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A Professional Conscience: On an Episode of Self-Accusation in Raymond Queneau's *The Last Days*

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ABSTRACT

A course of action plays out in the margins of Raymond Queneau's early novel that provides an object lesson in the peculiar phenomenon of *self-accusation*. The character caught up in this unfortunate fate seems intent on pulling at the thread that will make him unravel, for reasons no one else can understand, driven by a conscience that will never be satisfied with the sacrifices made to appease it. The contradictions and torments characteristic of the self-accuser's actions will be approached here above all with Nietzsche's idea of *ressentiment* in mind, that form of existence which shows remarkable inventiveness in the pursuit of its own abasement.

I

There is a form of tragedy all the more grievous for having come to pass on the basis of entirely innocuous circumstances. It receives its impetus from the unbridgeable discrepancy between, on the one hand, the trifling nature of the infraction that initially brings it about, and on the other, the unconscionable outcome it will eventually give rise to. It is scarcely conceivable – above all to the protagonist caught in the drift between these two moments – how the innocuous could have led to the calamitous, and this is what lends the fate meted out here its inexorability. Even if the overarching causal chain that confirms a relation between the two were to be reconstructed, link by link, so as to show the course along which this fate has been dispatched, this would do nothing to alleviate the disparity between the opposite ends of the sequence; from the vantage point of either one the other is displaced out of view and nothing can be done to reduce this imbalance, it persists over and above whatever common frame of reference they can be shown to share. In any event, with a tragedy of this kind it is as if everything unfolds in accordance with a strict rule: the more trivial the action by which things have been set in motion, the greater the burden the

individual responsible is left holding. The misfortune presided over is cast in inverse proportion to the apparent insignificance of its cause, the former acquiring ever more extravagant dimensions as the latter diminishes in turn. For the conscience that finds itself embroiled in this chain of events, what cannot be come to terms with, what proves itself ultimately ruinous, is less the grand transgression than the ostentatiously unremarkable, the very nearly unnoticeable peccadillo. Against all expectation and without apparent justification it is this that buries itself deep inside the accountable party, at a depth that cannot be excavated – again, the slighter it is, the further it sinks – and from there it comes to hold sway over everything this individual does, and is, exerting an incrementally increasing pressure that soon enough proves to be intolerable. You see the difficulty in taking even provisional steps to guard against an eventuality of this kind. In the moment it comes to pass there is nothing to distinguish it from innumerable other, barely assented to trivialities, its gravity only ever becoming apparent after the fact. Hence the troubled party will never be done returning to the scene of this initial folly, scrutinizing it for signs that belie its apparent inauspiciousness, which would give some indication of the calamity that will have come from it. But there are none, and it is this that lends this particular tragic form its most pronounced peculiarity: so diminutive is the scale of action on which it hinges that those it appears in the midst of struggle to recognize it as *having even happened* in any real sense. It is as if the individual singled out to suffer this plight is placed on stage, but at the same time withdrawn from any prospective spectator, condemned to perform to an empty hall. No one else can be made to understand why such a trifling affair warrants such attention, how it could possibly have had such ramifications. They cannot see what constitutes it as a case that anyone would have to answer for. It therefore belongs to that class of actions deemed *de minimis*, falling outside the law's scope not through any oversight on the latter's part, not as an exception to the rule, but because its extreme triviality means it doesn't even warrant the law's attention. This is why exculpation can never be granted:

the adjudicating order can see no wrong that needs to be righted. Such a case concerns something unforgiveable, then, but only inasmuch there is nothing to forgive. And all this means, finally, that from a certain perspective the entire ordeal is self-imposed and self-sustained. If a charge hangs over the fated party, it issues from nowhere other than this very same individual. He alone implicates himself, holding himself at the single spot where there is something to answer for, having initiated a trial in which he is left to play every part, and which would be brought to an end, with no repercussions whatsoever, if only he were to see this and withdraw his volition. This makes the proceedings in no small part comic and thus all the more tragic.

