ABSTRACT

BURNETT, JACOB CAMERON. The Satanic Self in Chaucer, Milton, and Beckett. (Under the direction of R. V. Young.)

The Satanic self is the autonomous, linguistically constructed subject who cannot support itself but who rebels against any external support. According to Foucault, the autonomous subject should be reconsidered as a function of discourse. This anxiety over the autonomous and autonymous subject is not new, but has antecedents far back in literary history. Chaucer's The Pardoner's Tale, The Parson's Tale, Milton's Paradise Lost, and Beckett's The Unnamable recapitulate the historical progress of the development and decline of the self-authoring subject, a progress of dislocation of significance from—in order—objects, language, and finally the subject itself. The first two writers show how to avert what Anthony Low calls the "disastrous fall into nihilistic subjectivity," while the third can present no such redemption. The withdrawl of meaning through profane kenosis is inextricably linked to the long, slow disappearance of God from Western European cultural consciousness. The rejection of God is the rejection of the traditional grounds of Western subjectivity.

THE SATANIC SELF IN CHAUCER, MILTON, AND BECKETT

by

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DEDICATION

To Ruth

They say the lady is fair; 'tis a truth, I can bear them witness; and virtuous;

'tis so, I cannot reprove it; and wise but for loving me; by my troth, it is no

addition to her wit, nor no great argument of her folly, for I will be horribly

in love with her.

—Much Ado About Nothing II.3.226-31

BIOGRAPHY

Jacob Burnett was born in Moscow, Idaho in 1975. He received a B.A. in Mathematics from the University of Chicago in 1997. He now lives in Raleigh, North Carolina.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Introduction

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Satan (nephew and namesake of the more famous fallen angel), pays one final visit to Theodor at the end of Mark Twain's <u>Mysterious Stranger</u>. His farewell is an act of supreme deconstruction. As the narrator relates, Satan reveals that

> "<u>Nothing</u> exists; it is all a dream. God—man—the world—the sun, the moon, the wilderness of stars—a dream, all a dream; they have no existence. <u>Nothing exists save empty space—and you!</u> . . . And you are not you . . . you are but a thought . . . There is no God, no universe, no human race, no earthly life, no heaven, no hell . . . Nothing exists but you. And you are but a <u>thought</u>—a vagrant thought, a useless thought, a homeless thought, wandering forlorn among the empty eternities!"
>
> He vanished and left me appalled, for I knew, and realized, that all he had said was true.
>
> (742-4)

This essay argues that Theodor's predicament is now shared and general. Moreover, as the texts I explore—from Chaucer, Milton, and Beckett—reveal, this subjective collapse is nothing new, but is an intrinsic and inevitable quality of the Satanic self—that autonomous, linguistically constructed subject who cannot support itself but who rebels against any external support. The texts are efforts to resolve this collapse, to arrest what Anthony Low has aptly called the "shocking fall from confident possession of objective reality into the bottomless abyss of subjective relativism" (<u>Aspects of Subjectivity</u> xi). They also show the historical progress of the development and decline of the self-authoring subject, a progress of dislocation of significance from—in order—objects, language, and finally the subject itself. This withdrawl of meaning is inextricably linked to the long, slow disappearance of God from Western European cultural

consciousness. The rejection of God is the rejection of the traditional grounds of Western subjectivity.

<center>2</center>

Michel Foucault could having been laying out the discursive program for Twain's Satan (and, it will be seen, the other Satanic selves in the texts I examine) when he wrote:

> [The subject] should be reconsidered, not to restore the theme of an originating subject, but to seize its functions, its intervention in discourse, and its system of dependencies. We should suspend the typical questions: how does a free subject penetrate the density of things and endow them with meaning; how does it accomplish its design by animating rules of discourse from within? Rather, we should ask: under what conditions and through what forms can an entity like the subject appear in the order of discourse; what position does it occupy; what functions does it exhibit; and what rules does it follow in each type of discourse? In short, the subject (and its substitutes) must be stripped of its creative role and analyzed as a complex and variable function of discourse. (137-8)

There is no clearer statement of the fate of the autonomous and autonymous subject. A free subject who strictly defines itself through giving itself meaning, when no longer allowed to "penetrate the density of things and endow them with meaning" becomes a subject that can no longer have any meaning to itself. Its function becomes deferred. But deferring the function to something we call "discourse" in no way ameliorates the malaise of meaninglessness that results from stripping the subject of its creative role. Instead of the mystery of the self, we have the even more baffling mystery of discourses unfolding, generating meaning spontaneously like maggots growing magically from meat. Nothing has been solved, but a

great deal has been lost. We arrive at a situation in which no one talks nonsense about nobody. There is only talking, uncoupled from the talker. And of course, talking uncoupled from a talker is without meaning; the sound of one hand clapping.

Historically Foucault's self-devouring nonsensical weltanschauung has been arrived at through a very long process profane kenosis, of emptying the cosmos of significance, particularly the significance that derives from the existence of the divine, and turning instead to the inner world and attempting to ground all significance therein. As Foucault himself observes:

> By denying us the limit of the Limitless, the death of God leads to an experience in which nothing may again announce the exteriority of being, and consequently to an experience which is <u>interior</u> and <u>sovereign</u>. But such an experience, for which the death of God is an explosive reality, discloses as its own secret and clarification, its intrinsic finitude, the limitless reign of the Limit, and the emptiness of those excesses in which it spends itself and where it is found wanting. In this sense, the inner experience is thoroughout an experience of the <u>impossible</u>. (32)

Our subjective selves are supported by our conception of meaning. For a long time in Western Europe, the presence of God gave meaning to things themselves—meaning was as intrinsic a quality as their mass, color, temperature, and so forth. Therefore, the subject could speak of itself with the same confidence with which it spoke of other things, namely, that there was some meaning there, some correspondence between the representation and the existence. Then, for reasons too manifold and complex for this essay to address, meaning slowly began to retreat from things themselves, to be deferred to a purely symbolic realm—

the perfect type of this deferral being the transformation, in Protestant countries, of the Eucharist, whose status as divinely imbued object yielded to divinely ordained reminder.

However, there was still confidence in the ability of language to mean something. The turn inward re-grounded the self in a relation with God that was no longer contingent on exterior objects, but relied instead on language—prayer, devotion, reading, and interaction with the community of believers. Gradually, very gradually, this too began to erode, as God was displaced from the center of consciousness. Descartes, with his self-relating dualism, was the harbinger of the new order, that reached its clearest expression in Kierkegaard's ironic definition of the self as "a relation relating itself to itself"—an irony that was taken very seriously. The end of this deferral of the grounds of the self's being leads to the present situation, wherein, as Anthony Low argues, "belief in the rise of the autonomous individual, having reached its terminus, has abruptly collapsed" (194).

3

Poetic ontogeny recapitulates cultural phylogeny. Again and again in European literature, the long arc of subjectivity's fall is recreated in miniature. For the purposes of this essay, I have chosen to examine three works, written three hundred years apart, each of which captures clearly a snapshot of one stage of the broad historical process outlined above.

In Chaucer's Pardoner's Tale, we see the consequences to the self of rejecting intrinisic meaning in things, while the Parson's Tale regrounds this objectively uncoupled self through intrinsically meaningful language, achieved through the properly conducted discourse of confession.

