

Foreword

Nothing new

Terry Eagleton

Postmodernism is supposed to be averse to grand narratives, but it has at least one of its own. According to this tall tale, Western culture manifests a continuous belief in a free, self-determining human subject, one that takes itself to be at the centre of the universe and is transparently present to itself. Only recently, so the story goes, have we come to realise that the human subject is diffuse, decentred, constituted to its roots by cultural and material forces. The all-powerful autonomous subject has been humbled and chastened in our time, dislodged from its imperial sovereignty and unmasked as no more than the ephemeral product of (and here one may choose) language, culture, history, the unconscious and so on.

There is something in this myth, as there is something in most myths which have convinced enough people for a long enough time. One is puzzled, however, to find the champions of heterogeneity telling such a drearily homogeneous tale. Can one really trace such a uniform conception of the subject all the way from Descartes to Davidson? And if we can, what becomes of the notion of history as text? The truth is that this buoyant, replete, self-fashioning subject is one of several strands of reflection on subjectivity within Western culture, and by no means always the dominant one. Take, for example, the lineage of Christian thought which passes from Augustine to Aquinas and on to contemporary theology. For this legacy, God lies at the core of the human subject, as the power which enables us to be ourselves. Yet he is not an entity, principle, creature, substance, life-force, individual, existent being or spiritual essence. Though he is said to be personal, he cannot be hypostasised to 'a person', in the sense that Paris Hilton is arguably a person.

From the standpoint of entities and substances, God is pure nothingness. He is not a 'being' but the ground of possibility of any form of being whatsoever. He cannot be counted up along with other phenomena. God and the universe do not make two. He is a sublime abyss of infinite negativity; and to claim that human beings are his creatures is to claim that they, too, are shot through from end to end by nothingness. St Augustine was perhaps the first great thinker to propose this thesis. If God, as Thomas Aquinas argues, is closer to us than we are to ourselves, and if God is no sort of thing at all, then what is most definitive about the human animal is pure negation. It is negativity which makes us what we are. To be a subject, as opposed to being a tin of caviar or a hat stand, is to elude definition and slip through the net of language. Subjectivity is the ceaselessly frustrated act of seeking to leap on our own shadows, or trying to see ourselves seeing something. The subject consists in no more than a constantly failing attempt to grasp itself. It represents a gaping hole in reality. It is the askew, unnameable, out-of-joint factor which prevents the field of the real from ever being fully totalised.

The greatest of all negative theologians of the medieval period, the Irish monk John Scottus Eriugena, understood this very well, and Samuel Beckett took an interest in his work. Creation for Eriugena is a great spiral of self-referential signs with a void at its centre, rather like Joyce's *Ulysses*. God is entirely unrepresentable, and so is the human subjectivity which signifies our participation in his Being. We have perfect self-knowledge, Eriugena remarks, only when we recognise that we do not know who we are.¹ So much for self-transparency. As a later Irish theologian, the eighteenth-century Archbishop King, observed, 'all finite beings partake of nothing, and are nothing beyond their bounds'.² Another Irish bishop, George Berkeley, famously commented that, when it came to the Irish, something and nothing were near allied. There was little you could teach the Irish about negativity (one thinks of another Protestant clergyman, Jonathan Swift), and Samuel Beckett is a modern inheritor of this distinguished narrative.

The liberal-humanist subject which supposedly lies at the centre of Western civilisation is above all autonomous. Its freedom lies not only in its emancipation from external constraint but in its strenuous self-determination. To determine, of course, means etymologically speaking to set limits; and to be free is to set one's own limits,

rather than submit to those imposed by another. Freedom is not freedom from determination, but self-determination. There may well be some such noble conception in the mighty liberal heritage which passes from John Locke to John Stuart Mill; but it stands at odds with the religious belief which has shaped Western culture for a much longer period. We have just seen that, as Aquinas argues, God is the power which enables us to be ourselves. He is not the obstacle to our freedom, but the ground of it. It is by our dependence on him that we come into our own. Dependency, as in all authentic love, is not the opposite of self-determination but the condition of it. If we fell out of God's hands we would be mere automata. Only by participating in his own life of pure freedom can we be free ourselves.

