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# The Never Ending Confession: The Confessional Mode in Two Novels by Mempo Giardinelli

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The Never-Ending Confession: The Confessional Mode  
in Two Novels by Mempo Giardinelli

Ryan Russel Hill

A thesis submitted to the faculty of  
Brigham Young University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

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## ABSTRACT

### The Never-Ending Confession: The Confessional Mode in Two Novels by Mempo Giardinelli

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In the years following the military dictatorship in Argentina many novels were published that spoke about the violence, terror, and traumas experienced during the Junta's rule. These texts deal with the theme of memory and retell the traumas of the past as a form of mourning. Such novels look back to the past in an effort to redeem it. In this essay I explore the use of the confessional mode in postdictatorial literature as a vehicle for the task of mourning.

In two of his novels, *Qué solos se quedan los muertos* (1985) and *Cuestiones interiores* (2003), Argentine author Mempo Giardinelli employs the confessional mode to tell the stories of two guilt-ridden protagonists who resort to writing in search of redemption. Giardinelli's use of the confessional mode highlights two aspects of confession that in actuality deny its completion. While confession aims to alleviate the guilt felt by the confessant and to provide him with a sense of self-understanding in light of his sins, the confessional act subverts these very purposes. The confession requires one to speak of guilt in order to arrive at a state of innocence, which only engenders more guilt and perpetuates the confession. Moreover, in confession the subject that speaks is also the object that it creates in speech. Confession as an attempt to present oneself as a coherent object to be understood and in turn to validate ones notion of identity involves a doubling effect of the self-inherent in language that reveals the impossibility of attaining an unmediated access to the self. These two aspects of the confessional act constitute the failure of confession to allow the confessant to attain the redemption and absolution they seek.

I argue that the confessional mode serves as an ideal vehicle for the task of mourning and that the inherent failure of confession is comparable to what Idelvar Avelar calls the "interminability of mourning" (5). These two processes constitute a tool of memory needed in post dictatorial Argentina as a way to conserve the past and redeem it from oblivion.

Keywords: confession, Argentina, postdictatorial literature, Mempo Giardinelli, guilt, self-objectification

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Writing and finishing a thesis is no easy task and there were many days that I did not know if I could do it. During those days I was grateful for my friends and family. They were always supportive and encouraging even when sometimes ignoring me for days at a time so that I would work and not procrastinate.

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## Introduction

In 1976 General Jorge Videla led a military coup that took control of Argentina. The military government's use of vigilance, censorship, and acts of violence to maintain control instilled a feeling of general distrust and paranoia throughout the country. In this time period, later known as the "Dirty War," more than 30,000 Argentines were disappeared, tortured or killed by the right wing government in an effort to eradicate the country of any 'subversive' (communist or leftist) ideology or activity. Yet, while much of what is denounced in the aftermath of the dictatorship is the violence and violation of human rights by the military government, it is also important to recognize that there was a great deal of violence and guerilla warfare exercised by the leftist 'revolutionary' cause in the years previous to the dictatorship and throughout. Groups such as the Montoneros and the ERP (Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo) were also guilty of such acts of terrorism like the kidnapping and killing of government officials and political adversaries<sup>1</sup>.

In the wake of this tragedy a great number of texts begin to appear that deal with the tragedies of the past, whether that be to denounce the violence and injustices suffered, to confess and rid oneself of guilt, or simply to vent about the atrocities they witnessed. In his book, *The Untimely Present: Postdictatorial Latin American Fiction and the Task of Mourning*, Idelber Avelar points out what he sees as the most important characteristic of such literature. "The imperative to mourn is the postdictatorial imperative par excellence...[these] texts...remind the present that it is the product of a past catastrophe; these texts thus carry the seeds of a messianic

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<sup>1</sup> In 1970 the Montoneros kidnapped and killed former military leader and once acting president of Argentina Pedro Eugenio Aramburu. In 1972, in conjunction with the ERP they detonated a large bomb in a Buenos Aires hotel. Their largest attack was Operación Primicia in October of 1975. They attempted to raid one of the military barracks and took more than 200 hostages.

energy, which [look] back at the pile of debris, ruins, and defeats of the past in an effort to redeem them” (Avelar 3). The past decade of violence, terror, and tragedy that engulfed the country produced a general feeling of loss and a yearning for understanding that pervades the literature of the time. Fernando Reati explains that one of the principle focuses of this literature is an “introspección de toda una cultura que busca comprender cómo y por qué se actuó de una manera determinada durante la violencia, en un polémico y confuso período de crisis” (Reati 120).

This literature that seeks to understand how a whole generation could resort to such violence cannot be fully represented solely by a condemnation of the crimes of the dictatorship but also must explore the wrongs committed by the leftist extremists. The confessional mode as opposed to the testimonial not only denounces the injustices suffered as a victim but also admits to its own sins and seeks a form of redemption. The Argentine literature of the time served to “question[ar] el maniqueísmo en todo el discurso político de la sociedad” (Reati 58). The use of the confessional mode specifically in post dictatorship literature serves to highlight the difficulties of a black and white perception of what occurred during this time period. In this thesis I examine two texts by Mempo Giardinelli, *Qué solos se quedan los muertos* (1985) and *Cuestiones interiores* (2003) that rely upon the discourse of protagonists that are not simply victims of the national tragedies suffered during this time but also occupy the role of victimizers. Their confessions constitute their struggle to come to terms with the loss that their crimes caused them and an understanding of what that means for them going forward. I argue that Giardinelli uses the confessional mode in these novels to show how two aspects of the nature of confession subvert its very purpose. The confessions in these novels are never fully completed and create a seemingly endless confession that preserves the past in memory and narrative as the confessant



continues his efforts to redeem it.

This thesis will focus primarily on the confessional mode as a vehicle for the task of mourning in post dictatorship Argentina but here I will briefly discuss the differences between confessional literature and perhaps the most prevalent form of postdictatorial narrative, *testimonio*<sup>2</sup>. John Beverly, one of the most prominent critics on *testimonio*, gives a very detailed explanation of the genre in one of his most widely published essays “The Margin at the Center: On *Testimonio*.”

By *testimonio* I mean a novel or novella-length narrative in book or pamphlet (that is, printed as opposed to acoustic) form, told in the first person by a narrator who is also the real protagonist or witness of the events he or she recounts, and whose unit of narration is usually a “life” or a significant experience. *Testimonio* may include, but is not subsumed under, any of the following textual categories, some of which are conventionally considered literature, others not: autobiography, auto-biographical novel, oral history, memoir, confession, diary, interview, eyewitness report, life history, *novela-testimonio*, nonfiction novel, or “factographic” literature. (31)

This definition, while very detailed, underlines some of the difficulties of defining a genre such as *testimonio* with clear fixed boundaries and distinctions from others. Beverly includes as one of his possible *testimonio* texts, confession. While confession may be considered a possible vehicle for *testimonio*, I argue that there are some key distinctions between the two.

Beverly explains that *testimonio* most often represents the voice of a victim who speaks with “an urgency to communicate, a problem of repression, poverty, subalternity, imprisonment,

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<sup>2</sup> The use of the Spanish term “*testimonio*” refers specifically to John Beverly’s notion of the testimonial literature of Latin America.

or the struggle for survival” (32). This voice seeks justice where injustice has prevailed and strives to bring to light the crimes committed against a people that have gone unnoticed or unpunished. Although confessional literature may also represent the voice of a marginalized individual who has been victimized, the confessional voice is most often that of a victimizer. There is a sense of guilt that is inherent in the confession that compels the individual to confess. Dennis Foster explains that the significant feature of confessional texts is that they are “narrated by characters consumed with guilt and driven to talk about it” (Foster 18).

Another difference that Beverly points out is the role of the narrator: “The narrator in testimonio...speaks for, or in the name of, a community or group” (33). The narrator in confessional narrative may also speak of an experience that others in the community may share yet his purpose is personal rather than collective. As opposed to telling his story in place of that of others, he depends on the community to ratify his story and allow him acceptance into the community from which he has been alienated.

While testimony speaks about the past experiences of individuals who have suffered loss and defeat, the purpose is to represent “the reality of the people” (Beverly 45) and to condemn those who committed terrible crimes against them. Confession on the other hand has a distinctly personal purpose that relies upon the community for fulfillment but does not aim to speak for the whole.

Up to this point I have briefly addressed some of the key distinctions between testimonio and confession. I will now give a more complete explanation of the confessional mode in literature. This understanding of the form, content, and purpose of confessional narrative will be important to understand the argument I propose.

Despite holding a prominent place in Western literature for centuries,<sup>3</sup> confessional narrative is still a genre (or subgenre) that eludes a concrete working definition to distinguish it from the many others that are also used to portray memories of the past and the lives of individuals. Other such genres that are often used synonymously with confession are autobiography, testimony, memoir, diary, and life history. Some questions that highlight a few of the problematic aspects of a definition of confession are whether it is religious or secular and if it is fictional or non-fiction. Confession can be said to belong to a variety of fields of interest: legal and judicial discourse, theology, psychoanalysis, psychiatry and politics. Dennis Foster explains: “the confessional tradition informs the workings of many kinds of narrative” (Foster 18). For this reason I will speak of confession as a mode, rather than a genre, a way of presenting the troublesome past of an individual that may be present in a variety of different genres.

Although there is not one concrete definition of confession, there has been substantial critical discussion on the topic that allows us to identify some of the key features of this literary mode. On the most basic level, the form of confession can be defined as narrative of a first person “I”-narrator<sup>4</sup>, told from a retroactive stance, in which he or she discloses or reveals intimate, secret, or hidden facts about him or herself. In terms of content the confession implies the disclosure of sin, transgression, or wrongdoing that causes the protagonist to feel guilt, loss,

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<sup>3</sup> One could argue that confession has been a central part of western literature, at least in the Judeo-Christian tradition, since the creation of man. Jeremy Tambling makes the following insight regarding the first experience of mankind that the Bible provides: “God’s first question to man was an interrogation of sin, according to the Bible. The first statement of man to God, in the same place, involves a lying confession: ‘The woman whom thou gavest to be with me, she gave me of the tree and I did eat’ (Genesis 3:13)” (Tambling 1).

<sup>4</sup> The novel I examine in Chapter 2, *Cuestiones interiores*, is not narrated exclusively in the first-person. Yet I consider it confessional in form because of my argument that the 3<sup>rd</sup> person voice is also the protagonist of the novel, simply portraying his attempt to objectify himself in the process of confession.

and remorse. Foster explains that the significant feature of confessional texts is that they are “narrated by characters consumed with guilt and driven to talk about it” (18). This statement leads us to the last aspect of confession that we must examine, which is its purpose. What is it that these protagonists hope to achieve in confessing the sins, secrets, and trials of their past?

James McCutcheon argues, “literary confession, while depicting afflicted characters that reflect on the past as they search for redemption in the present, reveals a profound desire on the part of these characters to confront past transgressions in the hopes of becoming whole in the present” (McCutcheon 19-20). McCutcheon’s use of words such as “redemption” and “transgression” point clearly to the religious heritage of the confessional practice, yet the confessional texts I will examine in this thesis will be ‘secular’ confessions. While these protagonists do not seek redemption in the form of divine forgiveness from God or a religious institution, they do seek another sort of redemption: a recovery of their sense of community and a renewed sense of self.

According to Terrence Doody, confession, whether religious or secular, “is always an act of community” (4). Judith Whitenack confirms this purpose of confession while placing it in juxtaposition to the religious tradition: “The secular confessant might not express openly the plea for absolution, although it often takes the form of longing for forgiveness and acceptance by the community. Often the confessant makes manifest his need for acceptance by an elaborate system of explanation and justification for past actions” (Whitenack 19). It is only by acceptance of the community that the confessant can feel relieved of his guilt and pain.

While the acceptance of a community is an essential part of the purpose of confession, the confession also serves a more personal motive. In his book, *The Modern Confessional Novel*, Peter Axthelm argues that the confessional protagonist confesses “hoping at last to find some

perception of the truth that lies at the center of his existence” (11). The narrative of past experiences, thoughts and feelings serves to give the confessant a more concrete sense of identity. Confession is a discourse that allows the confessant to objectify himself and reconstruct his image based on his own recounting of the past. Foster explains that confession “is an attempt to objectify the self – to present it as a knowable object – through a narrative that ‘re-structures’ the self as history and conclusions” (10).