In Milton's Paradise Lost, Satan rejects an intrinsic grounding on words by rebelling against the Word, source of meaning itself, while Adam and Eve fall by insisting on their own

rhetorical priority, then are redeemed by the paradox of free will, whereby the speaking subject is both an independent author of itself and yet grounded in the meaning intrinsic to language, the Word to which it submits.

Beckett's Unnamable, however, has neither the meaning of things nor of words, nor God, to support itself, yet it has to speak to exist—yet it cannot say anything concrete enough to guarantee existence as anything but a ceaseless and hysterical logorrhea. It is in a desperate and damned condition, from which, unlike for Chaucer's pilgrims, and Milton's humanity, there is no escape.

In the beginning, however, the rhetorical self was not the self-annihilating trap the Unnamable finds. At the nascence of the linguistically self-constructing literary selves, as we shall see in the next chapter, while anxiety about the Satanic self, with its will to discursive dominance and independence, was already present, the correct use of language could construct subjects who avoided the perils it inevitably presented.

"I Am Nat Textueel": Chaucer's Pardoner and Parson

1

Pilgrymes and palmers pligted hem togidere

To seke seynt Iames and seyntes in rome.

Thei went forth in here wey with many wise tales,

And hadden leue to lye al here lyf after.

I seigh somme that seiden þei had ysougt seyntes;

To eche a tale þat þei tolde here tonge was tempred to lye,

More þan to sey soth it semed bi here speche. (Piers Plowman Prologus 46-52)

The Canterbury pilgrims represent themselves through a game of story-telling, and The Canterbury Tales is a record of their resultant experiments in rhetorical self-fashioning. How can such selves, who exist solely through speaking fictions, hope to answer Langland's indictment? How can any subjective identity thus "tempred to lye" maintain itself?

For most of the pilgrims, the question remains in the background of their tales—an uneasy, but undeniable real presence. Only the Parson, who "Christes gospel trewely wolde preche" (GP 481) and his satanic shadow the Pardoner, who "moste preche and wel affile his tonge" (GP 712) confront the issue directly. Each, through his respective confession, faces the fact that for all we may desire that "wordes moote be cosyn to the dede" (GP 742), they seldom are, that all speaking contains within it a fictional element inadequate to capture truth.

Chaucer's proudest and his humblest rhetors react to the nihilism consequent from the self that only speaks and the speech that is the only self. The Pardoner, telling "som honest thynge" (PardT 327) embraces Langland's charge, then turns it on his fellow pilgrims, claiming to speak from a privileged place of truth, a truth that is only negation of lies, the

bitter truth that there is no truth but the dominant discourse. The Parson's "myrie tale in prose / to knytte up al this feeste and make an end" (ParsT 47-8), answers his fellows's fictions and Langland's condemnation by a conventional meditation on the proper means of confession, on the correct way of telling the story of ourselves to ourselves and thus to create a solid, higher ground on which the subjective self can stand. The Pardoner's inwardness, created out of a rhetorical power that must collapse, damns him to wanhope. The Parson's humble submission of his rhetoric (53-60) to God and his fellow man enables him to escape the text of fallen subjectivity and offer hope to all who listen and hear.

<div align="center">2</div>

"The ironist," as H. Marshall Leicester observes in his discussion on the Pardoner, "notoriously does not 'stand behind' what he says. Because you can never be sure if he is serious or ironic, sincere or rhetorical, his 'real meaning' and his 'real self' are always displaced. They are always something and somewhere else, different and deferred . . . . Language itself reflexively deconstructs the self" (170). This is the subjectivity that the Pardoner would like to construct for himself. If he can succeed, his mastery of language will then empower him vengefully to deconstruct the world, while holding on to the last remaining piece of identity left—that of the Pardoner, he who has the power to bestow (and, spitefully, to withhold) grace and being.

But is it possible? Does language necessarily deconstruct the self?

"Men of the Middle Ages," M. D. Chenu writes, shared "the conviction that all natural or historical reality possessed a signification which transcended its crude reality and which a certain symbolic dimension of that reality would reveal to man's mind" (102). It is this conviction that the Pardoner exploits to make his living—in fact, to make himself. He

imposes meaning like a self-conscious Quixote, aware of the inherent meaninglessness of the pillow cases and pig bones he sells—and equally aware of his ability to talk the common folk into seeing the sacred in the profane. In the Pardoner's semiotic reckoning, this disjunct between signs and things signified shifts all power to the person who signs. He would usurp God's power (as Aquinas says): "non solum voces ad significandum accommodet (quod etiam homo facere potest) sed etiam res ipsas (not only to fit things spoken to significance (which men can do as well), but also to things themselves to significance)" (Summa Theologica 1.1.10, translation my own). The Pardoner's satanic pride reaches its apogee in his final speech to the pilgrims:

> But, sires, o word I forgat I in my tale:
>
> I have relikes and pardoun in my male,
>
> As faire as any man in Engelond,
>
> Whiche were me yeven by the popes hand.
>
> If any of yow wole, by devocion,
>
> Offren, and han myn absolucion,
>
> Com forth anon, and kneleth heere adoun
>
> And mekely receyveth my pardoun. . . (919-26)

Leicester argues that with this blatant appeal, so insulting to his audience, the Pardoner is saying "I am what you kneel to, whose relics you kiss; I am that cupiditas that is the root of evils, the Old Adam, the obscenity of the eunuchus non dei that invites to fruitless generation . . . what do you make of a church that licenses me, of a world in which I am possible, of a God that allows me to exist" and that, moreover, he "posits himself as a malignant objection to God and his creation" whose tale represents "a world in which the power of the word over

reality is nearly total" (57). The Pardoner may be trying to <u>say</u> that, but that is not what he

ends up <u>meaning</u>. For it is not merely objects and their names which have ceased to have

intrinsic value or spiritual significance for him, but words themselves. Rhetoric has become

disconnected from the rhetor:

> For certes, many a predicacioun
>
> Comth ofte tyme of yvel entencioun;
>
> Som for plesance of folk and flaterye,
>
> To been avaunced by ypocrisye,
>
> And som for veyne glorie, and som for hate. (PardT 407-11)

Message and messenger, sermon and intention are separated, violently, in the Pardoner's hate-

filled confession. This separation is the core of the Pardoner's wanhope. He may wish his

final insult to the audience of pilgrims to say "you do not see your real spiritual situation, your

nothingness; you do not know who you are, that you are like me—and I do" (167). But,

having separated the speaker from the thing spoken when he says "though myself be a ful

vicious man / A moral tale yet I yow telle kan" (459-60), he has forfeited the power to make

any statement as conclusive as that.

> Just before his mocking envoi, The Pardoner recites the central truth of Christianity:
>
> > And lo, sires, thus I preche.
>
> And Jhesu Crist, that is oure soules leche,
>
> So graunte yow his pardoun to receyve,
>
> For that is best; I wol yow nat deceyve. (915-8)

When he recants at once in the next line, it is as if he has overheard himself and realized that,

caught up in his own scam, he has (despite his worst intentions) freely given his audience a

piece of truth that may benefit them. By reminding his auditors that it is Christ, not Pardoners with parchment pardons who grants grace he undermines his strategy of rhetorical domination (the only kind of domination that a weakling with a clever mouth can hope to achieve). Significance, the undeniable significance of the divine, has emerged, despite his best efforts to deny it. The contingent has caught the reflection of the eternal. Like the seven sons of Sceva (Acts 19: 13-16), the Pardoner is surprised by much more reality than he bargained for. All in a moment, his control of the cosmos dwindles to near-nothing.