II

Among the extended cast of characters found in Raymond Queneau's *The Last Days* (*Les Derniers jours*), there is an unfortunate soul, a Monsieur Tulot, whose outline takes shape in accordance with the principles informing this tragic form. In a novel whose narrative revolves around a tightly scripted concatenation of fates, of destinies converging yet coming to pass in their own singular fashion – some orbiting around one another enigmatically without ever coming into contact, others pairing off and intertwining, so as to form increasingly elaborate patterns, still others breaking off abruptly, leaving an inscrutable ruin in their wake: “He had fulfilled his destiny in his own way. Everyone has their own way” [1] – it is this particular figure whose fate leaves the most disquieting impression. When, in a later article, Queneau says of the intricacies of the narrative's structure, “*The Last Days* [can be compared] to a man perched atop a scaffolding built of chairs, teetering this way and that until the whole thing collapses,” and that this is “liable to provoke laughter – or any other opposite reaction, depending on the scale,” [2] he could well be describing the fate of Tulot, whose particular predicament therefore stands as something like a reproduction in miniature of the work as a whole.

That this individual is buckling under the weight of an unbearable burden is evident to whoever crosses his path: “there’s something that’s eating his heart out, gnawing at his liver and wringing his guts,” says someone of the private agony Tulot appears to be carrying around inside him, all watched over by a “professional conscience” (the watchword appears a number of times to describe this phenomenon, but always tentatively, as though it was only a stopgap measure applied in the face of something that otherwise resists understanding: “no one knows what else to call it” (*LD*, p. 209)). This conscience is merciless. It cannot be reasoned with and nothing can be done to satisfy it. Pursuing its subject relentlessly, it pitches him against himself with a belligerence entirely out of character, standing in marked contrast to the timidity that this unassuming man – “dry-as-dust,” a “decrepit little presence” (pp. 183; 209) – shows in his other dealings, until eventually there is nothing left of him that isn’t devoted to this unnerving display and the lacerating lines it traces around him.

It is this professional conscience that will ultimately unseat Tulot, having reserved for him an end that will make the campaign he is condemned to wage against himself properly interminable. Alfred, the novel’s protagonist – Queneau refers to him as both the “well-oiled axis” around which all else turns and the chorus keeping watch over the proceedings, [3] capable of seeing ahead of time the path laid out for those around him and what it is that drives them along it: “He saw right through people... that was the way he knew men... It was as if he’d turned the customer’s jackets inside out and could see their linings” (*LD*, pp. 208-09) – Alfred has this to say of Tulot’s fate in his closing summation: “In the end it [his conscience] led him where it had to lead him. People will say: yes, but he had to die one day or another. True, but there’s the way. That Monsieur Tulot, there was nothing for it, he had to die the way he did, lamentably, with that thing he called his professional conscience making his blood curdle” (*LD*, pp. 228-29).

Now in all this Queneau's invention is the embodiment of that curious creature that occupied so much of Nietzsche's attention, the man of *ressentiment*. Such men, Nietzsche suggests, are past masters in "conscience-vivisection;" having succumbed to the "sickness" of bad conscience, they are notable for being "frighteningly willing and inventive in their pretexts for painful emotions; they even enjoy being mistrustful and dwelling on wrongs and imagined slights: they rummage through the bowels of their past and present for obscure, questionable stories that will allow them to wallow in tortured suspicion, and intoxicate themselves with their own poisonous wickedness – they rip open the oldest wounds and make themselves bleed to death from scars long-since healed..."[4] This phenomenon stands in need of explanation. What possible interest could be served by placing so much of oneself in the service of one's own impairment, in setting oneself against oneself with such vehemence, and with so little by way of compensation? This readiness to indict oneself at any given opportunity, the bottomless reserves that a moment ago were not there, but all of a sudden make themselves available to these ends (and these ends alone), the boundless cruelty shown towards oneself in doing so: for Nietzsche it is in each case the *self-imposed* nature of this phenomenon that constitutes the essential puzzle of the man of *ressentiment*. And an understanding of this contradiction into which life has strayed is all the more pressing given that, as is made clear throughout *On the Genealogy of Morality*, it has won out over other configurations of existence, prevailed to the point that it is no longer even discernible *as* contradictory, having become, for "us moderns," "normality" itself: "In such a soil of self-contempt, such a veritable swamp, every kind of weed and poisonous plant grows, all of them so small, hidden, dissembling and sugary" (*GM*, p. 90). If existence is increasingly inextricable from this particular type and the distribution of values on which it rests, if it is less and less conceivable in any other terms so that finally it can only break with this type *by chance*, through a "stroke of luck," then this is the sign of a profound malaise, a *Weltschmerz* that by the latter half of the nineteenth

century has reached “epidemic” proportions: “Whoever still has a nose to smell with as well as eyes and ears, can detect almost everywhere he goes these days something like the air of the madhouse and hospital” (p. 89).