In this sense, the theological tradition recognises that human dependency is ontologically prior to human freedom, and is in some sense the precondition of it. In this, it runs contrary to the notion of the self-moving subject. What characterises human animals most obviously is what characterises all other animals, namely their dependence on Nature, biology and their carers. Unless human infants are tended and nourished, they will die very soon after birth. Indeed, it is well known that human animals, because of what Lacan calls their 'premature' birth, are considerably more dependent on their fellows than, say, calves or piglets. If this is one way in which we differ from our fellow creatures, the other is that our peculiar form of belonging to the world allows us in the end to be more independent of Nature and biology than they are. We are determined in such a way as to be self-determining – self-determining to a much greater degree than slugs or goldfish, which is what we mean by claiming that humans are historical beings. They have the peculiar capacity to make something of what makes them. And this capacity is nowhere more evident than in language.

Sigmund Freud taught us that our primordial dependency is so intense that sundering these bonds is bound to induce a convulsive crisis. Subjectivity is born in trauma. And this trauma persists into our adult life as a festering wound within the psyche, dragging our perceptual and instinctual apparatus out of true and ensuring that we will never wholly recover from the torrid psychological melodrama of our early years. Only the young dream of maturity. Psychoanalysis is the secular world's version of theology in all kinds of ways, but never more so than in its perception that what

meagre degree of autonomy we can negotiate for ourselves must be within the context of a deeper dependency. This is indeed a fact about us which the liberal legacy has ignored to its detriment.

If psychoanalysis is a science of anything, it is a science of desire, or of that which fails to find satisfaction. But here, once again, theology has pre-empted it. If desire is what hollows us into non-being for Jacques Lacan, it is just the same for Thomas Aquinas. In his *Summa Theologiae*, Aquinas argues that human beings can never be identical with themselves because desire is the very essence or organising principle of their being. Since to desire is to lack, what makes us what we are is an absence of being. For Aquinas, unlike Lacan, this hankering is ultimately one for God, which is to say that it is the inscription within us of a sovereign good for which we cannot help yearning. The nothingness of God can be felt at work in his subjects in the negativity of desire, which is always an empty excess over and above any specific object. Desire is just the way that the good is built into our material bodies and seizes us independently of the abstract will. It is what orientates our existence, a penchant or predilection which is radically prior to choice. Choice does not go all the way down, whatever marketing executives may imagine. The will for Aquinas is not a strenuous impulse but a primary orientation of our being. We have a natural bent towards well-being, an ineradicable interest in our own flourishing. We cannot choose not to choose the good, however much we might define or distort the notion. Our appetite for what Aquinas calls *beatitudo* or happiness is not in itself optional, any more than our appetite for food is. It is the way our bodies are biased and ballasted towards what is desirable.

Aquinas sees a kind of contradiction here. It is natural for us to desire happiness, but equally natural for us not to attain it, as self-divided, time-torn creatures who are chronically unable to coincide with ourselves. Desire for Aquinas is infinite, just as it is for his psychoanalytical successors. Dissatisfaction is our normative condition, and the perfection we seek would signal the death of our humanity. The only sort of human body which coincides with itself is a corpse – though Aquinas in fact refuses to call a corpse a body. He sees it instead as the remains of one. The Thomist view of the human condition is remarkably similar to the Lacanian one, shorn of its tragic dimension. For the Freudians, the human creature is the neurotic animal – which is to say that, because a degree

of repression is essential for us to operate, human beings are sick with desire. For Aquinas, the desire which depletes us into non-being is consummated in the love and knowledge of God, who is both cause and object of it.³ The self is exiled and unhoused, and in Augustine's words in the *Confessions* will never rest until it rests in its Creator. For Lacan, the bleak truth of humanity consists in persisting doggedly in our exile, refusing to give up on our desire, and renouncing all ideological consolation. Lacanian ethics are a form of ascetic otherworldliness without God.

The semi-myth of the autonomous subject must necessarily reckon without those two mighty champions of early modern rationalism, Hobbes and Spinoza. Thomas Hobbes is an out-and-out determinist; so is Benedictus de Spinoza, for whom freedom is no more than the ignorance of necessity. Nature and humanity for Spinoza are facets of a single system and are governed by the same laws; so that the forces which mould human passions are also those which ordain the fall of a leaf. Men and women are thus far from being autonomous agents, and only the common people labour under this vulgar delusion. It is because they are oblivious of the causes of their own actions that they can entertain the agreeable fantasy known as liberty. Even God is not free to do whatever takes his fancy. He is determined by his divine nature every bit as much as a goldfish is determined by its goldfish-like nature. True freedom lies not in trying to break free of these inexorable laws but in recognising them for what they are and accepting in Stoical spirit that they could not have been different.