He immediately tries to cover his exposure by baiting Harry Bailly, the perpetual misreader and easy dupe for double-speak. Reduced to using irony's country cousin, sarcasm, the Pardoner tries to reclaim his privileged position among the pilgrims as the knowing nihilistic ironist. It is too late. By over-reaching, he has revealed his monstrous rhetorical self-presentation to be nothing more than an enormous shadow, cast by some tiny, pitiable, ridiculous, but real thing, mute with impotent rage—impotence emphasized viscerally by the Host's crude rejoinder, "I woulde I hadde thy coillons in myn hond / In stide of relikes or of seintuarie" (953-4). By invoking the Pardoner's absent testicles as superior in value to his relics (whose sole value is derived from rhetoric), the Host delivers a crushing defeat. The effect is comic-pathetic, provoking first laughter, then Christian charity:

> Right anon the worthy Knyght bigan,
>
> What that he saugh that al the peple lough,
>
> 'Namoore of this, for it is right ynough!
>
> Sire Pardoner, be glad and myrie of cheere;
>
> And ye, sire Hoost, that been to me so deere,
>
> I prey yow that ye kisse the Pardoner.

And Pardoner, I prey thee, drawe thee neer,

And, as we diden, lat us laughe and pleye.'

Anon they kiste, and ryden forth hir weye. (960-8)

3

The Parson, least and last of Chaucer's pilgrims, who "kan nat geeste 'rum, ram, ruff,'

by lettre" (ParsP 43) can nonetheless offer his fellow travellers a means to escape Langland's

condemnation. His tale not only knits up the Host's game, but, at the sunset of the journey,

brings an end to the enterprise of telling tales, an end that points beyond itself to eternity

(which is neither an end nor a beginning). But to get to this celestial Jerusalem, we must pass

by one last misuser of language, the man whose "ordinance" originated the entire fictional

project of the Canterbury Tales:

[The Host] seyde in this wise: 'Lordynges everichoon,

Now lakketh us no tales mo than oon.

Fulfilled is my sentence and my decree;

I trowe that we han herd of ech degree,

Almoost fulfild is al myn ordinaunce. (15-9)

Let us assume that this is not merely an editorial oversight or that Chaucer simply ran out of

time or changed his authorial intent between the General Prologue and the Parson's Tale.

Rather, let us take as intentional the discrepancy between the Host's original declaration that

each pilgrim "shal telle tales tweye / to Caunterbury-ward, I mene it so, / And homward he

shal tellen othere two" (GP 792-4). What are we to make of this change of frame? Perhaps

that the nature of the game has changed in the playing. The purpose of tale-telling is no longer

to fill silence with mirth (771-4) or to shorten the pilgrims' way (791). It is instead, the tales

have fulfilled Chaucer the Narrator's original intent "to telle [us] al the condicioun / of ech of he, so as it semed . . . / And whiche they weren, and of what degree" (38-40). The tellers have found themselves not desiring just to entertain, but to present and (in some cases) force a particular rhetorical construction of themselves on the audience—an audience that, because of the alienation inherent in the act of speaking, comes to include themselves. Harry Bailly is (as always) unaware of the change that has occurred:

> 'Sire preest,' quod he, 'artow a vicary?
>
> Or arte a person? sey sooth, by thy fey!
>
> Be what thou be, ne breke thou nat oure pley;
>
> For every man, save thou, hath toold his tale.
>
> Unbokele, and shew us what is thy male;
>
> For, trewely, me thynketh by thy cheere
>
> Thou sholdest knytte up wel a greet matere.
>
> Telle us a fable anon, for cokkes bones!' (ParsT 22-29)

This brief exhortation, the Host's last, is a masterpiece of malapropism. The Host cannot determine the Parson's degree, so cavalierly categorizes him as just another generic clergyman. Dismissing the Parson's identity as irrelevant, the Host presumes him to be the sort of man who will tell a cheerful, entertaining fable—a presumption motivated by the erroneous belief that the "greet matere" can be wrapped up by indulging in one last play, as if the end of all story-telling were simply entertainment. Even his oath, "for cokkes bones" is a corruption—of "goddes bones" (per A. C. Cawley's footnote, page 519)—a mistake that cannot help but recall the Pardoner's "longe cristal stones / Ycrammed ful of cloutes and of bones" (PardT 347).

Moreover, the Host's final speech heralds the impending seismic shift in the game. The word "unbokele" is used only three times in the Canterbury Tales. In the Miller's Prologue, the Host responds to the Knight's tale "this gooth aright; unbokeled is the male" (MilT 3115). At the end of his tale, the Pardoner challenges the Host to "unbokele anon thy purs" (PardT 945). Each of these two moments precedes a breakdown, an unbuckling, of order. The fordronken Miller flouts the rule of precedence and thrusts himself to the fore to tell his tale. The Host's verbal violence to the Pardoner breaks the bonds of Christian brotherhood and silences him for good. The third time, however, leads to a new thread of discourse, a "myrie tale in prose" (ParsT 46) that is not just one more fiction fated to unravel as all fictions must, but truly a knitting up.

The pilgrims never reach the end of their pilgrimage to find the one "that hem hath holpen whan that they were seeke" (GP 18). Instead, the Parson shows that help for their spiritual sickness, wanhope, is ever-present in that most inward of sacraments, penance. To do achieve this end, the he must go beyond a simple story, beyond being a rhetor whose desire is to impose his fiction on the world. Rather, in the Parson's Tale, Gregory Roper argues, "Chaucer uses the theological and psychological structures of the penitential reform to show how to criticize, and finally to supersede, the limitations and depredations of the rhetorical self, to move beyond the limitations of rhetorical language, rhetorical self-fashioning, to find some firmer ground for the self itself" (166). Roper shows how the self-abnegating act of penance, as perceived and proscribed by the Parson and his sources, answers the problem of self-negating subjectivity. The penitent first looks inward and examines the particulars of his sins—treats himself as a singular subject, relating only to himself. Then he re-views his sins against the instructive narrative of a penitential handbook. What he discovers is that sins that

he thought were private, unique acts of a subjective will are, in fact, manifestations of an objective condition. Then, the act of atonement takes the sinner back from being a type to being to an individual subjective will, responsible for re-telling his own life in a new way. The end result is a self that is at once grounded in objective being and individually subjective (157-69).

Though "the fruyt of penance . . . is the final blisse of hevene" (ParsT 3095), as the Parson makes clear, penance also saves the sinner on earth—saves him from the final, dreadful condition of despair. The diagnosis of wanhope and its remedy is the last subject of the Parson's long sermon:

> Wanhope is in two maneres: the firste wanhope is in the mercy of Crist; that oother is that they thynken that they ne myghte nate longe persevere in goodness. The firste wanhope comth of that he demeth that he hath synned so greetly and so ofte, so longe leyn in synne, that he shal nate be saved. Certes, agayns that curses wanhope sholde he thynke that the passion of Jhesu Crist is moore strong for to unbynde than synne is strong for to bynde. Agayns the second wanhope he shal thynke that as ofte as he falleth he may arise agayn by penitence. (3078-89).