Now the contradiction within which this spirit is entangled has a tendency to take on a specific form of relation to oneself: that of self-reproach. Above all the man of *ressentiment* is he whose existence is given over in its essence to accusing. His will can take no other form (such men “promenade in our midst like living reproaches,” Nietzsche writes (p. 90)). Unable to refrain from accusing, this figure’s every action is filtered through and colored by this stance, guided by an accusation that is, ultimately, turned inwards, brought to bear on himself before all others. [5]

What is it, then, that the self is doing, what does the self undertake, when it accuses not another but *itself*? When the accusation it makes is directed back towards where it has issued from, so that the self stands accused only insofar as *it itself* accuses? What is it the self asks of itself when it self-accuses and what does it ask of the other (the one who, from within the closed circle of self-accusation, appears free of the indictment leveled)? Is this act one of self-scrutiny or self-obfuscation, does it bring the self before itself in a greater immediacy or cast it into ever darker seclusion? Along what channels, through what distribution of faculties, in the service of what motivations, does a self-accusation find itself dispatched? By what means and on what ground can the resulting charge be verified, the guilt or innocence of the individual be established, given that accuser and accused are, in this singular case, one and the same? And if, by accusing itself, the self seems to partition itself, along what lines does it do so? How does it position itself with respect to this split? Is the part that accuses neatly distinguishable from the part that stands accused? With what legitimacy does the self accuse, if it does not willingly submit this will-to-accuse to the same procedure in turn? And yet, were it to do so, what would ultimately prevent this process from repeating itself, interminably?

The debacle into which Tulot strays, or rather taken great pains to place himself in, makes it possible to draw up a provisional table of axioms concerning the phenomenon in question, once the latter is taken as an expression of *ressentiment*. Of course this turn against oneself and the misadventure it results in is by no means an uncommon sight across the canon of modern literature. It would be possible to show its vicissitudes play out in a host of other works, and these could even be said to form a genre of sorts, a taxonomy of the “weeds and poisonous plants” referred to by Nietzsche. Yet even accounting for this ubiquity Tulot stands out, not only for the severity with which he chastises himself, but for the extraordinary inventiveness he shows concerning the “pretext” that compels him to do so.

III

Before proceeding to the episode in question it would be remiss not to mention the way in which, for all its lightheartedness, this “air of the madhouse and hospital” is all pervasive in Queneau’s novel. Each of the fates unfurled in this comedy of manners are to one degree or another an expression of it, even those that end fortuitously. And if one wanted to conjure up the particular consistency of this milieu as it appears in *The Last Days*, a text of Walter Benjamin’s that is contemporaneous with the novel readily lends itself to this end. Indeed both works are written in the 1930s (albeit with Queneau’s set in the decade previous to this), both are conscientiously positioned after the Great War understood as a symptom of civilizational crisis, and both share a presentiment that a new stage of this crisis is approaching, if not already underway. In this text – its title is ‘Experience and Poverty’ – Benjamin addresses what he takes to be the defining feature of the historical present he is writing from: an unprecedented collapse in the very capacity for experience, a depreciation in its value the base level of which has not stopped falling. And one of the more acute signs of this “completely new poverty [that] has descended on mankind” is, Benjamin argues, an unwieldy proliferation of esoteric practices. Far from providing the

subject of experience with a surety of purpose they cut it adrift, withdrawing its capacity for self-determination. Here is the passage that touches upon this tendency:

The reverse side of this poverty is the oppressive wealth of ideas that has been spread among people, or rather has swamped them entirely - ideas that have come with the revival of astrology and the wisdom of yoga, Christian Science and chiromancy, vegetarianism and gnosis, scholasticism and spiritualism. For this is not a genuine revival but a galvanization.... For what is the value of all our culture if it is divorced from experience? Where it all leads when that experience is simulated or obtained by underhanded means is something that has become clear to us from the horrific mishmash of styles and ideologies produced during the last century – too clear for us not to think it a matter of honesty to declare our bankruptcy. Indeed (let's admit it), our poverty of experience is not merely poverty on the personal level, but poverty of human experience in general. Hence, a new kind of barbarism. [6]

This “mishmash” is the ever-present backdrop of Queneau’s fictional world. It appears there with a verisimilitude that constitutes the little noted *realism* of his novels – a realism that achieves its effect precisely through the outlandishness of its presentation – and it is a further way in which fate encircles his characters, because any idea taken up in this form can only be subscribed to blindly, leaving its adherent the passive witness of his own actions. Indeed, over the course of *The Last Days* there is very little that remains untouched by this mishmash, even History itself falls foul of the tendency, its events accumulating chaotically, senselessly, and without a synthesizing principle, like so many *faits divers* whose only relation is that they happen to share the same page of a newspaper apparently opened at random... “Thus passed the first months of this winter which was rendered illustrious by the exploits of the *piqueurs*, who went around stabbing people in the metro, some incomprehensible and multiple explosions in stoves, and Mussolini’s accession to power” (*LD*, pp. 175-76).

IV

The *mise en scène* of Tulot’s ordeal will only come to light late in the day, when he has already strayed too close to the end marked out for him to be able to back away. By this time the conscience that has carried him there has become properly maniacal. Having long since

ceased to be an instrument of self-discipline and good governance, it has become instead the very means through which the self has relinquished its hold over itself, to the point of disbanding altogether. In these final stages Tulot has taken to accosting whoever he comes across, strangers or familiars as chance presents them, with a view to unburdening himself, a pretext always at hand to ensure the conversation struck up will arrive at the same revelation. This can make for a peculiar exchange. The recklessness with which he rails against himself shows so little regard for his own well being that the party made an unwilling accessory to this performance feels compelled to step in and defend him against himself, taking on the role that he himself has apparently abdicated. Hence the peculiarity: on one side, Tulot, aligning *with* his conscience *against* himself, on the other, the accosted party, siding *with* Tulot *against* this same force, trying to ameliorate the effects of this self-immolation, to show that he is pulling himself apart for no good reason. “I don’t think it’s so very serious, monsieur, what you’ve been reproaching yourself for,” says the first person Tulot takes unwittingly into his confidence. But he will not be told otherwise. Every show of concern is waved away, dismissed as a failure to understand the gravity of what has occurred, and it is here that the phenomenon of *ressentiment* shows itself, with Tulot explicitly placing his actions under the sign of self-reproach. If the crime was so egregious, he is asked by this person, how could it be that no one else noticed? “That’s the most terrible thing of all! I alone reproach myself [*Je suis seul à me faire ce reproche*]. Yes, I’m alone. The others don’t want to understand me, my relations, my friends. They don’t want to understand me. There’s no one to accuse me... I am my only accuser [*Je suis mon seul accusateur*]. So how do you expect me to die? Either there will be no one left to accuse me, or I shall be accusing myself for all eternity. It’s abominable!” (p. 193).

What are we given to understand here with this lament? First and foremost, that an accusation, whether it is directed inwards or outwards, at oneself or another, makes an implicit appeal over and above the accuser and the accused to a third party. It necessarily

places itself before the judgment of others, if not the Other, who, having been called upon to intervene, is thereby implicitly deferred to, granted a certain power of adjudication, and this is what places the Other, be they personified or preserved in abstraction, in an elevated position, at one remove from the fray. It is in this sense that to accuse oneself is to offer oneself up to the Other or the institutions dedicated to its codification (to whatever degree of refinement this codification has been undertaken). And this means in turn that the form of reflexivity specific to self-accusation is peculiarly outward facing. An accusation turned back upon the one accusing, by the one accusing, does not bring the self before itself without at the same time exposing it to this point of reference at once external and elevated, with this figure integrated into the resulting self-relation and ceded to as an authority.