The novels that I will examine in this thesis are characterized by protagonists that are overwhelmed with guilt and distress because of their transgressions. These characters are compelled to speak about their pasts in an effort to be accepted into the communities from which they have been estranged and to come to better understand and accept themselves in light of the sins that they have committed.

In chapter one I will look at the affective aspect of confession in *Qué solos se quedan los muertos*. José Giustozzi is a self-proclaimed guilt-ridden protagonist. He assumes the blame for every little thing. His guilt corresponds not only to the sins he has committed but also to this many sins of omission. He even feels guilt for the wrongdoings of others. José’s confession is primarily personal, separate from any legal ramifications, and is only spoken between himself and the reader of his text, a text that he calls a personal reflection on his situation and a necessary release of guilt and tension. I will base much of my analysis on the ideas of Peter Brooks and will also rely on Paul Ricoeur’s notion of guilt as explained in his book *The Symbolism of Evil*. The chapter will explore how the speech-act, or in this case writing act of confession causes José to relive his past sins and produces more guilt. I will show how this feeling of guilt produced by his confession causes him to seek additional wrongdoings to which it can correspond and thus precipitates more confession. According to Brooks, confession produces more guilt in its very

attempt to rid the confessant of such guilt. In addition to this, confession, as an attempt to provide justification and explanations for the sinful act, shows how it condemns in the very effort to exonerate. Lastly I will show how José's attempt to write his confession is an act that ultimately perpetuates his task of mourning.

Chapter two will focus on the criminal confession of Juan, the protagonist of *Cuestiones interiores*, and his search for self-understanding through confession. With Juan, Giardinelli presents us with a very different protagonist than that of José Giustozzi. While José has a very keen sense of morals, even if he hasn't lived the most upstanding life, Juan is the complete opposite. Juan has murdered a completely innocent man and claims to feel no guilt or remorse for his actions. He does regret his action and wish he hadn't killed this man but his feelings do not reflect a truly penitent person. In the first chapter I focus on the affective aspect of confession, on the desire to feel relieved and unburdened from the guilt of sin. In this chapter I will focus on the cognitive aspect of confession. The confession constitutes Juan's search for understanding that is ultimately deferred. He must rely on a "fallen language" and the understanding of others to achieve self-understanding. Hence, the confession serves to expose the impossibility of understanding. While Juan does all that he can to avoid feeling guilty for his murder, as well as the many other immoral acts of his past, he is ultimately concerned with coming to an understanding of who he is in light of his crime. Juan's confession is presented in a few layers. Since he is a criminal and is charged with murder we will examine his legal confession solicited by the law and facilitated by his lawyer as well as the judge. Because the judge and lawyer fail to comprehend Juan's legal confession, he hopes to find his understanding and validation in other audiences, including himself. I will examine how Juan attempts to objectify himself in order to present a different version of himself to others in such a way that

will allow him be understood and accepted once again into the society from which he has been alienated. I will draw on texts by Michel Foucault, Dennis Foster, María Zambrano and Beatriz Sarlo for my textual analysis in order to show the inherent difficulties of self-objectification through confession.

While these novels were published nearly twenty years apart and at first glance do not have much in common, I have chosen these two in order to illustrate the fact that the task of mourning that was so prevalent in the literature immediately following the fall of the dictatorship in Argentina continues to be an important part of their literary tradition. The past will never be simply left behind or forgotten. Neither the task of mourning nor the act of confession can simply be completed. Rather, their incomplete nature serves to consistently remind the present of its connection and relation to the past and to inspire a continued effort to seek further understanding of itself in light of its past.

## Chapter 1: An Excess of Guilt: The Mitigating and Compounding Effects of Confession

At first glance, the novel *Qué solos se quedan los muertos* appears to be a typical detective novel. It tells the story of a man, José Giustozzi, who finds himself unexpectedly involved in a murder mystery of a former lover. Carmen Rubiolo, his former lover, and her next partner Marcelo Farnizzi, had become involved in drug trafficking in Zacatecas, México and had gotten in a little too deep. When Marcelo is murdered Carmen decides to call José, whom she hasn't seen or heard from in years, and asks him to come to her aid. Originally motivated by a long time fantasy to get back together with Carmen his reunion with her transports him to a difficult and guilt-ridden past. He and Carmen were guerrilla participants in the Montonero movements of the early 70's in Argentina leading up to the military coup in 1976. His reunion with Carmen brings back memories and feelings that he had forgotten and prompts a deep process of introspection. The criminal investigation is at the forefront of the novel at the beginning, but it gradually gives way to José's personal introspection and a form of "testimonio personal" of his life. The text is neither purely detective fiction nor testimonial/self-examination, but rather oscillates between the two forms. Walter Bruno Berg mentions the precarious nature of the text between the two modes: "El texto se sitúa, a medio camino entre novela policial y testimonio personal"<sup>5</sup> (Kohut 236).

This chapter will examine the confessional structure of this 'testimonio personal' and

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<sup>5</sup> While it is safe to say that the novel is a "testimonio personal" of José Giustozzi it can be helpful to see the text a testimonio personal of the author as well. The phrase "testimonio personal" in this instance can most adequately be thought of as an autobiographical account of one's life. In an interview about this novel Giardinelli said, "Mientras escribía la novela, en un momento dado, cuando Giustozzi habla de su pasado me di cuenta de que inconscientemente estaba poniéndole parte de mi propio pasado. Entonces tuve dos opciones: o lo eliminaba, o lo hacía más claro. Opté por la segunda opción" (Kohut 38). In her book *La confesión*, Rosa Chacel gives other examples of authors, such as Miguel de Unamuno, who she argues confess through their fictional characters.



explore how Giardinelli uses the confessional mode as a way for his protagonist, José Giustozzi, to cope with the guilt and the trauma of the past that this reunion with Carmen evokes. It is a commonly accepted notion that people are motivated to confess by a guilty conscience, believing that the confession of sin will later alleviate the pain and suffering caused by their guilt. This intense feeling of guilt and the need to talk about it is, according to Dennis Foster, one of the tell tale characteristics of confessional narrative: “The confessional tradition informs the workings of many kinds of narrative, the significant feature being that they are narrated by characters consumed with guilt and driven to talk about it” (Foster 18). José Giustozzi suffers from an excess feeling of guilt about his past and is driven not only to talk about it, but to write an entire text devoted to it. Yet what Giardinelli shows us is that José’s confession, rather than providing him with the relief he seeks, in reality turns him to more and more of his past errors and opens more wounds, which in turn cause more guilt. The confession leads José to find more and more things for which he feels guilty, even if he is not at fault for such things. The excess of guilt that he feels leads him to assume the responsibility for other sins that he did not commit. The very act of confession subverts the aim that José hopes it will achieve.

As just mentioned, another important element of José’s confession is the role that writing plays. In the novel José never confesses to anyone, except on one or two occasions when he meets with Hilda (Carmen’s neighbor). The confessor, to use the religious term, is the reader of the text. While I consider José’s confession in the order that it appears in the novel, as if in real time, it is also important to note that in a few select instances the narrator-protagonist speaks directly to the reader of the text to explain his motive for writing. He also elaborates on the emotional and mental experiences of composing his confessional text. These moments act as a sort of ‘parenthesis,’ a shift in time from the action of the novel, to the moment of writing. I will

explore the significance of writing the confession as an attempt to redeem the past and its relation to the task of mourning in postdictatorial fiction.

Just after seeing her for the first time in years, José realizes that his trip to see Carmen has not only taken him to Zacatecas, a town he describes as “detenida en el [siglo] Diecinueve,” but also on a journey to the past: “Mi encuentro con Carmen me retrocedía a un pasado indescifrable; y yo no era capaz –no lo soy – de explicar el pasado” (Giardinelli 28). His journey back in time presents him with a challenge to try and explain or justify his previous sins and traumas. Rosa Pellicer connects this return to the past and his desire to be able to explain it to himself as the beginning of what will become his confession: “El reencuentro con Carmen pone en marcha un proceso, propiciado por la narración en primera persona, de *autocrítica* de sus años de militancia y de *exilio*, lleno de preguntas sin respuesta y de *sentimiento de culpa*, individual y colectivo” (Pellicer; no pagination, my emphasis). As an exile in Mexico, José occupies the ideal position in relation to himself and his past to effectively “autocriticar.” His situation as an exile forces him to “take a step back” and try to see himself objectively. His time in exile has become a symbol of his alienated state and serves as a process for him to examine himself. In one instance José refers to his years in exile as “una práctica cotidiana y dolorosa de autocrítica” (Giardinelli 108). In his book, *Un universo cargado de violencia*, Karl Kohut cites this same passage to show how the plot of the novel serves to bring José’s self-examination, his ‘confession,’ to the foreground of the text:

El reencuentro con Carmen desencadena un proceso interior que lo lleva a una serie de reflexiones que son una síntesis de esta autocrítica de sus años de exilio. El, su generación, habían fracasado. Son ellos los perdedores, ganaron los otros, los militares. José pregunta por las causas de este fracaso...Las preguntas dolorosas convierten la

reflexión en una búsqueda de culpas, tanto individuales como colectivas. (77)

These reflections, questions, and self-criticism constitute José's confession. Kohut's use of the phrases 'búsqueda de culpas' and 'autocrítica' illustrate important aspects of confession as José begins to question himself regarding who is at fault for all of the tragedies of his past.

In the Christian tradition confession is offered to a priest who has the power to absolve sin. Confession aims to allow the confessant a path towards relief and freedom from his guilt (McCutcheon 23). If the confessant is willing to give a full and complete confession he can then leave the guilt and pain behind and move forward. In these secular confessions such power is not present in confessional discourse. Where in the religious sense guilt can be taken away by a promise of forgiveness, in the secular arena the hope for relief from guilt is found in the process of confessing and the validation of whomever he has entrusted his confession.<sup>6</sup> The confessant hopes that the spoken admission of his sins will provide him with the relief he seeks. The problem for the secular confessant lies not only in the lack of a forgiving authority, but is in reality found in the very nature of confession itself. In confession, one is made to re-enact, through speech, the very sin he hopes to be rid of. A confession of wrongdoing, in its attempt to justify or explain the sin, produces more guilt. Though in the act of confession the confessant hopes to move towards innocence and forgiveness he must first revisit his sin. Peter Brooks explains this aspect of confession in his book *Troubling Confessions*:

The confessional rehearsal or repetition of guilt is its own kind of performance, producing at the same time the excuse or justification of guilt (by the fact of confessing

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<sup>6</sup> It is interesting to note that José describes Zacatecas, the place of his confession, as a "ciudad secular" (22). Yet he often runs into churches and even sees the Cerro Bufa, an imposing hill that overlooks the city as an "índice de Dios" (169). There is a constant rejection of religion while at the same time a strong presence of reoccurring allusions to religious themes.

it) and the accumulation of more guilt (by the act of confessing it), in a dynamic that is potentially infinite. The more you confess, the more guilt is produced. The more the guilt produced, the more the confessional machine functions. The very act of confessing necessarily produces guilt in order to be functional. (22)

For Brooks, confession functions like some sort of ‘machine’ that, instead of relieving guilt, actually produces more. The act itself of trying to get rid of guilt forces the confessant to return to the very sin or wrongdoing for which they feel guilty and to thus relive the guilt experienced when they committed the sin. Dennis Foster also points out this difficulty that the confessant faces in his attempt to rid himself of guilt. “[The confessant] must pursue his goal through the detour of negation: he can only speak of innocence by speaking of sin, reenacting in the language of confession the loss he feels” (Foster 16). This aspect of the “confessional machine” lies at the heart of confession and undercuts its very purpose. Instead of allowing the confessant to arrive at a state of innocence confession requires the individual to continually relive his sinful act each time he confesses it, thus compounding his guilt each time.

