2000).

but very little about the individuals who were killed or the circumstances that led to these murders.”³⁵ Yet, from another vantage point, Krog’s description of her guilt and the way it engages with action in the political and personal spheres is an important iteration in an ongoing discussion about the dynamic of sympathy in relation to the communication of pain.

From the prologue, in which Krog dedicates the book to the victims who had an Afrikaner surname on their lips, it is clear that Krog is investigating the nature of her attachment to the Afrikaner community in South Africa, including perpetrators, victims, and all those who fell along the spectrum of providing support and legitimacy to the apartheid state. Even those who questioned the policies of the apartheid state and contributed to leftist causes were the beneficiaries, financially and politically, of a racist order. How should they respond to the testimonies of the TRC? What does the compromise between complete denial and dramatic martyrdom look like?³⁶ Does their guilt act as a type of bond? She considers these questions in the context of her own life and that of her family, as well as fellow citizens. To wit, Krog includes a letter in Afrikaans that appears to capture her own sentiment immediately after an extensive discussion of the testimony of Nomonde Calata, one of the most dramatic testimonies of the Commission. Nomonde Calata testified about the death of her husband, one of the Craddock Four, and her tears and scream of mourning were heard throughout the world as symbols of the lingering consequences of apartheid. Immediately following this discussion is a shift to the question of Afrikaner guilt. As if standing in for her own thoughts, Krog recalls a letter read by Archbishop Desmond Tutu, the chair of the TRC. The letter reads: “Then I look inside myself to understand how it is possible that no one knew, how it is possible that so few did something about it, how is it possible that often I also just looked on?”³⁷ The quotation reprises Krog’s own grappling with the moral guilt of having not done enough in a situation even when she was not criminally responsible. The letter also reflects the instinct described above in Rousseau’s writing on guilt: a fascination with one’s own action of denial or avoidance in a difficult situation. While the language of action and repair may perpetually sound premature, inadequate, and shallow, the experience of dwelling in (and on) guilt is aesthetically satisfying.

Speaking in her own idiom about the visceral feeling of guilt that accompanies her reflections on the violence and oppression of the past, Krog reveals the paralyzing impact of guilt: “And behind me sinks the country of my skull like a sheet in the dark – and I hear a thin song, hooves, hedges of venom, fever, and destruction fermenting and hissing underwater. I shrink and prickle. Against. Against my blood and the heritage thereof. Will I forever be them – recognizing them as I do daily in my nostrils? Yes. And what we have done will never be undone.”³⁸ The scale of the injustice of apartheid is the backdrop

35. Catherine M. Cole, *Performing South Africa’s Truth Commission: Stages of Transition* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2010), p. 97.

36. In her analysis of J.M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace*, Rosemary Nagy captures the subtlety of the relationship between avoiding responsibility and taking on the burden of guilt and repair in a way that is impossible to sustain through her analysis of J.M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace*. Rosemary Nagy, “The Ambiguities of Reconciliation and Responsibility in South Africa,” *Political Studies* 52, no. 4 (2004).

37. Krog, p. 62.

38. Krog, p. 171.

for Krog's individualized sentiment. Her use of natural imagery, including the skull, hooves, venom, and water, all suggest the permanence of mistakes of the past and the smallness of one woman's attempt to alter it. The olfactory impact of guilt is also notable. The sense of smell is not only strongly connected to memory, but is also particularly difficult to ignore.³⁹ It engulfs the agent and demands recognition. When Krog describes the guilt that she feels as an Afrikaner and the violence etched in the land, her lyricism is captivating for the reader and communicates the sensual pleasure of being overwhelmed by the force of guilt, just as it causes psychic distress. It is this pleasure that was under-examined in Rousseau's discussion of guilt, even though it set the tone for his entire memoir.