And yet, as this lament makes uncomfortably clear, the Other is precisely what Tulot finds himself deprived of here. Apparently nothing can be done on his part to make this figure appear and needless to say, far from absolving him this absence condemns him all the more forcefully. Regardless of the verdict arrived at there is something worse than being brought before the Other's judgment, and that is the withdrawal of this judgment altogether. Then the self-accuser is condemned to pursue the case alone – "I am my only accuser" – left turning upon himself senselessly and without clear direction (that is to say, without hope of exoneration). Perhaps this privation is why the conscience in question, in a certain sense the representative of the absent Other, its internalized form, has acquired such force, as a surrogate masking this lack. But in any case, there is no way out of the vicious circle that the self-accuser is caught in here. Each effort to exit draws its limits the more tightly around him. And if further confirmation of the Other's absence were called for, this will be made painfully clear by the sardonic tableau that immediately follows this first piece of testimony: "Monsieur Tulot began to cry. But in the 51 tram that doesn't shock anyone. People are used to it, because of all the people coming away from the Pantin

cemetery” (p. 193). When Tulot can no longer hold his distress in check and the moment of pathos finally occurs, it happens to manifest in the single place that ensures it will pass unnoticed, thus depriving this pathos of its primary function, to underscore the relation with the audience watching by eliciting its empathy for the hero’s plight. Because here to cry is the rule and not the exception, Tulot’s action does not give rise to the spectacle it would cause in any other context. It is proof that, wherever he is, the Other’s attention is focused elsewhere, and this shows, albeit negatively, the necessity of this attention for the process of self-accusation. In the Other’s absence Tulot is abandoned to his fate without the possibility of reprieve, and this is what leaves his lament indistinguishable from Nietzsche’s man of *ressentiment*: “‘If only I were some other person! [...] but there’s no hope of that. I am who I am: how could I get away from myself? And oh – I’m fed up with myself!’” (GM, pp. 89-90).

IV

“‘My whole life has been a deception, yes, monsieur, a deception. Isn’t that terrible... I believed I had lived an honorable, conscientious life; now that I’m reaching the end, I see that I have been radically mistaken’” (LD, pp. 191-2). But what is it that Tulot has done to treat himself with such opprobrium? In what does the case that he brings against himself consist? Of what, in plain speaking, does he understand himself to be guilty and what is he confessing to? For, whilst his conscience has become maniacal, it is not indiscriminate (its efforts are resolutely *monomaniacal*). It isn’t possible to overstate the *de minimis* nature of this self-inflicted misfortune. Quite simply, a onetime teacher of geography, he has misled the innocents in his charge by speaking of something he ultimately had no knowledge of, *having never travelled*. This is what plagues him, nothing more. Not that the information he has conveyed is in any way incorrect. Rather, the fault lies in the fact that his words, true enough in themselves, lacked even passing contact with reality, leaving him to ply his trade in a counterfeit coin: “‘Well then, how can you expect to teach geography without ever

having travelled? You teach the words, but the real things – you don't know them. You know the names, but you're totally ignorant of what they refer to... My whole life I've done that, my whole life I've perpetrated that swindle” (p. 191). And now retired, there is no way of rectifying this wrong. The shadow it casts over the present has come to stand for the irrevocable itself, a default that no further action can recompense, that renders all subsequent action spurious by taking away its ground. “All the same, I thought that if I did travel it would mitigate my self-reproach. That was my idea. Well, my friend, it was just the opposite. Whether I travel now or whether I don't travel, there's nothing to be done. I saw that very clearly, there's nothing to be done. My conscience is there, monsieur, and it doesn't forgive me” (p. 194). What else than this does Nietzsche mean when he says that every man of *ressentiment* has taken against himself on the basis of an “obscure” and “questionable” story?