If, as Foster claims, the significant feature of confessional narrative is the presence of a protagonist consumed by guilt, then José Giustozzi may be the confessional protagonist par excellence. José is a self-described ‘culposo.’ This characteristic of his personality is the one that is most clearly emphasized throughout the novel. The morning after Carmen’s death, José, overwhelmed by guilt, explains this aspect of his character as he tries to make sense of the regret he feels for not being able to protect Carmen:

Comprendí que, en realidad, eran muchas culpas que me perseguían. Mi inagotable, infinita capacidad de sentir culpa. Porque yo soy de esa clase de tipos que cuanto culpa anda suelta, la agarran para sí. Giustozzi el *culposo*, venga y deposite culpas, en efectivo,

a crédito o en tráveler-cheques; se aceptan culpas de todos los tamaños y contamos con un departamento de antigüedades<sup>7</sup>. (99; emphasis mine)

It is interesting to note that not only does José feel guilt for all that he has done, but he also states that he has an ‘infinita capacidad de *sentir* culpa’ of anyone else that may be lying around. We may ask ourselves, how can José feel the guilt of other people? In his book, *The Symbolism of Evil*, Paul Ricoeur gives this explanation: “guilt is not synonymous with fault” (Ricoeur 100). We often believe that we can only feel guilty for something for which we are at fault, yet Ricoeur argues that guilt is simply a manifestation of sin, which is the natural state of all men before God, whether they recognize it or not. Even in the secular sphere we all believe that no one is perfect, that mankind is by nature fallible and therefore we all carry sin with us. He continues: “guiltiness is never anything else than the anticipated chastisement itself, internalized and already weighing upon the consciousness... It is because man is ritually unclean that he is ‘burdened’ with fault; he need not be the author of the evil to feel himself burdened by its weight” (Ricoeur 101). José simply feels more acutely his status of a fallen being and feels the weight of others sins as well as that of his own.

This ability to feel the weight of other people’s guilt and to be willing to undergo the chastisement of their sins will be important later on when we discuss the guilt that José feels for his lost compatriots during the violent years before and during the dictatorship. We will see that he includes himself in the confession of their violence when he personally did not commit such acts. Yet his confession will speak to a feeling of guilt deeper than that of violence, which we

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<sup>7</sup> Note here another Christian trope. José here becomes a type of Christ figure. He takes upon himself the guilt of others. Later we will see how he becomes a form of redeemer, one who has taken upon himself the sins of his people and acts in a way that may redeem them from their fallen past, an act that can only inevitably result in his own death.

will examine later on.

Before moving on to a further analysis of the text I think it would be important to clarify the aspect of confession that I hope to explain in this chapter. Confession is both a process to seek answers about one's past and to lead to greater understanding of oneself as well as a process to bring about a change in one's feelings. Not only does confession help the confessant to come to *know*, but it also helps them to come to *feel*. Ricoeur emphasizes this affective aspect of the confession when he explains: "The experience of which the penitent makes confession is a blind experience, still embedded in the matrix of emotion, fear, anguish... Language is the light of the emotions. Through confession the consciousness of fault is brought into the light of speech (Ricoeur 7). Confession is the way in which the experience is made known, and in essence brought into being. Beatriz Sarlo adds an interesting perspective on this relationship between experience and language. Just as confession hopes to bring experience into language, in a way it is language that brings experience into reality. She argues that there is truly no experience without a narrative of said experience.

La narración de la experiencia está unida al cuerpo y a la voz, a una presencia real del sujeto en la escena del pasado. No hay testimonio sin experiencia, pero tampoco hay experiencia sin narración: el lenguaje libera lo mudo de la experiencia, la redime de su inmediatez o de su olvido y la convierte en lo comunicable. (29)

Language is indeed the 'light of the emotions' as Ricoeur says. It provides the way in which emotions can be made known to others. Yet language is never quite adequate to express in its purity any emotion. In a certain instance during the novel José himself explains how a specific emotion, that of pain, or 'anguish' in the words of Ricoeur, is an emotion that is seemingly impossible to communicate to others. "Un dolor, en esencia, es inexplicable. Es tangible sólo

para quien lo sufre. Todo lo demás que se diga, que se intente explicar, es una ceremonia retórica, una exposición de obviedades...Es quizá el sentimiento más intransferible que tenemos” (Giardinelli 94). This inexplicable nature of emotions is another hurdle that the confessant faces in the effort to confess. However, the failure of language to be adequate to the confessant’s need is not what we will focus on in great depth at this time. The purpose of the cited passage is rather to point out the aspect of ‘feeling’ and not just understanding that is important in confession. José doesn’t just seek understanding but rather hopes that this attempt to speak openly about his sins will mitigate his guilt and provide him with some measure of peace about himself and his past.

José, speaking as the narrator-protagonist of this text, directly addresses whoever will read it and explains that the intent of the text is precisely this release of tension and guilt: “Redactar estas páginas hasta aquí ha sido una manera de descargar tensiones, de desahogarme” (Giardinelli 215). All that he has written, both his reflections on the distant past in Argentina, as well as the experiences that he has just lived related to Carmen’s murder, represents an effort to feel differently about what he has experienced. His writing is a response to his need to vent, release tensions, and unburden himself from his guilt. Yet even though his writing, his written confession, is supposed to be a relief and to have lightened his burdens and guilt, he can’t help but still feel weighed down by the task of writing. “Volví a la habitación y me senté ante esta mesita, agobiado como si hubiese hombreado bolsas una semana seguida, para terminar este texto” (Giardinelli 216). The act he hopes will relieve him of the guilt and pain he carries is the very task that in the end leaves him feeling overwhelmed, tired, and weighed down.

Up to this point I have outlined how the “confessional machine” works in José’s confession and drawn particular attention to the affective change sought for in confession as

opposed to the cognitive understanding that I will address in chapter two. To summarize, the act of confessing compounds guilt each time a sin is confessed, as opposed to mitigating it. This effect undercuts the very intent of confession, which is to relieve the tension and burden of guilt. The renewed sense of guilt each time one confesses leads one to find another reason as to why they feel guilty, which only digs up more ruins of the past rather than burying the ones at hand. We will see that while José does have sins for which he needs to confess, his confession leads him back to other sins, his own as well as others, and traumatic experiences that he suffered for which he also now feels guilty. There is a certain transference of guilt from one act to another regardless of whether he is truly at fault. It will now be helpful to examine the specific instances in which José expresses the guilt he feels personally and then examine the way in which he takes upon himself the guilt of others, specifically his leftist militant Argentine companions, in an effort to be ‘saved’ from the individual and collective guilt and sins of the past.

The catalyst of this whole return to the past and the renewal of the feelings of guilt is, of course, José’s re-encounter with Carmen. Just the thought of seeing Carmen again takes him back to his past in order to reconstruct his relationship with her. Inevitably as he reminisces about their prior relationship he begins to remember those things for which he feels guilty. The first thing for which he admits to feel regret or guilt is the fact that he never went after her once she left him: “Me arrepentí mucho, luego, de no llamarla, ni buscarla, ni intentar un arreglo” (14). This is the first burden of guilt that he hopes to get over. However, this confession of regret soon reminds him of the things he did wrong that caused Carmen to leave. His first speech act to confess has now turned itself back on him and brought to his remembrance other sins that add to his feelings of remorse. He expresses in his first regret that he didn’t “intentar un arreglo.” The fact that he should need to fix their relationship most likely alludes to things that he did or failed



to do that led to their separation. Right after this admission of regret he begins to enumerate a few of the ways in which he failed to treat her well: “Es verdad, no la trababa bien, la desatendía, muchas noches la dejaba plantada por cuestiones del oficio, cierres impostergables, o bien reuniones del sindicato...” (14). What began as a simple admission of regret immediately turned into a confession of wrongdoing.

Now that José is in Zacatecas and has seen Carmen again, he can feel a bit of hope that he may have a chance to redeem himself from his past negligence. While he tries to make sense of Carmen’s current circumstances, to protect her and to fix everything, he once again falls short when he finds that Carmen has been murdered in the pent-house of his very hotel. The process of confession of negligence and regret begins all over again. The morning after her death he is faced by similar doubts and reproaches regarding his care for Carmen and once again only finds guilt and regret:

Mientras me duchaba, hice un breve inventario de lo que sabía y me flagelé<sup>8</sup> un poco más: ¿Había hecho yo todo lo posible para evitar que mataran a Carmen? ¿Había buscado los modos de estar cerca de ella, para impedirlo? ¿Por qué no fui capaz de advertir la dimensión del peligro que corría, si ella me había hablado de su miedo? ¿Por qué no luché por esclarecer sus dobles mensajes, si ellos indicaban que en el fondo sí quería—y necesitaba extremadamente—mi ayuda? ¿Por qué una vez más, *como en toda mi vida*, yo, José Giustozzi el hiperactivo, caía en la inacción justo en los momentos más importantes, e inexorablemente perdía lo querido? ¿Por qué fui tan estúpido de hacerme el discreto y

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<sup>8</sup> Note the connotation of the word “flagelarse.” The practice of self-flagellation is part of the certain sects of the Catholic tradition to inflict pain upon oneself in order to pay for one’s sins. Again we can note these clearly religious allusions in the self-denominated ‘incredulous’ (Giardinelli 95).

no insistí ante Carmen que me dijera la real situación en que se encontraba? (102-103; emphasis mine)

The failures of José's past are not only re-enacted in his confession but then are literally re-enacted in his failure to save Carmen. The same sins, regrets, and guilt that he felt years ago in Argentina when their relationship ended are the feelings that he feels now that he has seen her again, even in the wake of his confession. While he doesn't go into more detail, his use of the phrase "como en toda mi vida" alludes to not only this occasion for which he feels guilty but that this singular confession has a connection to those other experiences.

His next confession however demonstrates another level of depth that the previous one did not. While before the confession was simply that of regret and neglect, now in the wake of Carmen's death he confesses to a more serious sin, one of commission: "En los últimos meses de nuestra vida en pareja yo me enredé con una compañera de militancia, casada, y empecé a mentirle a Carmen. Llegaba tarde, faltaba citas, me contradecía." Even now looking back on his poor decisions he is still troubled by the fact that he doesn't know why he did it: "Nunca supe, realmente, por qué lo hice" (Giardinelli 122). Each time he confesses to something, the act of speaking causes him to feel more guilt, which reveals another sin to which it corresponds. José's confession, regarding his relationship with Carmen, began with regret, which led to his confessions of negligence and apathy towards her, until finally he admits to his affair. Now as he reflects on his relationship with Carmen, he can only feel guilty for all he did wrong as well as the fact that he can no longer ask for forgiveness: "Ocho años después...yo quería pedirle disculpas por tanta imbecilidad. Giustozzi el tonto, el papa frita, el chaqueño bruto, estaba llorando, arrepentido tardíamente, como siempre sucede con los arrepentimientos" (123).

This last quote illustrates another way in which we can read José's confession. José uses

certain words as labels to describe himself, such as ‘el tonto’, as well as others. He manifests his feelings of guilt not only by confession to specific acts but also by the way in which he speaks about himself. When José gives himself a certain title we can deduce a type of confession that would justify such a title. For example, in one instance he describes himself as, “el superficial, el frívolo, el pichodulce, el conch’esumadre que la iba de provinciano sencillo y enternecedor, que sabía ser porteño fatuo y engreído, que manifestaba vocación de andariego trashumante dispuesto siempre a aventuras amorosas” (Giardinelli 120). In this description and these labels we can find connections to specific sins to which he is confessing. ‘El superficial’ and ‘el frívolo’ may refer to the occasions that he was negligent and disinterested in Carmen as well as other women of his past. These negative terms with which he labels himself also connote a much more permanent sense of guilt. He is no longer just guilty for what he has done but for who he is. This name-calling is evidence of what Idelber Avelar calls “the self-mortifying, guilty rhetoric prevalent in postdictatorial confession and self-critiques on the Argentine left” (Avelar 115).

While there are many other terms that José calls himself, perhaps the most important one is “el gran abandonador” (Giardinelli 120). This term refers to some of the sins that José has committed but also shows how his ‘infinite capacity to feel guilt’ allows him to assume the fault for some of the traumas he suffered earlier in life which only add to his sense of guilt. José’s history of relationships is characterized by this one word, abandonment. Both his father and mother died when he was little and left him all alone. This abandonment as a child left a deep scar that has taken years, along with many visits to a psychiatrist, to get over. This scar of the past rears its head in the aftermath of an encounter José has with a henchman of the drug lord of Zacatecas who beats him up and warns him to stay out of the murder case of Marcelo and Carmen. That night he has a nightmare in which he is beat again by this same henchmen, only, in

the dream the henchman has his father's face. José says to have a “desconocido como enorme rencor porque [su padre] [le] abandonó,” yet he writes that during his nightmare “las culpas sobreolaban mi cama del Calinda” (87-88). This painful memory is not one of transgression but rather, of trauma. While he is the victim in this case and not the perpetrator he still feels guilt. Guilt is an emotion that mixes very easily with these feelings of pain and abandonment that José has felt all his life: “Entre remordimientos, dolor, abandonos y culpas, mi sueño valía nada” (88). The pain of guilt and that of abandonment are now all mixed together and have become indistinguishable.