While she seems to find pleasure and satisfaction in the representation of guilt, Krog also imagines the possibility of shared land. Guilt and the pleasure of experiencing it give way to a renewed commitment to place and community, rather than just existing as aesthetic objects in their own right. She writes, "And hundreds of Afrikaners are walking this road – on their own with their own fears and shame and guilt. And some say it; most just live it. We are so utterly sorry. We are deeply ashamed and gripped with remorse. But hear us, we are from here. We will live it right – here – with you, for you."⁴⁰ Here Krog posits that action begins with an apology and then with the commitment to the land that has sustained their collective lives. The apology must be as authentic as the guilt; it cannot be the final action, but it is critical to the larger process of taking responsibility for wrongdoing in the past, even as it is insufficient for what one hopes could happen. The apology is a step Rousseau did not include, just as he did not assist the one in pain. For Krog, the apology and the reorientation to the other comes, in part, through the land because the mutual dependence of all citizens on the land for survival and sustenance make it the necessary place of future cooperative action in both material and metaphorical ways. The immutable quality of the land, inured to guilt and apology, represents something much larger than the emotional life of the narrator, the testimonies at the TRC, and even the decades of apartheid itself. The land, in its inability to either blame or deny, becomes a space of creative possibility. The commitment to a specific place is the foundation of her vision of a future with others and it must be more than just a restoration of the past. Thus, for Krog, despite the violence and betrayal of the past, a shared existence on the land, with its cycles of death and fertility, is possible.

While reporting for SABC, Krog intimates that she has an affair with an unnamed man working with the TRC, she calls him "beloved." The scenes with him are highly abstracted, making it difficult to pinpoint the nature of their relationship, how it began, or the frequency of their interactions. What is evident is her desire to connect the intimacy of the relationship to the stress and frustration catalyzed by her experiences covering the truth commission. The suffering that she witnessed and the magnitude of the crimes she had to consider cause Krog to say that she "loses language" and with it, other familiar patterns of acting and communicating with others.⁴¹ In the place of her conventional mores, she finds herself acting in an aggressive way (e.g. she is censured for being

39. Johan Willander and Maria Larsson, "Smell Your Way Back to Childhood: Autobiographical Odor Memory," *Psychological Bulletin and Review* 12, no. 2 (2006).

40. Krog, p. 125.

41. *Ibid.*, p. 37.

physically rough with a colleague). In listening to the testimonies, she becomes a stranger to herself.

In contrast to the loss of language and exhaustion she feels with reference to the TRC are the vignettes of intimacy related to the affair. In it she can be angry, exhausted, and numb, and the affair is presented as a respite from the overwhelming nature of the task of broadcasting about the TRC and the guilt she feels regarding apartheid. Kim Roston reads the affair as a metaphor for other types of betrayal: first is the betrayal Krog feels throughout the text in regards to the testimonies of victims, whose words she quotes out of context and with poetic license.⁴² In addition, Roston interprets the affair as a way to depict the betrayal felt by her family and friends when she shifts her loyalties to the victims of apartheid violence rather than her Afrikaner or white brethren. Using the allegory of the affair allows Krog to explore how personal this type of betrayal feels, both for her and for her husband, even if it is consistent with a more capacious understanding of justice and a desirable outcome of the TRC.

Krog does not seem to feel guilt about the affair itself. While Krog is evasive about details of the affair, the confrontation with her husband after the affair is described toward the end of the memoir. When he expresses his hurt and sense of betrayal, it becomes even clearer that guilt does not define how Krog reflects on what happened or what she hopes will happen. After he says, "I will never forgive you – you have destroyed everything," she begins to say that narratives are necessary to give meaning to actions, for individuals as much as nations, but he interrupts her.⁴³ At this moment, it becomes clear that Krog is not grappling with why she had sex with someone outside her marriage, nor whether she should be psychologically punishing herself for it; instead, the multiple realities of truth she has experienced at the TRC seem to suggest that it is her husband's truth, his sense of betrayal and yearning for explanation, that is most important to her as the path toward repair. By not focusing on guilt, Krog is not tempted by the self-doubt, self-flagellation, and despair that sometimes accompany guilt, as they did vividly in the case of Rousseau. These temptations of guilt are connected to the pleasure that they provide (and it is a pleasure within one's control) while the process of repair is uncertain, plodding, and intricately connected to the hopes and feelings of another. Instead of taking pleasure in guilt, she cultivates a sense of attention and commitment to the needs of another person. Her husband says, "There is always a basic truth: you cheated on me. Why? Where? How?" but Krog disagrees with him.⁴⁴ She realizes that the details of wrongdoing, that which were so powerful for her thinking about guilt in relation to apartheid, are not the object of her attention now. She also realizes that there would be no way for her to speak of the details without also always hoping that they would be in the service of regaining his trust and thus always be partial. The questions

42. She writes, "The marital betrayal embodies precisely that conflict between an outstretched justice and homeward loyalty: her betrayal of an intimate, domestic partnership is depicted symbolically as the means by which she is able to commit herself to the unfamiliar, ethical demands of the truth and reconciliation commission." Kim Roston, "The Ethics of Infidelity in *Country of My Skull*", *Current Writing: Text and Reception in Southern Africa*, 2007.