In light of this bewildering revelation, the lifting of a curtain behind which there is not quite nothing, but something so slight one has to look twice to see it, it becomes clear why Tulot finds himself lacking the audience necessary for his self-reproach to be brought to fruition. On the occasions that Tulot defames himself, he is met with bafflement (“Well, er, monsieur, well, er... I'm not sure I follow you” (p. 192)). That an individual could lay waste to himself over such a trivial matter leaves the other at a loss as to how to respond. The confession is listened to but without ever being heard or understood (*entendu*). And nowhere is this more apparent than in what proves to be Tulot's final exchange before the curtain, only just raised, is brought down with a flourish upon the whole sorry affair. Through a chance meeting – in Queneau's universe it is always the chance meeting that has significant consequences, and these intensify in proportion to the improbability of its occurrence – Tulot finds himself in the company of two former students, the very victims of his supposed swindle. When he rehearses his self-accusation one last time it will therefore be made in the presence of those in whose name he has been accusing himself,

it never having occurred to him that he could have been wrong to grant himself the liberty of speaking on their behalf. But in a final ignominy, those who have suffered the supposed consequences of his pernicious action remain as perplexed as anyone else by his self-indictment. They are unable to corroborate the testimony presented, the misdeed in question having left them entirely unscathed. It would seem Tulot's sense of culpability is entirely misplaced, an absurd misadventure.

[...] 'I don't want to die trailing this remorse with me.'
 'Come on, Monsieur Tolut,' said Tuquedenne. 'You know very well all geography teachers are in the same position! And anyway, you were a very good teacher.'
 'Very good,' said Rohel.
 'You're very kind, young men, but that's not the point. *I* know my conscience. *You* don't know it, you don't know my conscience.' (p. 221)

And so Tulot is abandoned once and for all to this thing which has set him over and against everyone else, his burden finally revealing itself to be unbearable through this supplementary weight that consists in the Other's intractable absence (if he takes himself to be in the midst of a tribunal here, then judge, witness, advocate, and even victim are each missing in turn). Seen from this viewpoint it becomes clear how death itself could end up being less a threat than an opportunity, the single possible chance of exiting this tortuous circle. And Tulot will accede to his fate by taking this chance. But even here an ambiguity persists, because he does this firm in the belief that he will be able to make death into something other than an end. The idea for this "trick" has been given him by the stranger he first performs his self-reproach for. It rises to the surface in the course of their conversation, a throwaway remark made without much thought, but Tulot will take it to the letter, going so far as to stake his life on this little piece of flotsam (a familiar technique employed by Queneau: a passing suggestion, ostentatiously spurious, fundamentally alters the course of the narrative itself).

[Tulot:] 'What would be convenient, you know, would be to go off on that journey [death] and leave one's conscience behind. Do you understand me? Here, on earth.'

[The Stranger:] And what about ghosts, monsieur? Don't you believe that ghosts are consciences left in old houses who don't have their owners to torment anymore? And so they pester other people.' [...]

[Tulot:] 'It's very intelligent, your idea. To leave a ghost behind you, a ghost that doesn't torment you any longer. I wouldn't mind dying in those conditions. There'd be a Tulot who would go I don't care where, and then a ghost Tulot who would stay here. (pp. 194-95)

A little further along the line, when Tulot finally commits himself to the fatal act, stepping out in front of an oncoming car with his students looking on, it must therefore be understood as a ruse, an instance of cunning in the service of this puzzling idea, one sign of which is the unexpected alacrity that characterizes his final moments, culminating in the “funny little cackle” he lets out in lieu of any last word (p. 222). He looks to death not in a spirit of resignation, but with the expectation that it will allow him to work open a fissure within himself, as if death could be used to cleave him in two, cutting the self clean from its conscience, setting it at a safe distance from the will to accuse. Now the feasibility of this idea is perhaps less important than what it implicitly testifies to. If the best one can hope for is to evade this conscience by displacing its burden onto someone else, doesn't this confirm that it is indefatigable, that a lessening of the burden is, to the one who has borne it, inconceivable? Not even the death of the one it has made its home in can interrupt the efforts of a professional conscience. It is perfectly capable of upholding its campaign in the absence of its prior support. Apparently it does not recognize the threshold between life and death, does not see the crossing of this threshold as an impediment to its work. And in any case, were this trick to prove successful, Tulot somehow managing to leave his fate with someone else and go off elsewhere, unburdened, then how could this not stir in him a further guilt in turn, given that he knows what lies in store for the one hereafter haunted? Wouldn't he take away with him another burden, every bit as troublesome? The fantasy of a ghost left behind, “*un Tulot-fantôme*,” is thus a monument to the inexhaustibility of the will-to-accuse-oneself, its continuation in perpetuity.