Later in life he would feel abandoned by another anonymous girl and then Carmen. His confession shows the guilt that he feels for leaving her, yet this confession of being the “gran abandonador” shows the guilt that he feels for having been abandoned. Ricardo Gutiérrez Mouat summarizes this pattern of abandonment and the guilt that he feels:

Esta crisis de identidad está sobredeterminada por un avasallador sentimiento de culpa originado en el resentimiento contra la figura paterna que al morir prematuramente “abandona” al hijo (como lo hace la madre, que muere después del padre). Luego Carmen (y otra amante anónima) lo abandonan y Giustozzi se convierte él mismo en abandonador. No busca a Carmen aunque la quiere y se exilia del país y de la causa que ambos habían defendido. (107)

By calling himself “el gran abandonador” José can be said to confess to abandoning Carmen both then and now, as well as his country when he went into exile, yet he most definitely also relives the pains of the abandonment that he has suffered. Now that he is all alone, and those who have abandoned him, his mother and father as well as Carmen, have all died, it would be

understandable that he feels guilty for having lived while they all died<sup>9</sup>.

All these terms of self-loathing and abasement can also be seen as symptomatic of what Sigmund Freud would classify as melancholia. In this instance José has just suffered the loss of the only loved one he still had, even if it had been years since he had seen her, and her loss only brings to mind all the other people he has lost. In his landmark essay, “Mourning and Melancholia,” he says: “The melancholic displays something else besides which is lacking in mourning – an extraordinary diminution in his self-regard, an impoverishment of his ego on a grand scale” (Freud 584). If the ideal confession represents what would be a successful task of mourning, the confessional machine that produces guilt as it attempts to alleviate it would be representative of this state of melancholia or an unfulfilled task of mourning. As José remembers his past, the things that he did wrong, the pains that he has felt, and the traumas that he has suffered, he almost always refers to himself in a very negative light.

Freud continues to describe, in greater detail, the melancholic acts of a patient. His description of such an individual corresponds almost perfectly with José’s depiction of himself:

The patient represents his ego to us as worthless, incapable of any achievement and morally despicable; he reproaches himself, vilifies himself and expects to be cast out and punished... He is not of the opinion that a change has taken place in him but extends his self-criticism back over the past; he declares that he was never any better. (584)

It is precisely the morning after Carmen’s death when José begins his exercise of self-criticism anew and not only blames himself for his failure in the present but, as Freud says, “extends his self-criticism back over the past.”

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<sup>9</sup> In an interview with Karl Kohut, Mempo Giardinelli spoke of these same experiences that he went through as a boy and the guilt he felt for the experiences that he suffered: “Desde niño había sentido culpa porque murieron mis padres y yo seguía vivo” (Kohut 38).

Thus far we have only explored the guilt, which José feels for his own personal actions and traumas of the past. But another part of this novel is the fact that José not only feels guilt for his own past but also takes upon himself the guilt of a collective past life of transgression that he shares with all of his companions who participated in the leftist militancy movements in Argentina. The connection between José's personal confession and that of his communal confession on behalf of his leftist companions is without a doubt Carmen herself. In this foreign land that José now calls 'home' Carmen represents Argentina and an entire period of his life.

While trying to understand how there could be anyway he could 'be saved' after all he has experienced, José connects his individual guilt to the sins of all his other militant companions. He asks himself the question, "¿Cómo salvarme si yo también quedé marcado como parte de aquel proceso y de alguna manera colaboré en el delirio nacional..." (Giardinelli 193). It is interesting to note how he portrays his involvement with the Montonero movement. Rather than being an active participant he describes himself as merely a passive member. He was 'marked by the process' rather than an active participant in the revolution. It is partly because of his passive attitude towards the cause, to which Carmen and his other companions were so dedicated, that he feels such guilt. Reflecting on his last months with Carmen he confesses, "Vivía con miedo, con culpas y autochantajes relativos a mi propio compromiso político... Carmen empezaba a decir que quizá era cierto que había que terminar con las palabras y pasar a la acción. Yo no sabía decirle que estaba equivocada; no sabía si lo estaba" (Giardinelli 123). His personal guilt is derived from his inactivity in the revolutionist cause yet he also feels a responsibility for the 'delirio nacional' and crimes of his generation that were committed in Argentina before he abandoned his country as an exile. Kohut points out this connection between the personal guilt of José and the collective political guilt that he feels.

Al movimiento horizontal de la indagación policial corresponde el movimiento vertical de la indagación en el propio pasado del protagonista que es a la vez el pasado colectivo de su país. La historia de su amor por Carmen está íntimamente ligada con algunas fechas claves de la historia argentina reciente. Se conocieron en el agosto de 1972, poco después de la masacre de Trelew y se empezaron a amar el 17 de noviembre de 1973, el día del retorno de Perón. Los días felices de su amor coincidan con la militancia juvenil de estos años, su separación con la degeneración del movimiento. Vino el golpe y el exilio. (76-77)

For José, the guilt that he feels for his failure with Carmen is inseparable from the guilt that he feels for the failure of his generation.

Again, it is important to ask why José chooses to include himself in the confession of such acts as planting bombs and armed conflict when he never participated personally in any of those actions. He clarifies his own personal involvement by saying, “nunca llegué al mismo nivel de compromiso...o de delirio” (Giardinelli 192-193). Drawing on his research of actual judicial cases and crimes Peter Brooks argues that “there is always more than enough guilt to go around” (Brooks 21). He paraphrases Freud in order to explain his stance, saying “unconscious guilt may produce crime in order to assure punishment as the only satisfaction of the guilt” (21). In order to make sure that José will receive the punishment he feels he deserves for the wrongdoings he has committed he also confesses to crimes he is not at fault for as a way to satisfy the guilt he feels.

José’s decision to stay in Zacatecas after Carmen, Hilda, and the police chief, and even the henchmen that beats him, all tell him to leave is an indication of the unconscious guilt he feels about his sins of the past that won’t allow him to leave. After Carmen’s death José asks himself why he is still there in Zacatecas. Although he finds more questions than answers he

does provide a possible justification:

Quizá seguí adelante simple y sencillamente porque hay cosas que no se deben abandonar...[Uno] intuye o sabe que si se va si se rinde, si abandona, si claudica, llevará sobre sí la culpa del miserable, del cobarde, del indigno. Ni siquiera se lo puede explicar a sí mismo, pero cuando lo siente, *lo siente*. (125-126; original emphasis)

I don't believe it to be a coincidence that in his answer José uses the verb "abandonar" twice. Subconsciously he feels guilty for abandoning Carmen and stays in Zacatecas to accept the punishment of that transgression. Similarly he feels guilty for having abandoned his country when he left for exile and now confesses to their sins because of the regret that he feels. In this collective instance José's guilt produces the crime he confesses to rather than being the result of such a crime. We will see later on that José's confession of violence he never exercised in Argentina foreshadows the violence he will exercise in Zacatecas in his efforts to find out the truth about Carmen's death.

Throughout the novel José has confessed openly about his sins regarding his relationship with Carmen, with no attempt to justify or explain away his actions. His confession of the collective sins of his generation differs from his personal confession in that regard. At the same time that he confesses to things that they did wrong he attempts to provide a justification for their innocence. Perhaps in this part of the novel we can see what Brooks says about the confessional machine: "As a speech act, 'I confess' implies and necessitates guilt, and if the guilt is not there in the referent, it is in the speech-act itself, which simultaneously exonerates and inculcates" (Brooks 22).

While José admits that his generation made mistakes and was unnecessarily violent, he ultimately casts the blame on the 'others,' "los golpistas." In a moment of desperation he states,



“fuimos antes víctimas que victimarios” (Giardinelli 168). The difficulty is that even though he feels that the greater fault is to be found with the ‘others,’ who caused them to act in such a manner, the fact is that they were violent, and he feels the guilt of their errors now weigh on him as he contemplates their collective past: “Nosotros, todos, por ser hijos de la violencia, habíamos sido violentos” (167). The confession is what allows the victim to see the truly horrifying truth that because of the violence that they suffered they now find a torturer within themselves. As a result of the confession the past becomes more blurred instead of clear. The line between good and bad is blurred as even the victim comes to see that they have also been guilty of the same sins they denounce. Fernando Reati explains this effect that such violence had on all of Argentine society, which we see in José’s confession: “Ciertos rasgos del victimario han sido internalizados por los personajes victimizadas. . . . El enemigo deja de ser una fuerza exclusivamente externa para convertirse también en una presencia interior. Como resultado, se hace imposible sostener una visión maniquea de la violencia, toda vez que los límites entre los comportamientos de las víctimas y los victimarios se han desdibujado” (Reati 64).

It is in his collective confession on behalf of his fallen compatriots that José comes to the awful realization that his generation is guilty of the same crimes as their oppressors, or in other words, they are the ‘víctima convertido en victimario.’ This realization is similar to how his personal confession shows him that he has become the ‘abandonador abandonado.’ While he attempts to justify their violence he inevitably speaks to their guilt. He asks himself difficult questions as a way to highlight the tragedy of his generation’s circumstance in Argentina and their reasons for acting as they did: “¿Qué culpa teníamos, si nuestra generación fue condenada a la intemperancia y al desprecio por la democracia, al autoritarismo y a la violencia, y a la enfermiza necesidad de aplastar al adversario? ¿Cuál era nuestra culpa?” (Giardinelli 106).

While he tries to cast the blame on the military rule and societal circumstances of his time, his very need to grapple with these questions indicates a certain level of guilt.

It is his guilt that compels him to admit to such acts of violence and delirium even in the very act of seeking to justify his generation. His questioning and confession culminate in this significant statement: “Los miles de muertos que ha habido en esta tragedia contemporánea que ha sido la Argentina no tuvieron la culpa de lo que pasó. Mi generación no tuvo *toda* la culpa, al menos. No nos cabe la misma cuota que a los asesinos” (108; original emphasis). His confession begins with a statement of total innocence, “no tuvieron la culpa,” which then evolves into an admission of sin, “no tuvo *toda* la culpa,” and has now actually inculpated his generation by way of the very confessional act that he hoped would exonerate them.

The excess of guilt that José feels is one explanation for his confession of acts of violence which he himself didn't commit, but I believe there is yet another motive that explains why he assumes the responsibility for the sins of his compatriots. As mentioned previously, while José was a part of the Montonero movement he did not exercise the same level of commitment of action in the party. He left the country as an exile to save himself while others, more committed than him, stayed and were killed. His exile from not only Argentina, but also from his Montonero compatriots can be seen as alienation from his ideal community. José occupies a situation similar to that which Avelar claims is that of Arlt's ‘invisible gaucho.’ He [José] “cannot find community within the humiliated” (Avelar 117). One could say that José's collective confession may at first be seen as a form of testimonio, the discourse of a survived individual speaking for the community, but I argue that while there is an intent to denounce the crimes committed against his community, it is a community to which he feels he does not belong. His confession is in essence an effort to be condemned of their same crimes, thus

showing his shared values and commitment to their cause, as a way to be accepted back into their community. Stephen Spender articulates such a motive for confession when he explains: “The essence of confessing is that the one who feels outcast pleads with humanity to relate his isolation to its wholeness. He pleads to be forgiven, condoned, condemned even, so long as he is brought back into the wholeness of people and of things” (Spender 69).

Beatriz Sarlo also explains how the voice of the survivor of such horrendous traumas is the voice of a ‘sujeto herido,’ one that recognizes its estrangement from the very community for which it claims to speak. Such subjects “hablan entonces *porque* otros han muerto y en *su* lugar... es un sujeto herido, no porque pretenda ocupar vicariamente el lugar de los muertos, sino porque sabe de antemano que ese lugar no le corresponde” (Sarlo 43; original emphasis).

Understanding that José Giustozzi is a type of alter ego of the author, Mempo Giardinelli, I believe his statement about his experiences, paralleling those of José, to be very revealing about the underlying guilt that José is truly confessing. Just as I argue that José feels guilty for the death and the abandonment of his parents Giardinelli expresses a similar sentiment: “Luego sentí culpa porque mataban a mi generación y yo seguía vivo. ¿Qué era yo? ¿Privilegiado de qué? ¿Por qué?” (Kohut 38-39).