43. *Ibid.*, p. 261.

44. *Ibid.*, p. 262.

her husband asked go unanswered in the rest of the text, but it is revealing that he has the last word to which the reader is privy. Related to her refusal to talk about the details is Krog's willingness to accept the ethical ambiguity of the affair. She realizes that it was a transgression with serious consequences, but she also says, "I have no words for why something so right was so wrong."⁴⁵ The parallel of her affair and the violence of apartheid as types of wrongdoing comes to an uneasy halt here. Still, Krog realizes in this exchange that her husband's questions and needs must be prominent if the relationship is to be repaired, and her silence in response can be interpreted as an acceptance of the challenge of repair and of the onus that is on her to convince him of her intentions. The ethical ambiguity of the act, her own frustrations with language, and the infinite regress of details are not as important as the shared intersubjectivity between two people. In the aftermath of her affair, Krog does not focus on guilt as the source of pleasure or authenticity, but rather on the task of building a shared space for her marriage.

In contrast to the process of repair for Afrikaners in South Africa Krog described above, we do not see the steps of guilt, apology, and remorse with her husband, but what binds the two experiences together is a similar commitment to place. The place is the space of the marriage, their shared lives together. Krog recognizes that the opportunity for a shared future is at stake and appears to have skipped the steps of guilt and remorse. As a reader, it is difficult to tell if she truly had no guilt regarding the affair or whether we are not privy to it in this text. The unusual nature of the TRC and her task within it gave her the freedom to act in ways she would not have otherwise. It is clear that her husband does not understand it this way from the short conversation in the text, but we do not see how Krog responds to his interrogation of her lack of guilt. Yet, the way in which Krog responds to his anger is a dramatic change from the pleasures and the surrender to guilt she experiences in relation to apartheid and that mark Rousseau's reflections.

Mark Sanders notes that in the South African edition of the memoir Krog includes passages that suggest that the entire affair has been fabricated for the purposes of dramatic effect. Sanders writes, "At this point, in the South African edition, Patrick asks: "And the affair you describe in here. Is that true?" Her reply links the character of the lover to storytelling: "No, but I had to bring a relationship into the story so that I could verbalize certain personal reactions to the hearings. I had to create a new character who could not only bring in new information but also express the psychological underpinnings of the Commission."⁴⁶ Thus Krog admits that she invented a character that allowed her to disclose a particular affective response to the hearings and she chose to exclude this passage from the American edition.⁴⁷ The ambiguity surrounding the affair further

45. Ibid., p. 261.

46. Mark Sanders, "Truth, Telling, Questioning: The Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Antjie Krog's *Country of My Skull*, and Literature after Apartheid," *Modern Fiction Studies* 46, no. 1 (2000), 25. Antjie Krog, *Country of My Skull: Guilt, Sorrow, and the Limits of Forgiveness in the New South Africa* (Johannesburg: Random House, 1998), p. 171.

47. It is interesting to note that in an interview about the film adaptation of her book, Krog suggests that the extramarital affair depicted in the film is entirely fabricated. Rory Carroll, "I Write Because I Can't Speak," *The Guardian* (January 1, 2004).

highlights its significance as a foil for thinking about guilt and repair in the memoir. She acknowledges that the affair is a betrayal on a very different scale, but it still presents questions of guilt, accountability, and repair. It is also a situation in which she is the key agent, not just one of many perpetrators and bystanders. If the affair was imagined, this provides another explanation why she does not articulate the guilt she feels and why it does not seem to linger in her conversation with her husband. Yet, the fictional affair may have also been a conscious decision to display an alternative way of engaging with the past. Guilt is an action that requires significant mental and emotional energies and an alternative path to the expending of these energies is a decision to focus on what is required to regain the trust of the other. It may be impossible to move toward a cooperative relationship without accepting responsibility or showing remorse in a believable way, but Krog is drawing attention to the everyday ways in which we negotiate the demands of past wrongs. The conversation with her husband, with its plain language and moments when language feels inadequate, is a rejoinder to the sublime beauty of the imagery of guilt she presented in regards to apartheid. The affair and its aftermath demand a different type of energy, one that is not about the impossible weight of history, but rather about the incremental steps that are taken in the effort to regain trust.