If the great rationalists like Spinoza, Hobbes and Leibniz are in grave doubt about the self-determining subject, so are the great empiricists. What is affirmed ethically of the subject – that it can master its own destiny – is at odds with what is claimed of it epistemologically. For as far as knowledge goes, the subject of empiricism is purely passive. For the greatest of British philosophers, David Hume, the mind is simply a receptacle of sensations and perceptions from the 'external world', a phrase which Ludwig Wittgenstein professed himself to have trouble in understanding. But there is no one of these sensations, Hume writes in a celebrated passage, which represents what one might call the self:

For my part, when I enter most intimately into what I call *myself*, I always stumble on some particular perception or other, of heat or

cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure. I never catch *myself* at any time without a perception, and never can observe any thing but the perception. When my perceptions are removed for any time, as by sound-sleep; so long am I insensible of *myself*, and may truly be said not to exist.⁴

The repeated italicisation of 'myself' begins to sound increasingly ironic, rather as the phrase 'For my part' is calculatedly mock-modest. If all knowledge resides in the senses, then how could we ever know that immaterial principle called the self which is supposed to weld our various sensations together? And how therefore can we answer the question of why this particular sensation is mine rather than yours? My selfhood cannot be simply a random assemblage of experiences, since all these experiences have something in common, namely that they happen to me. But when I search for this 'me', all I find is this or that discrete experience. The self would seem to be beyond knowledge, just as the form which coheres the various parts of a work of art appears to be invisible. At least, however, this invisible aesthetic form gives itself *in* the various parts, which would not seem to be true of human experience. How then can empiricism account for the coherence and continuity of the subject? Are we really made anew in every moment? Is the fact that this pain is mine rather than yours contingent rather than necessary?

The postmodern bogeyman of the discrete, sharply individuated, self-moving agent is beginning to look a little thin. It starts to look even thinner if we turn to Immanuel Kant, whose work is among other things a response to Hume's scepticism. In his *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant certainly posits a free, self-determining human subject, as the foundation of his liberal ethics; but it follows from what he has argued in the *Critique of Pure Reason* that this admirably self-responsible subject must be entirely unknowable, both to itself and to others. All we can actually know is the phenomenal world; the subject, by contrast, is a noumenal affair, impenetrable to reason. We know that we are free because we catch ourselves acting that way out of the corner of our eye; but this can never be theoretical knowledge.

What is most precious about the human subject, then, slips through the net of language and presents itself as the purest enigma. Since the subject is no kind of object, it is not 'in' the world

at all. It can be regarded only as a perspective on the world, which cannot itself be objectified. Ludwig Wittgenstein will revisit this case in his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, a work for which the self is no more part of the world than the eye is included within its own field of vision. The task of the philosopher is simply to draw a line around what can be said, leaving all the most important topics unspoken.

At the highpoint of its mastery, then, the modern subject confronts itself as a void. Subjectivity is bound to elude itself in the very effort to objectify itself. In its unfathomable, inarticulable depths, the human subject is an illustration of what the eighteenth century knows as the sublime. It is a formidable black hole at the centre of the cosmos. It has a triumphant edge over all the purely phenomenal objects around it; but, since it can find no reflection of itself in any of these non-subjective things, it suffers a permanent crisis of identity and risks imploding catastrophically upon itself. Where it is most self-assured, it is also most solitary. The modern subject is a manic-depressive or bipolar affair, pitched ceaselessly from the most euphoric self-assertion to an anguished sense of its own vacuity. That it cannot be defined is both its delight and its disaster. It needs some kind of other to confirm its own identity; but, since that other also poses a threat to its autonomy, its instinct is to erase the very otherness which might tell it who it is. This is one reason why the subject is self-blinded at the very peak of its powers. It is both all and nothing, omnipotent and enslaved; and Karl Marx will have something to say about the historical grounds of this remarkable contradiction.