Returning to the novel itself we can now observe how José's confession of violent crimes as a part of the Montonero movement leads him to exercise the type of violence that he never committed while in Argentina. After Carmen has been killed, José continues in Zacatecas and gets even more involved than before, making important discoveries about Carmen and Marcelo's clandestine acts. Once again the henchman is sent after him. Realizing that he most likely won't be able to escape him, José lures his attacker into a bathroom where he finally resorts to the violence he never exercised in Argentina, and to his amazement is enraptured by the feeling of

power and strength that overwhelms him. However, immediately after this incident, he realizes his own error and feels guilty once again for having passed a limit. “Yo sentí que lo terrible era...sentirme fascinado con la sangre y el dolor de un tipo. Yo era bestial y violento como jamás había pensado...Salí del baño, enloquecido de rabia y de miedo, sintiendo que había traspasado un límite. No sabía de qué, ni qué había del otro lado, pero era un límite. Y yo lo había cruzado” (199, 201).

After having justified and explained the violence of his generation in Argentina, José now finds himself acting out that same violence. He can once again argue that the physical threat of the henchman made him resort to violence, but be that as it may, he cannot deny the guilt that he feels afterwards. He knows that he crossed a line and feels guilty for doing so. Berg points out the irony behind the evolution of events that take place. His confession of the violence of his generation accompanied by his attempts to justify such acts only lead him to then exercise that same violence he denounces and renew the sense of guilt that he was hoping to eradicate:

A este desvanecimiento de la ética militante corresponde la experiencia del sujeto-narrador, que se ve obligado él también, en virtud justamente del principio ético de saberlo todo, a cometer actos de violencia, a caer en la tentación de alcanzar la horrible categoría de dioses pequeños, capaces de decidir la muerte de un semejante. (238)

José has now exercised the violence which he never did in Argentina, a fact that estranged him from the community of his closest friends and associates, perhaps even Carmen.<sup>10</sup> This violence

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<sup>10</sup> On one occasion José begins to question whether or not Carmen or any of his other compatriots might have killed someone: “Habría matado Carmen, alguna vez? ¿Disparó contra un hombre; apretó un gatillo apuntando al pecho de alguien? ¿Cargaba ese tipo de culpas esa muchacha que yo mismo, ahora, no podía identificar?...En el exilio, con los amigos y compañeros, ¿acaso no nos habíamos interrogado con los ojos, temeroso de las respuesta, acerca de las posibilidades criminales que pudo tener cada uno de nosotros?” (Giardinelli 121). Even within their own community there is an ominous feeling of isolation one from another.

was not only an individual act, but one that he feels is connected to the collective violence of his past: “Yo...acababa de mostrarme mi propia capacidad de violencia, toda una fuerza acumulada que no era solo mía sino de todos mis muertos amados, de toda la rabia contenida por tanto que habíamos perdido. Era la violencia que yo no había desatado en la Argentina” (Giardinelli 203). José was now guilty of the same violence that his companions in Argentina had committed. He will eventually suffer the consequences of the violence that he exercised when the drug lord of Zacatecas catches up with him, in a similar way that those of his generation suffered the consequences of their violence at the hands of the ‘golpistas.’ The punishment of their sins was death; a punishment that José surely has begun to intuit will be his own as a result of his actions in Zacatecas.<sup>11</sup>

While José struggles to find the redemption he seeks in his actions he resorts to another method to try and redeem himself, Carmen, and the rest of his generation: he writes the text that we read as the novel *Que sólo se quedan los muertos*. José can’t bring himself to flee physically from Zacatecas, but also refuses to flee mentally and emotionally from the guilt of his past: “Rajarse para salvarse. Huir de nuestras culpas y salvarnos.. ¿Es posible salvarse cuando uno ha sido toda la vida un perdedor?...Puede uno salvarse cuando todo fue sufrir abandonos y buscar al padre, como Pedro Páramo, para ni siquiera encontrar fantasmas, sino sólo silencio y dolor?” (Giardinelli 192). José cannot just forget the past and act as if it didn’t happen. He feels a need to confront it and to break the silence that is left in the wake of the failure of his generation. This is

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<sup>11</sup> The foreshadowing of José’s death can be seen from very early in the novel. On the night of Carmen’s death he whistles a tune as he leave Hilda’s house. He recognizes that the tune he whistles represents the tragic nature of his reality that he feels: “No tardé en darme cuenta de que mi propia silbo decía, al son de imaginarios mariachis: “Si me han de matar mañana/que me maten de una vez” (Giardinelli 85). His confrontation with the drug lord Liborio, in which we suppose ends with his death, happens the very next day.

the purpose that his writing serves.

Several times throughout the novel, the narrator-protagonist, José ‘Pepe’ Giustozzi, speaks directly to the reader of this text. He tells the reader, “este texto, contra lo que pudiera parecer, no es ni pretende ser una novela” (Giardinelli 157). The text that we read is not simply a novel, a fictitious story meant to entertain, but rather it serves a deeper purpose. He goes on to say, “esto que redacto fervorosa, apasionadamente...es sólo un necesario desahogo, una indispensable reflexión alrededor de la idea de que son los muertos los que se friegan, los que se frustran, los que sufren y pierden, porque para ellos se acaba todo y entran en el olvido, en la soledad, en el gran silencio” (121). It is interesting to note that he calls his text a ‘*necessary* release’, as well as a reflection about this idea that the dead are those who are forgotten and left behind in solitude and silence. The use of the word ‘*necessary*’ connotes that the words that he writes serve a deeper purpose than just to tell a story or to provide the reader with information. These words have a purpose for the author. In his solitude José has resorted to writing as a way to release tensions, such as guilt, fear, and doubt, in order to obtain a clean conscience before what we ultimately assume will be his death.

It is against this ‘*olvido, soledad y gran silencio*’ that José writes. The text that ‘José’ provides us with is his way of trying to assure himself that he will not be forgotten as a mere number among the many who have died. His confession, or ‘*necesario desahogo*,’ of all that is occurring in his life at present as well as his reflection on his past, is a way to assert his place in the world and to seek peace regarding the way he has lived. At the end of the novel when José realizes that his road has come to an end he confesses that he considered taking his own life as an alternative to being murdered by the same people that took Marcelo and Carmen’s lives. But in his explanation as to why he didn’t follow that course of action he makes sure to explicitly state,

“No, este texto no terminará con el suicidio del protagonista. Ahora concluyo estas páginas consignando mi último día en Zacatecas, *José Giustozzi está vivo*, todavía, en el momento en que se entrega... (Giardinelli 214; emphasis mine). He makes sure to state that he is still alive. He is not yet a ‘muerto’ that is left to suffer, to be forgotten, and to be left all alone in silence. Yet the very last lines of the novel show that though he may say that he is still ‘alive’ he does not feel that way: “Entonces levanté la cabeza y me vi en el espejo: un patético José Giustozzi me mira desde ahí. Su cara es la imagen completa de la soledad y el desamparo. Le digo: Estás muerto. Seguí hablando pero estás muerto, sólo que todavía no lo sabés” (Giardinelli 216). The confession that he offers the reader is his way of denying his own death. While the task of writing this text is important to him in the present it is his hope that it will also assure his place in the world in the future.

When José reflects on the outcome of his participation in the leftist militancy in Argentina and how his life and those of his compatriots ended he struggles with the reality that their efforts seem to have been for nothing: “Todo había sido inútil y eso era lo tremendo. Años después, Jarito, Vicky, Mauricio, Yaya, Negro, Cristina, ahora Carmen, eran sólo nombres. A nadie le importaban. Nadie les levantaría un monumento que acaso ni siquiera merecían” (Giardinelli 167). These are the ‘muertos’ of which Juan speaks when he states that they are the ones that really suffer. Rosa Pellicer also emphasizes the importance of this passage in relation to the title of the novel: “En *Qué solos se quedan los muertos*, con el verso de Bécquer se alude al olvido de las víctimas de los años de plomo” (Pellicer; no pagination). His confession, this text that he writes, is his effort to “[confront]...the postdictatorial doxa of oblivion” that Avelar argues is implicit in any work of mourning (Avelar 111).

In his book, *Looking Awry*, Slavoj Žižek speaks about the power of speech, in this case

writing, to bring about a return of the living dead, a way to inscribe the memories of the dead gone before into the memory of the community:

When we speak about a thing, we suspend, place in parentheses, its reality. It is precisely for this reason that the funeral rite exemplifies symbolization at its purest: through it, the dead are inscribed in the text of symbolic tradition, they are assured that, in spite of their death, they will “continue to live” in the memory of the community. The two great traumatic events of the holocaust and the gulag are, of course, exemplary cases of the return of the dead in the twentieth century. The shadows of their victims will continue to chase us as “living dead” until we give them a decent burial, until we integrate the trauma of their death into our historical memory. (23)

José provides us with a text that he hopes will allow his generation and himself to ‘continue to live’ in the memory of their community. But he also tries to make sense of the errors, the transgressions, and the traumas of their past in order to show that they do indeed deserve the monument he tries to erect. This is the burden that José shoulders when he undertakes the task of writing. In part we can argue that much of the guilt and pain that José feels corresponds to “the burden of the unmourned dead whose anonymous, absurd, arbitrary deaths could not possibly be cathected” (Avelar 226). As one who is still alive José shoulders the burden to “restitute the dead to the realm of the dead and liberate them from the uncertain condition of being unnamed, unrecognizable, unmournable ghosts” (226).

Now, at the end of his writing, or his confessional act, it is important to note how José sees himself. After burning the drug money and disposing of the drugs that he had found in Carmen’s apartment, he returns to the room and looks at himself in the mirror:

Volví a la habitación y me senté ante esta mesita, agobiado como si hubiese hombreado



bolsas una semana seguida, para terminar este texto. Me sentí triste, abrumado, con ganas de llorar. Entonces levanté la cabeza y me vi en el espejo: un patético José Giustozzi me mira desde ahí. Su cara es la imagen competa de soledad y el desamparo. (216)

The task that he undertook to relieve himself of the tension of his guilt and to vent about his past traumas has not left him feeling any better than before. The very task of writing the text, of exploring his past guilt and recording his actions to recompense his past sins, has left him feeling sad, weighed down, and wanting to cry. He does not see himself in any better light than he did at the beginning of the text. Here we should remember what Foster says about the trouble of confession: “He [the confessant] must pursue his goal through the detour of negation: he can only speak of innocence by speaking of sin, reenacting in the language of confession the loss he feels” (Foster 16). It is only through speaking (writing in this case) of his sin that he can hope to justify, excuse, and redeem himself in order to achieve his innocence. Yet the writing of his experience requires him to once again relive that guilt and pain of the past, which leaves him feeling alone and hopeless. The very nature of confession will not allow José to be rid of his guilt.

It is fitting then that Giardinelli would employ the confessional mode in his novel as a representation of the task of mourning in postdictatorial texts. José tries to posit his feelings of loss for Carmen in the text that he writes, but at the end he realizes that there are certain things that simply can’t be written. His text does not exist as something outside of himself in which he can safely posit his feelings of loss and mourning, but rather he is swallowed up in the very text he writes to preserve himself. After explaining once again his purpose in writing this text, to “descargar tensiones y desahogar[se],” he then says, “Lo que suceda de ahora en adelante, no podrá ser contado” (Giardinelli 215). He has come to the point where he can no longer write.

Avelar explains how this experience relates to the unfulfilled task of mourning that José undertook in his writing:

Several of the books analyzed here depict scenes in which it is perceived (by a character, a narrator-protagonist, or the implied author) that one can no longer write, that *writing is no longer possible*, and that writing's only remaining task is to account for that impossibility. The loss with which the writing attempts to come to terms has, melancholically, swallowed writing itself, with the effect that the subject who mourns the other find him/herself to be part of what has been dissolved. (232; original emphasis)

The task of mourning cannot be completed just as the confession cannot provide the confessant with the peace of conscience that he seeks. The whole novel has been a long process of self-examination, which did not result in the desired outcome of peace of conscious, forgiveness, and redemption. Karl Kohut observes: “El largo proceso de autocrítica termina en desengaño. Dolorosamente, José Giustozzi aprende que no hay paraísos. Los valores en que creía su generación ya no sirven, y todavía no se asoman nuevos” (88). Then speaking on a broader level, regarding the work of the author, Mempo Giardinelli, he says, “El universo de Mempo Giardinelli está vacía.<sup>12</sup> La dignidad del hombre consiste en aceptar la condición humana. Vivir es dudar y buscar” (85). While José hopes to find some sort of redemption or salvation through his confession, narrated in this text, Giardinelli shows us that to return to one's past and to confess will only lead to a greater feeling of guilt, which perpetuates the confession in what

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<sup>12</sup> Kohut states: “No hay dios en el universo giardinelliano” (Kohut 83). It is perhaps this absence of God, or some transcendental figure, that condemns the confession to its unfulfilled state. In his book on Bahktin's view of confession, Les Smith makes just such an argument: “Unless the confessant adopts the terms of a transcendent perspective that places her in relation to otherness, she risks endless wandering in solipsistic discourse, language always deferring attainment of the goal--ontological self-definition” (Smith 35).

could be a never-ending cycle.