To disbelieve in the mercy of Christ, as the Pardoner does, is to insist on the primacy of one's subjective existence—to say: No one has sinned like me, I am so unique in villainy that the redemptive sacrifice Christ, which was for <u>all</u> men, cannot apply to me. In the place of the Pardoner's empty signs, the Parson offers the actuality of the Passion. The solution to the second manner of wanhope is proper penitence, a contrite act not linked to papal bulls or saint's bones, which can be imbued with false significance, but to speaking honestly <u>to oneself</u> and measuring that speech against <u>the objective Other</u>.

14

1

The hope at the core of Chaucer's enterprise is for the grace that language can, in the end and despite our "unkonnynge", correspond to something objective. As he promises at the beginning he will try to

> speke hir wordes proprely.
>
> For this ye knowen al so wel as I,
>
> Whoso shal telle a tale after a man,
>
> He moot reherce as ny as evere he kan
>
> Everich a word, if it be in his charge
>
> Al speke he never so rudeliche and large,
>
> Or ellis he moot telle his tale untrewe,
>
> Or feyne thyng, or fynde wordes newe. (GP 729-36)

It is this hope that there something there behind rhetoric, that language is not, in fact, reflexively deconstructive, that abandons the Pardoner. He takes as his refrain <u>radix malorum est Cupiditas</u> (PardT 334), rather than reading to the end of 1 Timothy and heeding Paul (and Chaucer's) warning <u>depositum custodi devitans profanas vocum novitates,</u> (6:20) to tend to his own charge (salvation) and avoid the profane novelties of words. The Parson, however, answers by showing how to use words aright. For Chaucer, the late medieval man, even though objects have been emptied of inherent significance by the world of pardoners, words themselves maintain a capacity for objective correlation—an objective correlation that prevent Anthony Low's "fall into subjectivity," that "dizzying vertigo that results from plunging ever more deeply into the depths of the self without reference to the objective

universe and without hope of escape" (195). The Pardoner empties out objects of their

significance, but is brought back from the brink of the fall, albeit inadvertently, by the

significance of language.

It is the significance of language, and its capacity to construct reality, that Milton's

Satan seeks to usurp. Satan, and those who follow his lead, mistake words for The Word. He

presumes that meaning is infinitely malleable, responding to power, and ungrounded in

transcendental imperative. The result of this diabolic misprision of logic is catastrophic

separation from God—from Being and thus from Sense. Insisting, like the Pardoner, on his

linguistic power and priority, Satan ends up the Author of a single degenerate Subject in an

incomprehensible Language.

<div align="center">2</div>

All human desire wishes, with Wallace Stevens, to "let be be finale of seem" (The

Emperor of Ice Cream 5). This accords with the Good in Paradise Lost only when it means:

"Let me represent what is." Adam and Eve deviate from God's Will when they act on the

principle: "Let what I represent be what is." They choose the image, not the thing. Their fatal

choice results from a desire to fashion themselves not after what they are, but after what they

say they are. Satan's wiles alienate Adam and Eve from themselves through the very

characteristic that distinguishes them: their nature as Authors unto themselves. Their

confusion between representation and creation, between seeming and being, lead to the Fall.

Unlike Satan, who falls into endless, incoherent subjectivity, human beings may

choose to be restored, to regain Paradise. Redemption comes about through the acceptance,

by grace, of an apparent paradox of identity. What Milton's God offers Man is a self that is at

once itself and another, in ineffable union with another and yet also distinct from it. To be

redeemed is to become a self whose representation once again accords with creation, a self whose language is grounded in existence. In the calculus of Satanic logic, where meaning is disconnected from being, this redemption is an impossibility. The poetic logic of <u>Paradise Lost</u> proves how it may be.

<div align="center">3</div>

Suppose that Harold Bloom is right and the Devil is a poet; more than that, that he is "the hero as poet, finding what must suffice, while knowing that nothing can suffice" (22). This is true, as far as it goes. Satan believes that Nothing, or nearly Nothing, can suffice, that darkness visible provides enough light to discover more than just

> sights of woe,
>
> Regions of sorrow, doleful shades, where peace
>
> And rest can never dwell, hope never comes
>
> That comes to all. (1.64-7)

In the utter darkness of Hell, Satan discerns Beelzebub and, Bloom tells us, "like the truly strong poet he is, Satan is interested in the face of his best friend only to the extent that it reveals to him the condition of his own countenance" (21). It takes Satan all of seven lines into his first speech (which begins as a lament for Beelzebub's ruin) to get to the first person; it remains his favorite form until his final transmogrification in Book 10. Satan uses the entire cosmos as a means to consider himself.   As C.S. Lewis says

> He meets Sin — and states his position. He sees the Sun; it makes him think of his own position. He spies on the human lovers; and states his position. In Book IX he journeys round the whole earth; it reminds him of his own position. The point need not be laboured... Satan has been in the Heaven of Heavens and in the abyss of Hell,

and surveyed all that lies between them, and in that whole immensity has found only

one thing that interests Satan. (102)

He looks outward only to look inward, but more than that, he looks at the outside only with

the desire to impose what is on the inside. He tells his new homeland

> thou profoundest Hell
>
> Receive thy new Possessor: One who brings
>
> A mind not to be chang'd by Place or Time.
>
> The mind is its own place, and in itself
>
> Can make a Heav'n of Hell, a Hell of Heav'n. (1.251-5)

This reads as brave and good epic poetry, stark stoic courage in the face of an overwhelming

foe—if we ignore the fact that Satan's mind could not even manage to turn the sting of injured

merit into a Heaven. Bloom's poet, in the bad of Hell, "finds his good; he chooses the heroic,

to know damnation and to explore the limits of the possible within it" (21). Limits that are, as

it turns out, non-existent. One cannot limit nothing.

Milton, following Augustine, tells us very simply: "entity is good, non-entity

consequently is not good" (CD 977). If being is all good, it follows that to be bad is not to be.

Satan's mind is free to make a Hell of Heaven but no amount of Satanic poetic genius will

make the nothing of Hell into the something of Heaven.

In the event, he does not even try. Mammon, in paraphrase of Satan's praise of liberty

and the creative capacity of the demonic mind, offers this advice to the bad angels:

> seek
>
> Our own good from ourselves, and from our own
>
> Live to ourselves, though in this vast recess,

Free, and to none accountable, preferring

Hard liberty before the easy yoke

Of servile Pomp...

As [God] our darkness, cannot we his Light

Imitate when we please? (2.252-7, 269-70)

Satan, "with Monarchal pride / Conscious of highest worth" demurs (2.428-9). Rather than

rallying what remains and forging a poetics of damnation from the materials of his fallen Self,

Satan orders his followers to render Hell more tolerable (he is vague as to how), then leaves to

spoil Earth. It turns out to be Mammon, "the least erected spirit that fell" (1.679), who is

Bloom's modern poet, not Satan, after all.