The dialectical legacy from Hegel and German Idealism to Marx and the Frankfurt School has its own way of puncturing the myth of the self-sufficient subject. What it teaches is that there can be no identity without non-identity – which is to say that every identity works by an in-mixture of otherness, subsisting only in relation to what it is not. To speak of identity is already to speak of a structural opening to otherness, rather than of the self-enclosure which is supposedly characteristic of the autonomous subject. Indeed, as the nineteenth century wears on, that dimension of otherness becomes more and more minatory. With Schopenhauer, it takes the form of the voracious Will, which installs itself at the core of our being like some virus or malevolent force, and which is absolutely alien to our happiness and well-being. There is now a power

within us which constitutes the very kernel of the self yet is stonily indifferent to us. Subjectivity is what we can least call our own. If Schopenhauer dubs this force the Will, Freud and Lacan will later give it the names respectively of the unconscious and the Real. For Nietzsche, too, Will (though in his case Will-to-Power) is all there is. Both subjects and objects are grammatical fictions, mere spume on the wave of a force which is far more fundamental than either of them. Selfhood is simply another of those ontologically groundless categories of which, however, we have some pragmatic need, and which we therefore posit to augment our flourishing. For Kierkegaard, the self is thrown into perpetual crisis by that relationship to the Other known as religious faith.

We are still no nearer, then, to tracking the liberal-humanist subject to its lair. That it exists somewhere is not to be doubted; but both Marx and Freud rudely dislodge it from whatever sovereignty it still clings to, as the former insists that all the most vital social processes go on 'behind the backs' of the agents involved, and the latter demonstrates that the ego is the mere tip of the vast, submerged iceberg of the unconscious. It is, as Freud remarks, no longer master of its own house. The forces which go into the making of the subject must necessarily be absent from its experience, thrust violently underground, if it is to operate coherently. Repression, in short, is good for us. The subject is therefore never at one with itself, and will bear the wound of this original trauma permanently inscribed within its identity. Louis Althusser will later adapt this model to develop a new theory of ideology. The tragedy of the subject for Jacques Lacan is that there is no single signifier in which it could express itself whole and entire, so that the subject is consequently doomed to hunt for itself along a potentially infinite chain of signifiers, all of which are merely placeholders or metaphors for it. For the subject to articulate itself in a signifier is thus for it to lose itself at that very moment, in a perpetual flickering of presence and absence. The subject, so to speak, disappears down the crevices between its various signifiers, scattered and strung out along an unending chain of meaning, and can be detected only as a kind of low rumbling noise in the hinterland of its own speech.

The most ominous form of negativity for both Freud and Lacan, however, is not this essential inarticulacy but *Thanatos* or the death drive. At the centre of the self we find installed a pure negativity,

one which wishes to dismantle the ego and return us to the security of non-being. Nothing is more invulnerable than nothing. The scandalous secret of the human subject is that it actually desires its own destruction, harbouring as it does in its depths a sublimely annihilating force which would reduce it to nothing. It would not perhaps be too hyperbolic to claim that for psychoanalysis, the truth of the subject is death – a claim which brings that theory close to the thought of the Heidegger of *Sein und Zeit*, for whom human existence is always at some level being-towards-death. Adapting Heidegger's categories, the Sartre of *Being and Nothingness* sees consciousness, or the *être pour soi*, as a pure kind of *néant* or negativity. Since to be conscious is always to be conscious of something – since consciousness, in phenomenological jargon, is 'intentional' – there can be no content to subjectivity in itself, which is a practice rather than a substance. For him as for Lacan, we find a pure void or abyss in the inmost reaches of the self. Moreover, our very historicity is a matter of negation, as we continually annul one situation in an empty surge forward to another. This, one might suggest, is the Sartrean version of desire.