## Chapter 2: The Confession as Self-Objectification in Search of Understanding

Of all of Giardinelli's novels, perhaps the one that is least often mentioned, let alone written about, is *Cuestiones interiores* (2003). On one occasion Giardinelli himself called this novel his "verdadero *worst-seller*" (Giardinelli 28). In most of the criticism on Giardinelli's work this novel simply appears in a list of titles that represent his works belonging to the *género negro*. While the novel did not do well in sales, and the literary critics have not paid it much attention, it is one of the author's preferred works. He says this novel is "una nouvelle desdichada que aprecio mucho." He goes on to explain his use of the term 'desdichado' to describe it: "Fue un fracaso de ventas... aunque en mi opinión es uno de mis mejores textos negros, el más literario en el sentido de que importa más la escritura que la trama" (28).

The novel tells the story of a man who killed a stranger while in a public bathroom in the airport for no apparent reason or motive. While the protagonist, Juan, claims to accept full responsibility for his actions, which led to the death of this man, he struggles to come to terms with what he has done and what that says about who he is. His court confession leads him into the dark corners of his past to confess other sins and denounce the traumas and injustices of his life. This novel, opposed to *Qué solos se quedan los muertos*, is almost entirely apolitical. Glen Close describes the novel as "depoliticized, intimately subjectivized, and decisively removed from the reductive schemes of moral containment" (Close 149). Yet even when there are no explicit references to any time period or political events, the novel does reflect a disillusion and discontent with the state of his own country, Argentina. On one occasion Giardinelli offered an explanation of the political context of his novel *El décimo infierno* (1995), in a way that seems to also be applicable to *Cuestiones interiores*: "*El décimo infierno* quise que fuera una novela brutal y despiadada porque mi país bajo la presidencia de Carlos Menem era entonces un país brutal y

despiadado, como quedó a la vista cuando la crisis terminal de la Argentina en 2001” (Giardinelli 27). In another interview he explained a similar sentiment: “It expresses what this government has been: a form of irrational violence, an absolute corruption of values, a form of hopelessness and vertigo of heedless action” (Giardinelli; no pagination).

Giardinelli’s description of the Argentina he tries to portray in *El décimo infierno* is very much the same picture that he paints in *Cuestiones interiores*. Juan is just an ordinary citizen who all of a sudden finds himself condemned by an act of completely irrational violence. The rest of the novel also shows Juan to be a man almost void of any real morals whose difficult life has left him in a state of hopelessness. In the wake of such incomprehensible pain and loss, Juan confesses in order to mitigate and maybe even eliminate the possibility of legal punishment, but more importantly to explore his own ‘cuestiones interiores’ in order to understand who he really is and what this awful deed may say about his identity. I propose that Giardinelli highlights the struggle that Juan faces in his effort to come to an understanding of his crimes and his identity by employing the confessional mode that requires the mediation of another, even a virtual other, to arrive at an understanding of the self. The confession fails because it cannot provide an unmediated access to the self that Juan hopes to understand.

Have you ever found yourself in a “situación tumultuosa de la que no puede salir[?] Y no sabe ni por qué está viviéndola[?]” (Giardinelli 28). And if you have, how do you explain yourself to others when even you struggle to make sense of it? These are the questions that Juan faces as he goes through the drawn out process of his trial and sentencing for his obscene crime of murder. Juan realizes what he has done yet cannot grasp why he has done it. He has no apparent connections to the victim and doesn’t even know his name. He was neither attacked nor threatened in any way. Yet for some inexplicable reason, he decided to hit this man across the

back of his head while he was on his way out of the bathroom. This strike consequently left the man dead on the ground and placed Juan in a predicament in which he never thought he would be.

‘Asesino’: This is the word that has come to define Juan. He cannot deny the fact that he is the one directly responsible for this man’s death and yet he cannot bring himself to accept the fact that he is indeed a murderer. His distress is made plain to see when he cannot restrain himself any longer during a court session, in which he jumps to his feet and declares: “Pero yo no soy un asesino, Señor Juez. Maté a ese hombre pero no soy...” (Giardinelli 97). Juan is now made to confess his actions to a court in an attempt to persuade them of his ‘innocence.’ This confession and his time spent incarcerated lead Juan to reminisce on many other experiences of his past. His thoughts take him to other traumatic experiences, horrible transgressions, and even other deaths. Not only is he made to confess in the public eye, but he is also compelled to confess in his own private space in order to come to terms with who he is.<sup>13</sup>

One who confesses finds himself alienated from his community because of the act(s) he has committed. Confession is an effort to reconcile that distance and find acceptance once again. The narrative offered is a way that the confessant is able to represent their actions, desires, and motives to their confessor (community) as a comprehensible object, able to be reinstated into society. However, confession does not only exist in the public or communal space but also in the private. This same task of self-objectification is required of the individual to come to know

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<sup>13</sup> The fact that the place of Juan’s confession is a jail cell is not a mere coincidence. Jeremy Tambling explains the significance of the cell, as a modern day equivalent of the Catholic confessional. These spaces exude an illusory nature of privacy that compels the confessant to make public the most private matters of his/her life: “The point is both the illusoriness of the ‘private’; ...and a space guaranteeing nothing; it is also that the foregrounding of private spaces within architecture involves creating a desire for introspection, doubled with the sense that the fear of solitude is a function of guilt” (Tambling 73).

himself as well as to come to terms with his wrongdoings and in turn his own identity.<sup>14</sup>

Nevertheless, these two levels of confession do not exist in totally separate planes. Hepworth and Turner state: “confession is a method of linking the interior conscience with the exterior public order.” They go on to explain that “confession lies at the sensitive intersection between the interior freedom of the individual conscience and the exterior requirements of public order” (Hepworth and Turner 14-15). Mempo Giardinelli employs the confessional mode in his novel *Cuestiones interiores* (2003) to illustrate the difficulty of this process and the seemingly futile nature of confession both on an individual and communal level.

The process of self-objectification in confessional narrative presents the reader with an interesting scenario. The subject, or the voice of the confession, is at the same time the object that it is describing. As mentioned above, the aim of confession, that is to come to know oneself and to make oneself known, requires that the subject (confessant) resort to language to portray oneself and to depend on the understanding of an “other” that can confirm his status as a coherent object in reality. When speaking of this process of transforming the confessing subject into an object for others to see, understand, and accept as such Foster explains what should be meant by the term ‘subject:’ “By ‘subject’ I do not mean an autonomous, centered being that founds the individual, but the representation of the self, particularly as it is objectified through language. The subject is that aspect of the self available to understanding” (Foster 3). The ‘subject’ is precisely only what becomes available to understanding through this objectification of the self through language. The process of self-objectification is the primary obstacle that Juan

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<sup>14</sup> In his book on Bakhtin’s perspective of confession Les Smith points to an obstacle that any being has to face when they confess: “Self-reflection can never achieve finality since it always derives from consciousness itself, which is ongoing. No word can be final since it, like any other act, connects the self with the ‘open endlessness of the event of being.’ For this reason, confession is “potentially endless” (Smith 34).

faces in his confession. He relies upon the opinions and perceptions of others in order to know himself yet he cannot adequately depict his experiences and feelings in a way that they can comprehend.

While Juan claims that “salvación está en uno mismo” (Giardinelli 131) he cannot ignore the need to speak in order to be recognized and validated as a “buena persona” (104). Foster explains this need for an ‘other’ that can confirm the notion of identity and truth about the confessant. Based on his reading of Lacan he argues:

Speaking...moves one from a primal isolation into a social realm of signification that is not completely within the speaker’s control. Because the limited possibilities of language determine how a demand can be expressed, the desiring subject is not fully present in his own speech. He cannot, therefore, find out who he is by questioning himself, but must seek his confirmation in the reply of another who can say, ‘I know you.’ (9)

It is this need to be made known to someone else that influences his desires, meanings, and language. He must use a language that will be understood by others in order to attain their recognition and acceptance. Foster defines confession in this context as “an attempt to objectify the self...through a narrative that ‘re-structures’ the self as history and conclusions” (Foster 10). While the self is present to Juan through his memory of experiences and feelings it can be made “understandable only when they are transformed into objects for consciousness, into histories rather than sensations” (Foster 10). It is precisely this task of converting his memory of experiences and sensations into ‘objects of consciousness’ that Juan is not able to master:

Todavía no me traiciona la memoria, no, a mí no, explicó Juan al abogado hace un rato, simplemente que lo que no recuerdo no lo recuerdo, yo le soy sincero, sinceramente no sé por qué hice lo que hice y no me lo pregunten más porque no lo sé, pero no es que me



traiciona la memoria. No sé si me entiende. O mejor dicho, no me entiende, yo sé, yo veo que no me entiende. (Giardinelli 67 - 68)

Juan admits that there may be elements of the story that exist but which he does not remember and therefore cannot explain. Yet he claims that he has fully divulged all the information he can and as clearly as he is able. To his displeasure, however, Juan has not been clear enough to make his lawyer understand him. The understanding of his story, and therefore his judgment, is deferred since the gap of understanding has not been bridged. Even after being asked several times and having repeated his story over and over, he cannot make his experience into a coherent object understandable to others. Foster claims that it is this “perverseness of language” that dooms each confession to failure. John Rosenberg also addresses the difficulty of language to meet the needs of confession adequately in his book on the circular nature of confession: “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” (Rosenberg x). It is “the failure of speech to be adequate to its subject” (Foster 10) that keeps the confessant from being able to successfully objectify himself.

This gap between being able to express in language our personal experiences to then be understood by others is made apparent in the first lines of the novel. “Nunca sabría por qué le pegó. Jamás podría explicarlo, Juan ni a sí mismo” (Giardinelli 11). From the very beginning Giardinelli articulates Juan’s desire and the impossibility of fulfilling such desire. While Juan proceeds to tell a detailed explanation of what happened that dreaded day in the public bathroom he is presented with the challenge of explaining the experience and everything that accompanies it to others that will pass judgment on him. Even if Juan knew why he hit that poor man he would still face the challenge of explaining it to others so that they can “understand, judge,

forgive, and perhaps even sympathize” (Foster 2), thus rendering his confession complete. The confession comes full circle returning to the same gaps in understanding that are present each time Juan has attempted to give a full account of his actions, thoughts and feelings regarding his crime.

After having already given his version of what happened Juan has still not been able to make himself fully understood to his interlocutors and talks about the difficulty, and even impossibility, of arriving at this ‘shared expectation of understanding:’ “Podría repetir el mismo relato las veces que sea necesario, por supuesto. No es cuestión de voluntad, ni de andar mintiendo, de ninguna manera, lo que pasa es que él admitió los hechos tal como acontecieron” (Giardinelli 27). Juan claims that he has already told his story and admitted to all of his wrongdoings just as they occurred, yet the judge and lawyer are still not satisfied with his confession.

In the public arena Juan must adhere to basic power structures in order to tell the ‘truth’ about his crime. The truth is not found only in Juan’s confession but rather in the understanding that the listener can grasp from the confession. The need to alter one’s confession to fit within the forces that control it leads us to question the veracity of the confession. Is the confession that Juan offers really his, the one that he wants to give, or is it the judge’s or the lawyer’s, the one that they elicit, as the individuals in power?

Therefore the back and forth of confessing, being misunderstood, and then retelling of the confession creates a power struggle between the discourse of the confessant and that of the confessor which mediates and thus complicates the understanding that Juan would like to attain. He can only establish himself in society through the power of his discourse: “Discourse ‘poses the question of power; [it is] an asset that is, by nature, the object of a struggle, a political

struggle.’ The confessor can produce his place in the world only on the capital of his discourse, and thus depends on expanding his influence through a sort of imperialism of discourse” (Foster 14). This struggle is clearly demonstrated in the interrogative aspect of the novel.