The differences between the injustices of apartheid and personal betrayal (in infidelity) as examples of guilt are dramatic, and not only in scale: in the first example, Krog is not directly responsible for violence, and her guilt is tied to what was done in her name as well as her failure to assist those fighting against the apartheid state. As much as she felt the pangs of guilt connected to apartheid on a visceral level, she did not attribute to it the same intentionality that she used to talk about the affair. In the affair, her direct action hurt someone she loved, and while she was able to respond sympathetically to his pain, her culpability is more salient. She had more reason to feel guilt regarding the affair, yet she does not. Her guilt is not the driving focus of the exchange but the repairing of the relationship is; her husband expects her to take responsibility for the breach of trust that she caused and she is willing to do so. Krog's separation of guilt and repair allows for this type of exchange between two parties, an opening impossible in Rousseau.

The imagined conversation between Rousseau and Krog on the nature of guilt suggests how guilt and the desire for repair are not necessarily reinforcing sentiments. Instead, attention to the pleasure of writing about guilt suggests that it may be the aesthetic seduction of guilt that is the largest obstacle to attention to the one in pain. Yet although guilt can be the obstacle for sympathy I wonder whether there may be a productive quality to self-consciously realizing the impact of guilt and its pleasures in one's life. Krog's guilt surrounding apartheid had a totalizing quality; it was all-encompassing of her physical and mental state and through writing she embodied a type of surrender to these feelings of guilt. With poetry and her suggestion that language falls away, it was only her guilt that remained while the distinctiveness of her person, her specific deeds, and in many ways her responsibility, dissolved. This dynamic is her sublimation into guilt, a move not unlike the one to which Rousseau aspires in his memoir. The possibility of sublimation into guilt fulfills a need, one that is human and understandable in a variety of circumstances, but Krog's experience suggests that this need may not be insatiable. I posit that there is a way in which her attempt to surrender to guilt regarding apartheid through writing altered her experience of the affair and its aftermath. Apartheid and the

affair are psychologically linked for Krog and the guilt that stemmed from the former allowed the guilt from the latter to be kept at bay. In contrast, Rousseau allowed his own guilt to be the most encompassing force in his life and the object of the reader's attention for the entirety of the *Confessions*. He was unable to focus on repairing relationships damaged by the lack of empathy or on the task of building a shared space with another. Instead of attempting the repair of an actual relationship with another, he channeled the energy of guilt into a symbolic relationship with the readership of his *Confessions*, a relationship that has the appearance of dialogue but is still monologic. His ability to experience the sublimation of guilt in his writing seems infinite, yet his final memoir, *Reveries of a Solitary Walker*, reveals a different focus. Instead of the guilt from failed interactions of the past, the solitary walker finds respite in nature. It is harmony with the land, not authenticity, that is a cause worth pursuing.

Returning to the issue of truth commissions that inspired the article, the lessons of Rousseau and Krog suggest that the public performance of suffering and guilt may have unintended consequences. In the South African TRC, attempts to cultivate sympathy and compassion in the nation as a whole were overwhelming and even coercive.⁴⁸ *Amour de soi*, in its best form, could not be mandated on a national scale. Despite the symbolic and legal value of formal apologies by the state (such as in Australia's "Sorry Day"), one should not assume that an acknowledgment of guilt will necessarily be a precedent for a commitment to repair. There are many ways in which the spectacle of guilt can become an end in itself, and the state may be particularly vulnerable to this. I cannot go so far as to say that guilt is entirely unproductive: it can serve, at the very least, to bring up questions of wrongdoing, accountability, and the recognition that others have been harmed by the actions of the state or others. Yet, the performance of guilt carries its own pathologies, some of which are unusually poetic and aesthetically appealing. Guilt can be seen as one of the most sophisticated forms of *amour propre* because it disguises itself as a sympathetic response borne of *amour de soi*. Taking this observation into account might lead transitional justice institutions to insure that forward-looking initiatives that increase trust, economic opportunity, and cooperation are seen to be equally as important as testimonies about the past and the desired audience responses of guilt and compassion.

48. Sonali Chakravarti, *Sing the Rage: Listening to Anger after Mass Violence* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago, Forthcoming 2014).