What can this Cook's tour of Western philosophy tell us? Simply that the fractured, non-original, decentred subject did not first see the light of day with modernism, or postmodernism, or post-structuralism. It is not as though there is a single identifiable break between the full, self-present, self-originating subject of, say, the classical realist novel, and the lean, eviscerated creatures of Samuel Beckett. There is, to be sure, a kernel of truth in this suggestion. Roughly speaking, the former kind of subject belongs to capitalism in its buoyant liberal, Enlightenment and industrial heyday, while the latter is far more typical of its later, darker, corporate, crisis-racked phase. The liberal-humanist subject is secretly the subject of the era of production (including self-production); whereas the so-called decentred subject can be seen as belonging either to the epoch of consumption, consisting as it does in a dispersed network of libidinal desires, or as reflecting the deflation and alienation of the subject under twentieth-century capitalism. But this linear conception, while true as far as it goes, is too simple in itself. It overlooks among other things the extent to which the subject and non-being were associated long before Beckett or Eliot or Kafka burst upon the scene.

A key text here is Joyce's *Ulysses*. In what one might call the surface or 'phenomenal' text of the novel – the day in Dublin – both Stephen and Bloom would seem the familiar, sharply individuated characters of realist fiction, of which the novel is among other things a monstrous parody. The intellectual and the petty bourgeois both appear autonomous and self-motivating enough. From the viewpoint of the novel's Homeric subtext, however, they are no more than functions of a plot which is taking place altogether elsewhere, one which shows up their apparently free actions to be rigorously determined by an invisible network of forces. Or, to put the point in Marxist terms: an old-style individualism lingers on; but, in the new world of monopoly rather than liberal capitalism, it is corporate, anonymous, less tangible forms which covertly call the tune.

It is a familiar case that Beckett's Ireland never really bred the kind of developed liberal, capitalist, middle-class culture which makes for a thriving literary realism. What middle class the country could boast of was small, subordinate and to some extent ethnically alien to the great mass of small tenant Gaelic farmers. Liberal individualism never flourished in traditional Irish culture, which is one reason why Oscar Wilde proved so scandalous to it. An individualism which was commonplace in the urban, Protestant, middle-class, metropolitan nation was audaciously subversive in its agrarian, communalist, Catholic colony. Whereas the commonsensical British tend to believe in a substantive private self beneath the public mask, Wilde and Yeats adhered to the truth of masks themselves. Identity was less an essence underlying the mask than what was constructed by it. One thinks also of the mid-nineteenth-century Irish poet James Clarence Mangan, with his flaxen-coloured wig, waxen, Andy-Warhol-like complexion, outsize green spectacles, false teeth, two bulky umbrellas (one for each arm), exotic hat and bottle of tar water, a man whose whole identity was mask-like and calculatedly inauthentic, rather like his poetry. For all of these writers, the distinction between mask and reality could be dismantled: the truth of the self, if any such grandiose entity could be said to exist in Irish culture, could be expressed only through a device or persona. For Wilde in particular, selfhood is protean, pliable and pluralistic, endlessly reinvented rather than brutally given. If this makes him a postmodernist *avant la lettre*, it also harks back to a turbulent Irish history in which identity is always doubled, precarious and unstable. Postmodernists tend

rather callously to celebrate this condition; the Irish were aware of just how painful it could be.

Much of that pain is transmitted through the work of Samuel Beckett, a man who sprang from a declining social class in Ireland which at the time of the founding of the Free State was regarded by a good many nationalists as amounting to little or nothing. That little or nothing is also Beckett's writing, which is as slim as is compatible with (just) existing, and which purges all trace of what one might call the expressive personality. Subjectivity is relentlessly mechanised and externalised, as it often is in Swift. There is no modish celebration of the fragmented subject in Beckett; there is rather a sense that, however dire such a condition may be, it is probably preferable to viewing the self as the robust agent of its own destiny. Beckett is averse to that conception partly because he came to consciousness in a colonial culture that was in the process of achieving collective self-determination, and as a middle-class Protestant intellectual felt estranged from that project; but he is also suspicious of it because, in a world after fascism, self-affirmation has too sinister an infinity with mass murder. It is as though all action after Auschwitz is garbage. Better to suffer the pains of self-dispossession than court the perils of dominion. One must back the beggar man against the king. Only by some extreme form of *kenosis* or self-emptying could one expiate the crimes which flow from an inflated sense of human agency, both fascist and Stalinist. You cannot answer those crimes with vigorous actions of your own (though Beckett the *maquisard* did exactly that), since to do so would be to remain within the same noxious frame of reference, make a move within the same lethal game.