<div align="center">4</div>

Nevertheless, there is something of the poet about Satan. He is drive by the desire to

be a poet of existence, a maker of his own reality. Satan fashions himself and his image of the

cosmos in terms of power. When he and the other members of the infernal crew speak of

God, they invariably speak of his omnipotence. For Satan, the reason for his failure to unseat

God is a result only of God's superior power. Satan's image of his antagonist is "hee / Whom

Thunder hath made greater" (1.257-8). As the Son clearly sees, it is "by strength" that Satan

and his infernal crew "measure all, of other excellence / Not emulous, nor care who them

excels" (6.820-2). It is not God's merit, but His power Satan envies, and the power of His

Son, the Word.

Satan recognizes, with Augustine, that when "God speaks mysteriously before He

acts, His speech is the unchanging cause of what he does" (City of God 12.6). He knows, like

Aquinas, that it is God's power to signify using the materials of existence. However, where

Augustine and Aquinas see a singular power contained within an infinite set of Divine powers, Satan sees the whole of God's power, and definition of power in general. The Satanic syllogism is: "If God's speech has generative power, and I speak, my speech must have generative power."

We see this when he tries to relocate the origin of his own being to himself, taunting Abdiel:

> remember'st thou
>
> Thy making, while the Maker gave thee being?
>
> We know no time when we were not as now;
>
> Know none before us, self-begot, self-rais'd
>
> By our own quick'ning power. (6.856-61)

In Hell, ontology is epistemology. Autonymy becomes the rock on which Satan builds his claim to autonomy. The ground of Satan's being, as he sees it, is in his own mind, flowering from his capacity for Reason and Logos.

Satan tries to put self-begetting and self-authoring (self-making) on the same level. Begetting, however, as the Nicene Creed is clear, is not making. The only begotten being in Paradise Lost is the Son, whom the Father calls: "My word, my wisdom, and effectual might" (3.170). The difference between the Word and words is the subtlety that Satan trips himself up on. God is a poet, a maker, even as Satan himself has the capacity to be. But, through his own image, God is the means by which a poem is made: the Word. It is this that Satan cannot see. He turns away too soon. He leaves Heaven before God creates the world, before "at his Word, the formless Mass / This world's material mould, came to a heap" (3.709), and thus

misses his chance to learn to distinguish between speaking <u>of</u> being and speaking <u>into</u> being, between the power that makes and the power that begets.

Satan conflates these two very different powers under the name "strength." In doing so, he erases the distinction between the authorship of creations and the authorship of God. God, as we are often told, is the Author of all Being. The creatures from whom he asks willing obedience, namely men and angels, are "Authors to themselves" (3.122). To Satan's mind, this means that he has the authority, the strength, to beget himself. Once again, he stops listening too soon. Creatures, unlike their Creator, are not unqualified authors. Rather, they are: "Authors to themselves in all / Both what they judge and what they choose" (3.122-3). The authority of Milton's God is the power to change existence, to give meaning the thing-itself. The authority of his creatures is the power to respond to existence, whether rightly or wrongly. A creature, such as Man, may make images, but not materials. He may represent, but not create. He may self-fashion, but if the self he fashions does not accord with the person he is, no amount of strength can change the image into the real thing. The delusion that it can is the origin of sin.

5

Eve wakes for the first time. She wonders where and what she is, and how she came to be. She goes down to the banks of a lake and looks into the water. She sees a beautiful shape staring back and is entranced. As she later tells Adam

> there had I fixt
>
> Mine eyes till now, and pin'd with vain desire
>
> Had not a voice thus warn'd me, What thou seest,
>
> What there thou seest fair Creature is thyself. (4.465-8)

Eve's first action is to mistake her image for a reality and to be enamoured of that image. The warning voice reminds us that she is a creature. She takes her being, however fair, from a higher source. Then the voice leads her away from her own image

> but follow me,
>
> And I will bring thee where no shadow stays
>
> Thy coming, and thy soft imbraces, hee
>
> Whose image thou art, him thou shalt enjoy
>
> Inseparably thine, to him shalt bear
>
> Multitudes like thyself. (4.469-74)

She is called away from her own image to the source of that image, Adam; enjoined to turn from the lesser reality of representation to the greater reality of the thing represented (which, of course, is but another link in a chain of representations leading up to Ultimate Being, who represents nothing but himself). The reward for her obedience is the power to create multitudes of her own images, to emulate the begetting power of God. But first she must turn away from her reflection.

Adam's behavior upon waking is very different. Adam begins his story (told to Raphael) by acknowledging what Satan cannot, asking "for who himself beginning knew?" (8.251). He grasps the simple logic that being must precede (or at nearest coincide with) perception of being. Adam's response to finding himself awake is to look outwards, upwards. In his first action, he tells Raphael: "Straight toward Heav'n my wond'ring Eyes I turn'd" (8.257). Eve looks into a mirror, Adam looks to God, then out over the world. When at last his attention turns to himself, it is to his own body, not to a watery reflection, to the physical

reality, not the representation. He asks the world, the Sun, the Earth, the landscape, the other Creatures

<div style="text-align:center">how came I thus, how here?</div>

Not of myself; by some great Maker then,

In goodness and in power preëminent;

Tell me, how may I know him, how adore,

From whom I have that I thus move and live. (8.277-81)

Adam reads God's poem and wants to know the poet. Eve reads God's poem and admires the portrayal of herself therein. For Satan, whose self-defined role is the supplanter of God's Word, Eve is the natural target for temptation. From her inception, she confuses the image for the object.

<div style="text-align:center">6</div>

The Satanic Self operates on a sort of Pauli Exclusion Principle of the Soul. As Lewis's <u>Milton malgré lui</u> Screwtape tells us: "The whole philosophy of Hell rests on the recognition of the axiom that one thing is not another thing, and, specially, that one self is not another self. My good is my good and your good is yours. What one gains another loses... 'To be' <u>means</u> 'to be in competition'" (94). Satan cannot imagine that the Son's Kingship could mean anything but his own diminishment, and so rebels. Hell's Credo, "to be weak is to be miserable" (1.157), invites eternal misery, because in a hierarchical world, unless one has absolute authority (as Satan well understands), there is always someone beneath whom one is weaker.   This axiom of absolute ego integrity defines the post-lapsarian self at its worst.

When Eve eats the apple, it is remarkable how quickly she falls into the cruel reckoning of the Satanic economy of selves:

> shall I to [Adam] make known
>
> As yet my change, and give him to partake
>
> Full happiness with mee, or rather not,
>
> But keep the odds of Knowledge in my power
>
> Without Copartner...
>
> And render me more equal, and perhaps,
>
> A thing not undesirable, sometime
>
> Superior: for inferior, who is free? (9.817-21, 823-5)

Within twenty lines of eating the fruit, Eve has forgotten that she already <u>was</u> free. Were she not free, she could not have taken the apple to begin with. Moreover, though she has yet to work through the implications of her question, it leads, as we have seen, swiftly up the Chain of Being to God, who, if inferiority is slavery, must be overthrown for any to be free. At that moment, however, the full weight of her thought has not yet occured to Eve. Foremost in her mind is the calculation: "I have gained X amount of power, which, if I keep it for myself, reduces Adam to Y amount my inferior."