This is the state of equivocation to which Tulot's fate is abandoned. Like every fate, it has included the attempt to elude it, has made this attempt a principal part of the fate itself. But a final question remains. Very little in Queneau's narrative suggests that Tulot's testimony, for all its eccentricity, should not be taken at its word, that it is made in anything other than good faith, and that he goes to his death on its accord would seem to confirm this. All the same the possibility cannot be discounted that this is not necessarily the case, and in point of fact, speaking in his chorus role at the novel's close, Alfred does indeed give voice to this doubt as he recalls the Tulot episode: "He said that geography tormented him. Nonsense. I'm not naïve, or a simpleton... It was gnawing at his guts, his conscience was. What a thing it is to think you have one!" (p. 228). At stake here is a further and final constitutive feature of self-accusation and the discursive position specific to it. Whoever says, "I am my only accuser" is acting as his own guarantor, so to speak, having spoken in the absence of a corroborative function, which means that ultimately there is no way of establishing beyond all doubt the veracity of what is being said. Whatever the claim put forward in this form, it cannot be settled either way, once and for all, for better or worse, and here is raised the formidable problem of *calumny* as it pertains to self-accusation. [7]

Why is one inclined to take the self-accuser at his word? No doubt because these words appear to cost the one who says them, in saying them, accusatory speech being injurious in principle and self-accusation being no exception. This is what gives the words their gilding. But precisely as such they can also be used to mislead, and this the statement's recipient cannot defend against, or only with great difficulty. Elias Canetti touches on this in one of his many engagements with this subterranean sphere of existence: "How easy it is to reduce oneself in the eyes of others! One only has to invent some belittling things about oneself; no matter how improbable they may be, they will immediately be accepted and believed." [8] There is something like a *transparency effect* at work with any self-incriminating or self-defamatory discourse. Since its author appears to speak in

contravention of his own interest, this gesture lends itself to being mistaken for disinterest. On account of the self-inflicted nature of the injury, whatever is said acquires the appearance of truth, to the point of beguiling the other. And yet the self-accusation circulates without ever making available a means of discerning its veracity. Such means remains the prerogative of the one speaking, resulting in an asymmetry that is itself undisclosed.

What is brought to light here is the sense in which a self-accusation can always be the consequence of a calculating decision, having been placed strategically in the service of a motivation quite different to the one it apparently represents. An entire sacrificial economy is potentially in operation whenever a self-accusation is made. The cost that it inflicts upon the self can of course be incurred in the expectation that this will ultimately afford a greater gain. There is always the chance that a self-accusation presides over something like a contract taken out with oneself, a form of investment based on a loss readily accepted because it is only ever provisional. Here is Maurice Blanchot on the duplicitous self-interest that inheres within (and is even the driving force behind) any form of critical engagement with oneself. "Self-criticism," he writes, is "clearly only the refusal of criticism by the other, a way to be self-sufficient while reserving for oneself the right to insufficiency, a self-abasement that is a self-heightening." [9] It may well be then, despite every appearance to the contrary, that a self-accusation is being undertaken as a surreptitious form of self-defense, and that this defense is all the more effective for not being discernible as such. The self can always reproach itself as a way of foregoing an indictment it knows would otherwise issue from elsewhere. It is a means of securing itself against the Other by placing itself out of reach precisely where the Other would seek to condemn it. Or else, the self-accuser can bring something out into the open with a view to guarding against the disclosure of something else, thereby burying the latter at an even greater depth (and of course this process need not even pass through mechanisms of which the self is conscious).