This, as it happened, proved too gloomy a perspective. What brought Hitler to his knees was a collective action, and the same was to happen forty years later with neo-Stalinism. There is a limit to what Hegel called the labour of the negative, as is evident, too, in the case of deconstruction. The stark, solitary, scooped-out subject, for all its imaginative fertility, is not the only response to the Pozzos of this world. Even so, it figures in Beckett as a kind of negative utopia. A world of diminished subjects whose language is only ever an inch or so from silence is at least a non-injurious one, since men and women in this attenuated sphere lack even the kind of agency they would need to skewer one another. By the same token, however, they lack the kind of agency which

might enable them to resist such atrocities, which cannot be said of the real-life Beckett. In a kind of imaginative homeopathy, the problem becomes the solution: the sadly dwindled state to which twentieth-century barbarism has reduced men and women is also a prophylactic against the powers which have brought them so low. You cannot pick a quarrel with the wellnigh-dead. The point of the death drive is to save us from the unseemly buffetings of this world by returning us to an inanimate, pre-egoic state; and Beckett's characters are somewhere en route to this deeply desirable goal, some of them rather more advanced along the path than others. But since there is no death in his work, just as there is no end to writing and no closure to consciousness, these characters are not yet able to take refuge in this immortal sanctuary altogether, but are caught like the living dead in some twilight or subliminal state, unable quite to shake off the long disease known as life however much they are falling apart at the seams.

What Beckett shares with the post-structuralists is a fear of determinacy. In the wake of Hitler and the Gulag, there is something profoundly disturbing about the *proposition*. It belongs to a grammar of violence. Too many have perished of absolute truth in the modern age. Certainty can be lethal, but irony and ambiguity can act as antidotes. To deconstruct the proposition is a political move, and for Beckett the word 'perhaps' is an anti-fascist weapon. By the time of Jacques Derrida, this nervousness of the determinate has become a wellnigh pathological aversion to it, so that the emphatic or impassioned begins to look incorrigibly vulgar. It is true that too much belief can make you ill, but so can too little. One can die of scepticism, like Martin Decoud in Conrad's *Nostromo*, just as surely as one can drown in a surfeit of doctrine. *Pace* the Derrideans, indeterminacy is not always on the side of the political angels. There are times when conviction is preferable to confusion. The vacant subject is not always more progressive than the replete one. One should not encourage a dogmatism of undecidability. There is a creative sort of nothingness, which as in Beckett consists in a sense of the extreme frailty and finitude of the human, and which is the foundation of any authentic ethics or politics. There is also the negativity of the nihilist, for whom the very idea that one value might be more precious than another provokes a cackle of relativist laughter. It is hard to see how this particular form of nothingness can resist the insolence of power.

The radical-Protestant deity is a hidden God, one who has turned his hinderparts to the world. His withdrawal then provokes a crisis of neurotic uncertainty in his subjects, akin to Vladimir and Estragon's anxiety about the coming of Godot. Despite its delight in ritual, *Waiting for Godot* is a profoundly Protestant text, and not only in its austere rejection of papist frippery. If the Other is inaccessible to us, how do we know that he has recognised us for what we are? How, as the Lacanians inquire, are we to recognise recognition? Would such recognition be a specific kind of act, or are we being acknowledged all the time without knowing it? How would we identify Godot in any case, were he to come? Has he arrived already? Did the two tramps mistake the name 'Godot' for 'Pozzo'? Ambiguity is curse as well as blessing. It may retrieve us from the clutches of the autocrats, but only at the cost of plunging us into a state of chronic ontological anxiety. If Beckett is decisive about at least one thing, it is that this, in the end, is the only choice. One may admire the starkness of this dichotomy without signing on for it.

Notes

- 1 See Dermot Moran, 'Wandering from the path: *navigatio* in the philosophy of John Scottus Eriugena', *The Crane Bag Book of Studies*, 2:1 and 2 (Dublin: Blackwater Press, 1978), p. 244–51.
- 2 William King, *Sermon on Predestination* (Dublin, 1709). See also *Archbishop King's Sermon on Predestination*, ed. Andrew Carpenter (Dublin: Cadenus Press, 1976), p. 143.
- 3 See Stephen Wang, 'Aquinas on human happiness and the natural desire for God', *New Blackfriars*, 88:1015 (May 2007), 322–34.
- 4 David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (London: Routledge, 1985), p. 300.