> She degrades herself further, saying
>
> > but what if God have seen,
>
> And Death ensue? then I shall be no more,
>
> And Adam wedded to another Eve,
>
> Shall live with her enjoying, I extinct;
>
> A death to think. (8.826-30)

She fantasizes fretfully about Adam and a non-existent Eve enjoying pleasures she will not. She goes from reckoning actual self-gain against another's projected loss to reckoning

imagined, and unrealizable self-loss resulting from the potential future gain of one real person and one as-yet unreal one. Becoming a Satanic self, denying hierarchy in her self-authority, Eve departs reality for a solipsistic world of phantasms — a world that she will murder to protect.

It is a world that Adam will commit suicide to enter. Lewis argues that Adam's "sin is, of course, intended to be a less ignoble sin than hers... If conjugal love were the highest value in Adam's world, then of course his resolve would have been the correct one" (126-7). It is hard to believe this to be the case without granting Adam more capacity for self-honesty at the moment of his failure, and Milton less ability for irony.

On the surface Adam's declaration that his love of Eve will lead him to taste death sounds like a noble thing, recalling John 15:13: "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends." Adam, however, gets his preposition wrong. It is not "lay down his life <u>with</u> his friends," which any gang member might do in a gun fight without wanting to, but "lay down his life <u>for</u> his friends." Adam's death, even if he were dying for her, will not spare Eve one jot of suffering, not gain her a minute more than her allotted span. In the final analysis, though, Adam dies not for Eve's sake, not, as Augustine would have it, "because in obedience to a social compulsion he yielded to Eve as husband to wife, as the only man in the world to the only woman" (14.11). Adam dies for self-lust. He kills himself rather than lose his incarnate self-image:

I feel

The Link of Nature draw me: Flesh of Flesh,

Bone of my Bone thou art, and from thy State

Mine never shall be parted, bliss or woe. (9.913-6)

It is not Adam's love of Eve, but his love of the Adam in Eve (the double entendre, while unfortunate, is not inappropriate), that causes him to fall. His sin is worse, is less noble than hers. Eve sins because she wants to be Adam, or a greater Adam; while she is not looking at God as she ought, she is at least looking in the right direction. Adam, contrawise, sins because he does not want to reliquish a lesser image of himself; he turns away from God. He chooses what Augustine calls "a love by which we love what should not be loved" (11.28).

The sexual result of this misdirected love is Lust. Eve becomes, to Adam a "bounty of this virtuous Tree" (9.1033). He objectifies her into fruit. She ceases to be a person with whom Adam can unite, and becomes a thing to be consumed, coequal with an apple. Having achieved the freedom to author their separate selves fully, without the other, Adam and Eve

> in mutual accusation spent

> The fruitless hours, but neither self-condemning,

> And of thir vain contést appear'd no end. (9.1187-9)

In these three lines, Milton sums up the inevitable result of choosing the representation over the thing represented. Adam and Eve, against reason, turn their reason against one another, who an evening earlier were each other's other selves. They lose the fruit that late seemed so perfect. The contest of their mutual vanity, like the War in Heaven, threatens never to end.

The punishment for their sin is to be given what they seek. Thenceforth, Eve is given the power to multiply her images throughout the earth:

> Thy sorrow I will greatly multiply

> By thy Conception; Children thou shalt bring

> In sorrow forth. (10.193-5)

Her god-like generative power remains intact. But in a world after Paradise, that power is a hard burden.

Adam, God's image who looked on the image of his own flesh and preferred it, is given that image, but not before learning what it really is: "Out of the ground wast taken, know thy Birth / For dust thou art and shalt to dust return" (10.205-6).

Satan gets to live in a world of power and to have a discourse all his own, outside of the Word. Instead of being able to deliver a grand speech of triumph celebrating his own power as Author and Architect of Man's fall, he discovers

> a greater power
>
> Now rul'd him, punisht in the shape he sinn'd,
>
> According to his doom: he would have spoke,
>
> But hiss for hiss return'd with forked tongue. (10.514-7)

God says to each of them, "Thy will be done." Each of them receives the Seeming they chose as the finale of Being.

7

At the moment when Adam and Eve stand sundered from God, from each other, and from themselves, Milton makes the paradox of divine personality explicit and unavoidable, and thereby lights the way to redemption. Where previously in the poem the acts and words of the Son were ascribed to "the Son," in the scene of judgement we read about "unclouded Deity" (10.66) "Judge and Intercessor both" (10.96), "God" (10.101) and "the sovran Presence" (10.144). Milton pushes the rhetoric of character representation to a paradoxical end—and in that paradox is redemption from the incoherent damnation of the Satanic self.

The goal of Hell is self-separateness. The goal of Heaven is what Augustine calls "the ineffable union of being one with God" (12.1), yet at the same time also being a distinct person. Putting it another way, Milton emphasizes a subjectivity that is saved from annihilation by being simultaneously a part of discourse and apart from discourse. The Trinity is the model for this relation, and it is a model with reflections throughout the poem. The desire to express and reflex this paradoxical relation is what motivates Milton to have Raphael describe angelic sex to Adam, saying

> Whatever pure thou in the body enjoy'st
>
> (And pure thou wert created) we enjoy
>
> In eminence, and obstacle find none
>
> Of membrane, joint, or limb, exclusive bars . . .
>
> Nor restrain'd conveyance need
>
> As Flesh to mix with Flesh, or Soul with Soul (8.622-25, 628-9)

Milton's angels, unlike those of Augustine and Aquinas, have physical being. They overcome this, however, in the mixing of matter that is sexuality "in eminence", and that overcoming is a type of the Trinity, a poetic representation of Augustine's "trinity of being, knowledge, and love" in which "there is no shadow of illusion to disturb us" (11.26). The selves of the angels are not dependent on objects to exist, and thus not subject to the profane kenosis that empties objects of intrinsic significance. In overcoming physicality while retaining identity, angels ground their subjectivity in the Word. The closest human experience comes to emulating this grounding is sexual intercourse. This is why Milton departs from Augustine, and represents in such elegant detail pre-lapsarian sex. Adam and Eve most resemble God when "hand in hand alone" (4.698), alone together, they pass into their Bower, there to enjoy

> wedded Love, mysterious Law, true source

> Of human offspring, sole propriety

> In Paradise of all things common else. (4.749-51)

Wedded love, that communal intimacy in which each self is at once in and for itself and in and for another, provides the means by which Man becomes not merely a speaker, a maker, but, in truest emulation of God, a begetter. It is the act by which human representation becomes incarnate. Only through the unity of still-separate selves does Man fulfill his true nature. It is in hopeful prefiguration of this redemption from the spiral into Satanic subjectivity and its annihilations that Adam and Eve, together and individual, "hand in hand with wand'ring steps and slow, / Through Eden took their solitary way" (12.648-9).

"This Hell of Stories": Beckett's Unnamable and the End of the Satanic Self

1

While the Pardoner is restored to Christian fellowship with a kiss, and Adam and Eve have one another to cling to as they leave Paradise, no such grace is granted to Samuel Beckett's pitiable, singular Unnamable. In this strange creature struggling to be a self— devoid of any clear form or body, sometimes seeming to sit at the center of an infinite (or claustrophic) emptiness, other times self-described as a torso and a head in a jar, other times confused with a worm or embryo, at one point disappearing entirely into the third person pronoun, always a ceaseless voice—in this monstrously pathetic logorrheaiac we find the inevitable end of the Satanic self—that rebel who seeks to become the linguistic grounds of its own rhetorical being at the expense of any external source of significance.