Even though he is the criminal, we can see Juan as the one in a position of power because it is his confession that constitutes the discourse that must be understood and he can change it anyway he would like. Foster argues this point when he says, “a confessor commands a power over a listener because he controls the material the other is obligated to use to be the one who understands” (Foster 14). Although this may be true, it is also true that the material that is presented as confession can only exert its influence on an ‘other’ as far as it is understood by that other. The refusal of understanding on the part of the listener or the reader then forces the speaker to change his discourse in order to be understood. Juan may control the material of his discourse, but if it is not understandable he runs the risk of seeming crazy. In one instance in the court Juan begins telling a story that has nothing to do with his situation and the judge responds, “pero qué dice este hombre, sáquenlo de mi presencia y se suspende la sesión” (Giardinelli 106). While it is true that the listener has a ‘need to understand’ (Foster 3), there is an even greater need for the speaker, the guilty one, ‘to be understood.’

Just as Juan sees that the judge doesn’t understand him and recognizes the need to change or alter his confession in order to be understood, his lawyer is also aware of the power struggle present in discourse. The ‘truth’ about Juan, whether he is a murderer or not, and about the acts of his crime will be established based upon discourse and which one is more comprehensible to the judge and the jury. This ‘truth,’ however, does not reside only in his confession. Truth becomes a social construct. Michel Foucault sheds some light on the nature of truth within the confessional context: “The truth [does] not reside solely in the subject who, by confessing, would

reveal it wholly formed. It [is] constituted in two stages: present but incomplete, blind to itself, in the one who [speaks], it could only reach completion in the one who assimilate[s] and record[s] it” (Foucault 66). For this reason Juan’s lawyer counsels him to be as clear as possible when he speaks: “Cuando se le pregunta algo, usted debe responder acerca de ese algo y ser lo más claro y concreto posible” (Giardinelli 16). His confession is not allowed to follow a free line of thought that he dictates, but instead must respond to the needs and demands of those that require the confession from him.

The “true” position of power in confession is that of the listener. The speaker has to offer the confession in such a way that corresponds to the demands and prescriptions set forth by the listener. In Juan’s case, the judge and the court prescribe the confession that he must make. Juan points out that the fact that they require him to have a lawyer to speak for him is even another level of mediation that impedes him from expressing himself as he would like. The whole system according to Juan, “es un modo de que yo no pueda valerme por mí mismo, vaya, seguro, por eso ha de ser que no me escuchan, no les importa lo que yo diga porque están todos preocupados y ocupados en el cumplimiento de las formalidades ordenadas por los códigos y procedimientos, las formas lo son todo” (Giardinelli 121). This trial and Juan’s confession are not so concerned with the truth but rather fulfilling the codes and formalities that those in power have established.

On several occasions Juan’s lawyer demands that he alter his confession or his explanations in order to respond to the accusations of the prosecution. He pleads with Juan, “haga un esfuerzo por mejorar el nivel de sus explicaciones o estamos perdidos” (Giardinelli 60). Later, when he realizes that the discourse of the prosecution is filling the gaps of the events better than Juan, he feels the need once again to help Juan realize that he needs to change or improve his discourse: “¿No se da cuenta de que lo están haciendo papilla? Y vaya buscando una

buena explicación para replicar lo que dice [la señora fiscal]” (Girardinelli 73-74). Juan can no longer dictate his own discourse but rather it is dictated by his accusers. His confession is no more than self-defense. Beatriz Sarlo explains the role of ‘discourse of memory’ as self-defense in her book, *Tiempo Pasado*. She speaks specifically of the role of testimony, but I believe that the same is true regarding the discourse of confession: “El discurso de la memoria, convertido en [confesión], tiene la ambición de la autodefensa; quiere persuadir al interlocutor presente y asegurarse una posición en el futuro” (Sarlo 68). In this instance Juan’s discourse is very literally self-defense in terms of whether or not he is convicted. We will also see later that on a deeper level, his discourse is also a defense of his ‘self,’ his very identity and the way others perceive him.

While Juan cannot escape the requirement to confess in the public arena, he realizes that he cannot find the understanding and acceptance that he seeks in the eyes of the judge, the courts, and his lawyer. As an attempt to regain some sort of community and a feeling of acceptance and validation he seeks a different confessor. He first resorts to his lover Cristina, and then when that fails, himself. The change in community to whom Juan confesses, from the judge and the government officials, to Cristina (only virtually), and then to himself, indicates a change in the purpose of his confession. While his confession to the court is motivated by fear of punishment and conviction and a desire to be released, his confession to Cristina and to himself is more personal, and constitutes a search for his identity. In his book, *Confession and Community in the Novel*, literary scholar Terrence Doody explains how the confessant’s needs create his community:

He [the confessant] must create the confessor because he usually feels that no available institution, no system or myth, no class structure, profession, locale, or family quite

accommodates his full sense of his individuality. His confession expresses his sense of disconnection between what he should be, or appears to be, and what he really is...Not just any confessor will do. (22-23)

When Juan realizes that the governmental institutions simply don't understand him, he attempts to create his own confessor who will. He turns first to his lover, Cristina, who also happens to be his brother's wife.<sup>15</sup> During his time in the cell one of the stories of his past that he revisits is the whole evolution of his relationship with Cristina. They both are depicted as somewhat marginal individuals who have suffered a difficult family life and relationships yet seem to find solace in one another's company. Cristina is the person Juan loves the most and the one individual whose opinion matters to him. Juan doesn't need all of humanity to accept him. He only needs someone, and someone he loves. Yet the uncertainty of Cristina's understanding or acceptance is what causes Juan's confession to elude fulfillment once again: "No entienden, no escuchan, no quieren aceptar los hechos, sólo quieren, digamos, adecuaciones. Pero todo es inadecuado ahora, salvo Cristina, si viniese, porque ella entendería, razona Juan. O creo que entendería, quién sabe, Con eso bastaría, sí, pero. Shhh" (110; original emphasis). The only thing that can save Juan is Cristina. Everything is inadequate 'salvo Cristina' because only Cristina 'salva'. But even in the moment that Juan deposits his faith in Cristina he is overcome by doubt and uncertainty. Cristina never comes to visit nor does she ever write him. This perceived abandonment produces feelings of not only loss and sadness in Juan, but even feelings of anger and frustration: "Y Cristina que no viene, no escribe, piensa Juan, recuerda Juan, *reprocha* Juan en silencio" (Giardinelli 70,

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<sup>15</sup> From his first mention of Cristina, his attempts to describe her show his deep awareness of society's disdain towards his relationship with her, she being his sister-in-law. From the first instance he seeks a way to explain away or justify his sin: "Cristina era la esposa de Tomás. Bueno, es la esposa todavía, digamos que sigue siendo su mujer, vive con él, en la misma casa. Seamos exactos, precisos" (Giardinelli 31).

emphasis mine). Because she never writes nor comes to visit, her discourse cannot validate Juan's sense of identity by saying, 'I know you' and therefore allow him to 'produce his place in the world' (Foster 14) or 'asegurarse una posición en el futuro' (Sarlo 68).

Up to this point I have shown how the actual interrogation and the court process has influenced and changed Juan's confession regarding his crime. This is an important aspect of the confession but does not represent its totality. The other part of the confession, and the part that occupies the majority of the novel, is Juan's confession to himself and by extension to the reader. In his thoughts Juan is concerned with trying to explain why he did what he did and attempting to convince himself that he is a good person and not a murderer. As Juan moves deeper into his thoughts, memories, and in essence, his being, he realizes that there is no unmediated access to his self.

Autobiographical speech constitutes an alienation of the speaker from his very self. The self cannot be perceived in and of itself but only as a 'signifier' represented in language. Foster explains: "Rather than being the foundation and source of speech, the observer of the world, and the rational discoverer of truth, the subject is 'nothing' but a locus indicated by its relation to the structure of meaning of which it is not itself a part" (Foster 9-10). Juan is 'nothing' without the language that ascribes meaning to him. He continues: "It is the signifier, that is, not the subject, that participates in meaning, and that signifier represents the subject only when it engages other signifiers" (Foster 10). This is why Juan must use language, even in thought, in order to engage with other signifiers that will allow him to recognize himself.

As Juan approaches the last days of his time in jail before his final hearing he attempts to explain the mechanics of this process of introspection. He tries to explain his motives as well as the actions that his introspection consists of:

Hay un momento en el día, cualquier día, en el que de pronto se produce como un desplazamiento textual interno, digamos que es algo así como volver a un mismo no-lugar, o mejor dicho a un no-mismo lugar, esto es: una negación del volver al sitio del que saliste... Eso es lo que piensa Juan, piensa que hay como una pulsión elemental que te fuerza a moverte pero no para avances ni para retrocesos. Es un movimiento raro, ilógico, que se podría pensar que está en el aire, porque uno no lo domina, ni lo espera ni puede detenerlo, simplemente de pronto sucede y te catapulta de la realidad. Eso, algo así, piensa Juan, se sale uno de la realidad y se encierra para ser otro. No por voluntad, no exactamente, incluso improbablemente pero el deseo más preciso es el de ser otro... Ser otro que sostiene y que a la vez dará lugar, o será inicio, de un renacimiento. Me gusta esa idea, piensa Juan: ser otro para renacer uno, el mismo que era pero diferente. (133-134)

It is interesting to notice the motivating desire of this ‘desplazamiento textual interno’ that Juan describes. The process of self-objectification doesn’t occur “por voluntad, no exactamente, incluso improbablemente pero el deseo más preciso es el de ser otro... *Ser otro que sostiene y que a la vez dará lugar, o será inicio, de un renacimiento*” (Giardinelli 134, emphasis mine).<sup>16</sup> Juan’s inner self cannot exist without his inner ‘other.’ His description of this process of introspection as a ‘textual’ displacement refers to the necessity of language in his effort to create an ‘other’ that will “sustain” his being and lead to the potential of a rebirth. In order to come to

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<sup>16</sup> While Juan doesn’t claim to have any religious belief and actually explicitly discards the notions of Christian salvation through Christ (“Sólo la lectura sana y salva, reflexiona Juan pensando en el cartelito que tienen en la Guardia, donde de un Cristo flaco y patético cuelga la promesa de sanación y vida eternal” (Giardinelli 113).), the use of this word shows the presence of the religious tradition even in a ‘secular’ confession. There is a desire to be something different, and better, a change in his nature, as a result of his confession.



know himself he requires a discourse, a language, just as he does in order to make himself known to others.

In order to understand himself more objectively he must have a means to reveal his identity to himself. Even in thought he requires a language, a discourse of sorts, to present to himself in order to come to an understanding of who he is. This need for language is obvious when any of us pause to think about what we do when we ‘talk to ourselves.’ Even our thoughts rely on our concept of language to make themselves known to us. Juan is impeded from an unmediated access to his self by this need for language just as everyone else. Very rarely does Juan actually produce spoken discourse in the novel. The majority of what appears to be Juan’s spoken words is immediately followed by a phrase like “piensa Juan, pero no dice, y aunque quizá vaya a decirlo por ahora ni una sola palabra de estas palabras que piensa sale de su boca” (Giardinelli 152). Juan’s explanations, descriptions, and justifications are presented to the reader just as they are to him, as language meant to represent his reality.

On a few occasions the third person voice of the novel, Juan’s representation of himself from an objective perspective, dialogues with the first person voice of Juan, the protagonist of the novel, regarding his situation and his search for identity: “Déjese de joder – se dice uno, piensa Juan – y amaine un cacho su ego, y el superego y el reontraego” (Giardinelli 131). It is always the third person voice that discredits Juan’s justifications for his sins, ranging from the murder all the way to his affair with Cristina. While Juan would like to explain everything away and deny that he has done anything wrong, this confessor that he has created, this third person narrator, will not allow him to deceive himself. In order to address himself, he must use another’s voice, hence the use of the third person co-narrator throughout the novel. This same voice appears in an interrogatory fashion later on as Juan attempts to justify the adulterous

relationship he had with his sister-in-law, Cristina:

Por los meandros del amor, del sexo mejor dicho porque aquello era amor, seguro, pero era sexo puro también, y perversión, querido, como se dijo y se admitió ante sí mismo, porque fuera como fuese te estabas cogiendo a la mujer de tu hermano, vos ponele azúcar y dulceleche y lo que quieras, pero era la mujer de tu hermano y eso, bueno, eso. (148)

Even with himself Juan has to enter into dialogue in order to achieve a true understanding of who he is. Juan goes through a process of trying to explain away his sinful relationship with his brother's wife in which, acting as his own interlocutor, he requires that he 'say and admit to himself' that his love and sexual relations were a "perversion." This confession is made known to no one (save the reader); it is his own confession to himself, yet one that still requires language to achieve an understanding of who he is.