To accuse oneself, we suggested earlier, is to cede to the Other, as though disarmed and without protection. *But the converse is no less true.* A self-accusation is also a means, perhaps the most refined means, of appearing before the Other masked, enciphered, and thus outside of the Other's jurisdiction (the most refined because here disclosure itself is the very means of dissimulation). This is the antinomy through which every self-accusation passes and Tulot's case is no exception. A testimony that admits, "My whole life has been a deception," implicitly stakes its veracity on the line it seeks to draw between the deception previously lived and the truth now being spoken in order to dispel it, and the efficacy of this gesture depends on the capacity to hold open this distinction. But insofar as his testimony takes the form of a self-accusation, this line is precisely what can never be definitively established. Whoever has denounced himself in this way at the same time avails himself of a means of dissimulating with impunity, because any further deception would now appear cloaked in the guise of truth itself. Whether or not Tulot has made use of this possibility, it remains an irreducible feature of the discursive position he has adopted, and this has a final, definitive consequence for the fate hanging over him. In order to discern something of its structure one can refer here to Giorgio Agamben's valuable analysis of *kalumnia*, above all to the paradox that arises when this procedure is turned back upon itself. Agamben has Kafka's universe in mind when he writes:

Every man initiates a slanderous trial against himself... guilt does not exist – or rather, guilt is nothing other than self-slander, which consists in accusing oneself of a nonexistent guilt... As a matter of fact, slander exists only if the accuser is convinced of the innocence of the accused, only if he accuses without there being any guilt to ascertain. In the case of self-slander this conviction becomes at once both necessary and impossible. The accused, insofar as he is a self-slanderer, knows perfectly well that he is innocent, but, insofar as he is accusing himself, he knows just as well that he is guilty of slander, that he deserves to be marked. [10]

If no one else will recognize Tulot's guilt, if he alone upholds the charge that indicts him, *then even if true*, from the outside at least (and of course it is how his case appears to those around him that matters most to him) his discourse is difficult to distinguish from that of

self-slander. Whenever his word is proffered without being accepted – which is to say, *always* – he finds himself consigned to this role (this can be heard quite clearly in Alfred’s impugning words, when he responds to Tulot’s claim by saying: “He said that geography tormented him. Nonsense. I’m not naïve...”). But if this is the case, then Tulot has indeed succeeded in making himself culpable beyond all doubt. Whichever scenario is true, whether he accuses himself in good faith, of something he has done, or whether he does so slanderously, of something he has not, he would now be culpable on either count, guilty of the charge or else of the falsification. He has therefore found a way of making even his innocence contribute to the consummation of his guilt. Here is the *inventiveness* characteristic of the spirit of *ressentiment*, and having laid the trap into which he gladly throws himself, whatever else one hears in the “funny little cackle” with which Tulot takes his leave, it is also the sound of this spirit having won out.

Endnotes

(1) Raymond Queneau, *The Last Days*, trans. Barbara Wright (London: Atlas, 1990), p. 230. Hereafter referred to as *LD*.

(2) Raymond Queneau, “Technique of the Novel,” in *Letters, Numbers, Forms: Essays, 1928-70*, trans. Jordan Stump (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007), p. 28.

(3) Queneau, “Technique,” p. 29.

(4) Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, ed. Keith Ansell Pearson, trans. Carol Diethe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 66; 94. Hereafter referred to as *GM*.

(5) For an expansive treatment of this tendency see Deleuze’s canonical reading of *ressentiment* in *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, where not only is “*perpetual accusation*” seen as a fundamental characteristic of the man of *ressentiment*, but the nature of the force it expends always find itself “interiorized,” “turned back against itself.” Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche and*

Philosophy, trans. Hugh Tomlinson (London and New York: Continuum, 1992), pp. 118; 128.

(6) Walter Benjamin, "Experience and Poverty," in *Selected Writings, volume 2: 1927-1934*, ed. Michael Jennings et al (Cambridge, MA and London: Belknap Press and Harvard University Press 1999), p. 732.

(7) "... Larousse says it: a devil is someone who slanders." Raymond Queneau, *Children of Clay*, trans. Madeleine Velguth (Los Angeles: Sun & Moon Press, 1998), p. 121.

(8) Elias Canetti, *The Secret Heart of the Clock: Notes, Aphorisms, Fragments: 1973-1985*, trans. Joel Agee (London: Deutsch, 1991), p. 99.

(9) Maurice Blanchot, *The Unavowable Community*, trans. Pierre Joris (Barrytown: Station Hill Press, 1988), p. 8.

(10) Giorgio Agamben, "K." in *Nudities*, trans. David Kishik and Stefan Pedatella (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), pp. 21-22.