The term Satanic is apt. The Unnamable invokes the imagery and language of damnation time and again in its narration, calling Lucifer's revolt and its consequences, with heavy irony, a "distant analogy" (296) for its condition. At times its frenzied pronouncements closely echo Milton's Satan, sounding the same tone of self-sufficient pride and bitter despair. It is not a far stretch to imagine the Unnamable's monologue occuring within the tortured mind of Satan, after he is reduced to hell-bound reptilian incoherence.

The Unnamable re-enacts, in its self-stumbling, repetitive way the historical progress of profane kenosis, emptying things, and God and words of their meaning, and takes this progress to its terminal stage, in which the self no longer has any grounding at all, but is merely a function of discourse, talk without talker without ceasing. It lives (if one can even call it that) torn between the imperatives of autonomy and of linguistic dependence. It must talk to exist, yet it cannot accept an existence based on language, for language is sundered

from any source of significance. Twisting in its untenable yet inescapable prison, it tries to proceed "by aporia pure and simple" and by "affirmations and negations invalidated as soon as uttered or sooner or later" (291), but fails at every turn, tries again, fails again. Its struggle to be a "free subject" with the power to "penetrate the density of [itself] and endow [itself] with meaning" (Foucault 137) is consistent only in its lack of hope, its bleak persistence, and its despairing desire for silence.

<center>2</center>

"What is the correct attitude to adopt towards things?" asks the Unnamable near the beginning of its monologue. Its answer is a far cry from that of medieval man, with his symbolist mentality and transubstantiated Eucharist, or of the Renaissance neo-Platonist with his material reflections of spiritual Idea. But before it answers the first question, the Unnamable raises a surprising second.

"[T]o begin with, are they necessary?"

That is, are things necessary for the existence of discourse or for the existence of a subject? To which it replies: "Where there are people, it is said, there are things" (292).

This simple formula is what is shared in the many and varied notions of the self. It is assumed by all parties, whatever else may be said about the subject, that it stands in some relation to things—whether as creator, observer, helpless victim, master, representer, peripheral occurence. Even if things do not ground the subject through significance, they must relate to it as an inevitable consequence of its existence. To be means to be in relation to something.

Insofar as one can find things surfacing in the Unnamable's stream of confession (and they surface rarely), however, they are all not very helpful in grounding identities, either the

Unnamable's own or the phantoms that inhabit the dark space of its narrative.   The Unnamable is confronted by a person revolving around it, a person tentatively identified by a thing. "Malone is there . . . I am almost sure it is he. The brimless hat seems to me conclusive . . . Perhaps it is Molloy wearing Malone's hat. But it is more reasonable to suppose it is Malone, wearing his own hat. Oh look, there is the first thing, Malone's hat" (292-3). The "first thing" in the Unnamable's primordial darkness (fiat petasus!) has a concrete identity. It is definitely Malone's hat. However, that is an identity that serves no use in picking out a person, in signifying a self. The precision of the thing's identification only heightens its comic inutility as a means of endowing significance on the human being beneath its brimlessness. The joke is almost vaudevillian: "Are you Malone?" "Well, I'd better be, I'm wearing his hat."

A little later on it tells us "of an incident that has only occurred once, so far. I await its recurrence without impatience. Two shapes then, oblong like man, entered into collision before me. They fell and I saw them no more. I naturally thought of the pseudo-couple Mercier-Camier" (296-7). Here the two things themselves are indistinct, being only oblong— like man only in the most general sense, like the first step in a child's figure-drawing handbook. The Unnamable thinks of Mercier-Camier, but cannot draw any firm conclusion from that. The singularity of the encounter between the unidentifiable oblong things, coupled by the Unnamable's fixedness of vision that traps him into a single subjective perspective (294-5) renders it meaningless. The Unnamable, concluding its mediation on the collision and its inability to draw any meaningful conclusion therefrom, mockingly echoes Nietszche, saying "I have said that all things here recur sooner or later, no, I was going to say it, then thought better of it" (299). It cannot mitigate difficulties the transient nature of things poses

to efforts to discern their meaning, either through a capacity for significance in the case of Malone's hat, nor through eternal recurrence in the case of the colliding oblongs.

The Unnamable empties things of their capacity to give meaning and definition to the subject. "People with things, people without things, things without people, what does it matter, I flatter myself it will not take me long to scatter them, whenever I choose, to the winds" (292). This desire to scatter things to the winds is more than mere whim. It is the foundation of its confession. "The search for the means to put an end to things . . . is what enables the discourse to continue" (299). Far from being the objective foundations upon which discourse is built, concrete substances that discourse can be about, things have become a target for rhetorical annihilation. More than that, for the Unnamable, things aren't things in any sense other than the rhetorical. As it continues, "I shall have to banish them in the end, the beings, things, shapes, sounds and lights with which my haste to speak has encumbered this place" (299-300). Everything, for this benighted, ceaselessly speaking being, is text. Malone, Molloy, Basil, Mahood, Worm, hats and jars and lights—all these things are, according to the Unnamable, merely textual emanations, arising and falling in the order of discourse, creations of someone's logogenerative power. But it is not clear whose. It may not be the Unnamable's.

<div align="center">3</div>

Whether or not Samuel Beckett the writer was, as John Pilling puts it, a "God-haunted man" (1) the Unnamable is without question a God-haunted literary creature. The rejection of God permeates its ravings, even as it mockingly assumes divine characteristics. It compares itself to Satan, its location to Hell (295-6). It seems aware of the claim of God to underlie things and selves and imbue them with significance, learned somehow from a mysterious

"them" who it never could have met and yet somehow who, it claims, "gave me the low-down on God. They told me I depended on him, in the last analysis. They had it on the reliable authority of his agents at Bally I forget what, this being the place, according to them, where the inestimable gift of life had been rammed down my gullet" (298). Presented with this claim, it therefore sets itself with cheery blasphemies against God even as it does against things and selves.

Just as The Unnamable tries on different, contradicting versions of the nature of things, it cants and recants on God, trying to find some formulation that will let it cease to speak, some final word. Malone, it tells us, "revolves, a stranger forever to my infirmities, one who is not as I can never not be. I am motionless in vain, he is the god . . . I alone am man and all the rest divine" (300). In this formulation, the Unnamable seems almost to envy God his non-existence. A short while later, it reiterates this anticredo, saying "God and man, nature and the light of day, the heart's outpourings and the means of understanding, all invented, basely, by me alone, with the help of no one" (304). It describes itself immediately thereafter, stripping away even the limbs and torso it had previously claimed to have, as "a big talking ball" (305)—a perfect sphere reminiscent of the Stoics' god, or Pascal's. However, as Laura Barge writes, "we must remember that neither Beckett nor the Unnamable is a mystic" (227). This usurpation of God's role—or identification with God—is short-lived, and the Unnamable, with its "perceptions of cosmic authority—guilt, experience of determinism, need for a witnessing authentication of being, and a sense of unwanted immortality" (Barge 227) returns to "obedience to the unintelligible terms of an incomprehensible damnation" (Beckett 308), even playing with the notion that what it is struggling to say, what its discourse is aiming at is "praise of [its] master intoned, in order to obtain his forgiveness" (311).