As mentioned earlier, it is this need to be revealed to oneself that motivates the confession. In order to achieve this goal Juan "ejecuta el doble movimiento propio de la confesión: el de la huida de sí, y el de buscar algo que le sostenga y aclare" (Zambrano 32). Confession, both in thought to himself and out loud to a judge and jury, is the mechanism by which Juan attempts to 'flee' from himself yet in that very action find something that sustains or confirms his story and his identity. This is Juan's 'desplazamiento textual interno' that he describes as "el deseo ... de ser otro...Ser otro que sostiene y que a la vez dará lugar, o será inicio, de un renacimiento" (Giardinelli 134). Giardinelli illustrates this process of stepping out of one self, by objectifying it in order to then reconstruct ones identity, in a very unique way through the whole novel.

The writing style employed by Giardinelli is halted, fragmentary and incomplete. While the novel is primarily narrated by a third person voice that describes or narrates both the events

that take place in the novel as well as Juan's thoughts, this narrator seems to be Juan himself. The third person voice has access to all of Juan's most intimate thoughts and memories and in many instances seems to dialogue with himself. While this voice is the most prominent throughout the novel there is often a first person "yo" that appears in Juan's speech. In some instances the voice even changes mid-sentence.

One example of this mix of voices can be seen in Juan's attempt to disqualify the retelling of his crime as a confession. In it we see the spontaneity and fragmentary nature of these two narrative voices: "No **le** gusta la palabra confesión. No es el vocablo adecuado, no el que **yo** quisiera utilizar, Su Señoría, porque hacerlo implicaría admitir una sensación de culpa que **él** no tiene, piensa Juan, una voluntad previa y considerada de ocultar los hechos, de negarlos" (Giardinelli 27; emphasis mine). The narration begins with the third person describing Juan but then changes to first person as if Juan himself were speaking to the judge. The third person is then employed again to narrate Juan's thoughts ("piensa Juan") as if to indicate that what at first seems like dialogue is really interior monologue. We are left wondering what was really spoken and what was simply a thought.

Another moment that shows this jump between voices takes place when Juan is alone in his cell following this session in court. While still struggling to find some way to explain his way out of his predicament, he asks himself, "Pero qué puedo hacer, se pregunta. Juan, se lo pregunta. Si **yo**, la verdad. **Se** dejó llevar. Los acontecimientos, la vida, la fuerza de los hechos, digamos. Por eso ni culpa, no. Bueno, un poco pero. Hasta ahí nomás" (Giardinelli 34). While this change in subject does not occur mid-sentence as did the previous example it does so without any quotations or clearly defined demarcations to indicate which words are Juan's and which are the 'narrators' (assuming there is a difference between the two). The entire novel is written this way.

Instead of indentations and quotations to clearly demarcate what is spoken and indicating to whom the words are directed, the text is written in a confusing mix between narration and ‘spoken’ language that produces ambiguity for the reader regarding the voice that ‘speaks.’

This fragmentary structure of the novel illustrates this desire to be able to step outside of oneself, the first person voice, in order to present oneself as an object, coherent to another through the correct choice and placement of words in discourse. The unexpected interruptions of the first person voice show the impossibility of being able to maintain a completely objective view of one self. It is only in using the voice of an ‘other’ that Juan is able to speak of himself, but in the moments when he struggles to maintain the objectivity he desires the first person voice interrupts creating the fragmentation of his confession. It is this voice that is often incoherent and confusing.

This literary motion back and forth between first and third person narration is also illustrated symbolically in Juan’s movement while in his cell. Juan’s moments of introspection are preceded by a physical movement that imitates his internal movement: “Va para el portón, gira lentamente, va para la pared...Cada giro es, se diría, teatral...gira lentamente y sale caminando hasta la pared, donde casi al chocarla, repite la operación, que ha ido perfeccionando, mecanizando yyy...gira lentamente...” (Giardinelli 23). This movement from one side of the cell to another and back again can be seen as another representation of Juan’s flight from himself before returning. It is no coincidence then that this circular movement leads Juan to remember, to think, and to search inside himself to find answers to those ‘cuestiones interiores:’ “Recuerda, mientras camina y gira y camina, recuerda...se pregunta y gira lentamente y camina, para seguir girando....gira y camina, gira y camina, y piensa” (23-24).

Introspection itself is an act of self-objectification. When Juan remembers and thinks as

he walks, he sees himself in the past. He no longer just perceives his identity as it is in that moment but is in reality seeing his own construction of himself. As he walks in circles, stepping out of his self and then returning to it, repeating this ‘operación mecanizada,’ “evoca, y se ve a sí mismo...en una cárcel asquerosa” (Giardinelli 24). As he continues this circular movement not only does he remember, and think, but he also speaks: “No hay nada ahora, piensa, *dice* mientras gira y camina” (26; emphasis mine). This is the connection then between Juan’s physical movement in the cell and the discursive ‘circle’ that Giardinelli creates with his shift from first and third person. As the novel says, “cada oración es un giro y caminar lentamente hacia el otro giro yyy...” (25). But Juan’s actions and attempts to objectify the self in a way comprehensible to even himself seem to be for naught. While he walks in circles and delves deeper into his self he finds nothing, not even words with which to express himself: “No hay nada más que la nada. Ninguna palabra, ninguna sonrisa, ninguna esperanza, ningún aliento, ninguna ilusión, ningún amor” (Giardinelli 26).

Even when Juan is the one who occupies the position of power and does not depend on public interrogators he can only come up with questions. The answers, the explanations, the words all seem to elude him in his own cross-examination. In the cell while he walks asking himself questions he realizes that all of his questions have gotten him nowhere: “No sabe cómo es que va hacia donde va, ni por qué llegó adonde llegó. Ni sabe si ha llegado a algún punto, en rigor, porque sólo anda, se desplaza, gira y camina, gira y camina como buscando en su interior, revisando todas la cuestiones interiores que han compuesto su pequeña vida” (Giardinelli 107). Even when he tries to step outside of himself (“se desplaza, gira y camina...buscando en su interior”) he can only continue to search for answers that he cannot find: “En la celda, camina y gira, gira y camina como buscando las respuestas que no encuentra” (Giardinelli 107).

By his confession Juan has sought understanding of his act (*why* he killed that man) as well as his identity. Is he really a murderer, an adulterer, and the many other despicable things of his past that haunt him? Or is he a “buena persona,” someone capable of loving and helping others? Is he morally and ethically responsible? These are the two versions of his self that Juan has been trying to reconcile throughout the whole novel. The confession that we are presented with in this text is the means by which Juan has made an effort to come to feel validated in his insistence that he is indeed a good person, that even though he killed this man, he is not a murderer. He appeals to three communities or confessors: the public legal system of the judge and his lawyer, his virtual creation of Cristina, and himself. Giardinelli has shown how the inadequacy of language and the powers of discourse in society frustrate the objective of confession. The confessant cannot overcome these obstacles in order to make himself known to another who can validate and accept him once again into the community from which he has been estranged.

Even to himself, the need to step back and see oneself objectively, was a process that Juan could not complete which in the end has left him feeling alone and empty. This aspect of the confession, the fact that one has to occupy simultaneously the space of subject as well as the object of speech, undermines the very aim of confession to gain self-understanding and self-acceptance (Doody 8). The constant deferral of understanding simply points to a never-ending process of confession.

The last lines of the novel indicate this nature of the confession and the fate of one who confesses. After having been in front of the judge several times throughout the novel and having repeatedly offered his story he asks the question, “¿Me permitiría usted que yo hiciera ahora una exposición completa ante este tribunal?” The judge then replies, “Por supuesto. Adelante, lo

escucho” (Giardinelli 153-154). The novel ends by pointing to the way it began, with a full explanation of his crime. After the many versions of his confession, both of the crime and the many other secret acts of his life, that he has offered he is still left feeling “acongojado, triste, y solo” (153). His confession cannot provide him with the understanding or validation that he seeks and leaves him with only one option: to offer another confession.

## **Conclusion: Confession as an Alternative Lens to Postdictatorial Fiction and the Task of Mourning**

If, as Avelar argues, mourning is the characteristic par excellence of postdictatorial literature, then I would add that the confessional mode lends itself best to the task of mourning. Avelar states, “what is most proper to mourning is to resist its own accomplishment, to oppose its own conclusion” (4). We have seen in both of Giardinelli’s novels that the nature of confession itself undercuts its own aim and presents the confessant with a sort of endless confession. Just as the task of mourning is never able to fully reconcile the past, neither can the confession ever be completed.

While the confessant desires to be free of his guilt and remorse for past transgressions, confessing requires him to revisit precisely those experiences that create more guilt. The act of confessing compounds the sensation of guilt rather than mitigating it and leads the confessant to continually confess in a perpetual effort to rid himself of his guilt, a process that will never be completed. In the search for self-perception and understanding in light of one’s transgressions, the self-objectification inherent in confession causes greater self-alienation rather than unity. Confession can never provide the confessant with the unmediated access to the self that he seeks and forces him to rely on others to come to know himself. Confession, just as mourning, “resists its own accomplishment.” Yet even in its incomplete nature it can bring to light important lessons and experiences from the past. Speaking of this circular nature of confession, Rosenberg speaks of the state of the confessing ‘pilgrim’ in search of the Promised Land. “The pilgrim never arrives at the destination and must remain in a fertile yet infinite exile” (ix). Though the confessant remains in exile, there may be certain truths and comforts that can be rescued from the process of confession.



My portrayals of Giardinelli's protagonists at the end of these two novels can seem very negative and hopeless as their confessions never attain for them the redemption they seek. While this would be a fair assessment, I propose that the failure of confession, just as the "interminability of mourning" (Avelar 5) serves a deeper purpose. Speaking in an interview about the origins of his novel *Qué solos se quedan los muertos*, Mempo Giardinelli said, "Digamos que emana de una experiencia generacional muy traumática, en un país desgarrado de cuyo nombre no quiero acordarme y en un tiempo que *quizá sería mejor olvidar pero que es indispensable no olvidar*" (Planells 84; emphasis mine). Avelar calls the task of mourning, "the task of *actively forgetting*" (1). This would suggest that a successful task of mourning would allow the mourner to place the experience of loss in the past, never to be remembered. While the mourner may prefer to forget, as Giardinelli states, "es indispensable no olvidar." Similarly a successful confession would theoretically allow the confessant to forget their past and move on from it. I propose that while the confessant may vocally express that desire, it is impossible to truly leave your past behind. The events of the past, both the good and the bad, play an essential part in the identity of the individual in the present.

Often throughout history, when a country has suffered a national crisis, such as the dictatorships in Argentina, the general public would like to just sweep the past under the rug and act as if it never happened. In 1989, the Argentine government under President Carlos Menem approved large numbers of pardons for both participants of the military government as well as guerrillas guilty of violent crimes against others. Giardinelli wrote an essay titled "Romper el silencio" that spoke directly to the notion that Argentina's solution to its catastrophic past was to simply forget: "Esta sociedad no necesita olvidos sin justicia, sino justicia con memoria. No hay verdadera pacificación sin arrepentimiento y sin autocrítica. Y este país no ha escuchado una

sola palabra de arrepentimiento o de autocrítica ni por parte de la corporación militar ni de los otrora soberbios guerrilleros” (Kohut 157). For Giardinelli, the path to peace and wellbeing consists of repentance and self-criticism, two processes that go hand in hand with confession. This self-criticism may be a helpful lens through which other postdictatorial literature may be examined. The majority of criticism concerning memory and mourning has to do with the re-writing of the “historia oficial” of the past, often disregarding the sins and shortcomings of the left. Yet Giardinelli’s use of the confessional mode, as opposed to a purely testimonial form, leads to a more full and complete task of mourning and process of repentance. Although these tasks may ultimately never be completed, they may bear fruits along the way, which can serve to help redeem this difficult past.

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