However, this idea too is discarded, as all of the Unnamable's propositions are, to be replaced by another effort, another coming to grips with the ungraspable. Passing through the stages of Mahood and Worm, the Unnamable concludes "the essential is to go on squirming forever at the end of the line, as long as there are waters and banks and ravening in heaven a sporting God to plague creature per pro his chosen shits" (338). The non-existent God is recast as a Manichean malevolence. Then that demiurge is replaced with God-as-social-untouchable, with a glancing commentary on Kafka—"The master in any case, we don't intend, listen to them hedging, we don't intend, unless absolutely driven to it, to make the mistake of inquiring into him, he'd turn out to be a mere high official, we'd end up by needing God, we have lost all sense of decency admittedly, but there are still certain depths we prefer not to sink to" (374-5). Even this sense of gaucherie slips away though, and eventually the Unnamable says "what have I done to God . . . what has God done to us, nothing, and we've done nothing to him, you can't do anything to him, he can't do anything to us, we're innocent, he's innocent, it's nobody's fault" (386). Yet a few pages later, it tells us "there's a god for the damned" (400), which, with all its talk of "unusual hell" (392), "infernal" seconds (395), and "strange sin" (414), certainly includes the Unnamable.

The one thing that the God who haunts the Unnamable is not, the one thing the Unnamable can never allow him to be, is an Other upon whom its existence can depend and from whom it can derive meaning. Hence the contradictory circumlocutions. Just like the people who circle the Unnamable, and the things that populate the empty space around it, God too is nothing more than a rhetorical construct, a function of discourse. The Unnamable's quest to find, as Laura Barge describes it, "a reference point for [its] identity" cannot be

completed through appeal to God, for God is subject and subjugated to its talk, the very talk from which it is trying to free itself.

<div align="center">4</div>

Gary Adelman summarizes the Unnamable's confession thus: "The game afoot is how to prove [it] exists" (73). The strategy is confession. But what is there to confess? "I seem to speak, it is not I, about me, it is not about me. . . . At the same time I am obliged to speak" (291) the Unnamable tells us at the very beginning of his story. It cannot say anything about itself, yet it cannot talk about anything except itself. It must construct an identity from language, seeking always what Laura Barge calls the "reference point for [its] identity"—yet as we have seen, it systematically rejects every reference point that presents itself, turning away from things and then away from God, seeking the grounding for the discursive self in discourse alone.

Yet even discourse proves insufficient to create the independent self-constructing subject the Unnamable—the apotheosis of the Satanic self—demands. Its ouroubourosian monologue cannot find a language all its own, but must use a common language, a discourse that originates outside the self it struggles so hard to purify. As it says, early in the narrative,

> It's of me now I must speak, even if I have to do it with their language, it will be a
>
> start, a step towards silence and the end of madness, the madness of having to speak
>
> and not being able to, except of things that don't concern me, that don't count, that I
>
> don't believe, that they have crammed me full of to prevent me from saying who I am,
>
> where I am, and from doing what I have to do . . . I can't say it, I have no language but
>
> theirs . . . (324-5)

That is the crux of it. The Satanic self is caught in the bind of grounding its existence on discourse while at the same time requiring the impossible—that discourse be a singular and unique phenomenon that affords absolute autonomy. The Unnamable, as the portrayal of the subject as a function of discourse, reveals the panicked near-nothingness that such a formulation of the subject really is. As it nears the long last gasp that ends the novel, the Unnamable reels headlong into the despair of its condition:

> I'm in words, made of words, others' words, what others, the place too, the air, the walls, the floor, the ceiling, all words, the whole world is here with me, I'm the air, the walls, the walled-in one, everything yields, opens, ebbs, flows, like flakes, I'm all these flakes, meeting, mingling, falling asunder, wherever I go I find me, leave me, go towards me, come from me, nothing ever but me, a particle of me, retrieved, lost, gone astray, I'm all these words, all these strangers, this dust of words with no ground for their settling, no sky for their dispersing . . . I am they, all of them, those that merge, those that part, those that never meet, and nothing else, yes, something else, that I'm something quite different, a quite different thing, a wordless thing in an empty place, a hard shut dry cold black place where nothing stirs, nothing speaks, and that I listen, and that I seek, like a caged beast born of caged beasts born of caged beasts born of caged beasts born in a cage and dead in a cage, born and then dead, born in a cage and then dead in a cage, in a word like a beast, in one of their words . . . ." (386-7)

The ludic freedom of the ironic philosopher proceeding by "aporia pure and simple" has vanished. At this moment, the terrible imprisonment that is the purely discursive self is revealed—not independent, not free, not individual at all, but entirely bereft of will and power in the face of a discourse it can neither construct nor control.

All that is left for the Unnamable after its rejection of the validity and significance of things, other people, and God is going on, and not even the going on of a lone proud doomed figure like Satan on the shores of Hell at the opening of <u>Paradise Lost</u>, but a breathless, exhausted talking of "no one but me, no, not me either" (408), the subject as the Spartan's nightingale, a voice and nothing more, in a long death rattle that lacks even the dignity of belonging to a dying person, crying "I can't go on" and knowing "you must go on" and able only to say "I'll go on" (414).

Conclusion

The subject's situation at the end of <u>The Unnamable</u> seems bleak beyond bearable. To be told that our only option is to persist without hope, persist without reason, persist without anything except an imperative to persist that does not even originate with us—that truly is to take up residence in a "hell of stories" (380). To be denied even that sliver of misery and be subsumed as Foucault's "function of discourse," utterly without the capacity to endow meaning on the world is, if such a thing were possible, even worse.

Yet there is hope, for those of us who, like Wallace Stevens, "never lived in a time / When mythology was possible" (<u>A Mythology Reflects Its Region</u> 2-3)—hope in the absence of meaning intrinsic to things, hope in the face of the clear inability of language to map precisely to meaning, hope in withdrawal of the real presence of the God from the world. This hope lies in the fact that, whatever Foucault may argue, we nevertheless do, through some as yet unexplained alchemy, penetrate the densities of things as free subjects and endow them with meaning. Human beings create meaning like coral create reefs—as an intrinsic part of our nature. To deny the validity of such meaning because it resists arresting at the point of manufacture, to dismiss the subject because the subject lacks indisputable boundaries is to miss a key insight about the nature of things—that they are always in flux, impermanent, distinct yet fuzzy around the edges. The subject arrested loses its meaning precisely because subjects exist in time. Further, to claim that the inadequacies of <u>language</u>, as exploited by deconstructing sophistries, are the inadequacies of <u>meaning</u> precisely misses the point—were it not for the sense that there was some <u>there</u> there to mean something, the struggle to fit words to meaning would not exist. As Viktor Frankl writes, "as each situation in life represents a challenge to man and presents a problem for him to solve, the question of the meaning of life

may actually be reversed. Ultimately, man should not ask what the meaning of his life is, but rather he must recognize that it is <u>he</u> who is asked" (109).

The metafunction of this essay has been to show how meaning and selves <u>can</u> be maintained, and even the act of reading the literature of centuries past, of reaching out across the divide between autonomous subjects to comprehend another's meanings and to provide one's own meanings in return, in the hope of being comprehended, proves that human communion sufficient to sustain the subject does exist, that the unquenchable laughter of the pilgrims, and Adam and Eve's slow hand-in-hand walk through Paradise are the rule, not an illusion.

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