17. Me

Who are we? What am I? What is an ‘I’? What does it mean to say ‘me’? What is the relationship between an ‘I’ in a literary text and an ‘I’ outside it? One of the central ideas of this book is literature’s capacity to question, defamiliarize and even transform the sense of who or what we are. In the next few pages we would like to elaborate further on this, by trying to look at the nature of personal identity or ‘me’ both in broadly historical and theoretical terms and more specifically in terms of what literary texts themselves suggest.

In Flannery O’Connor’s story ‘Revelation’ (1961), a woman called Mrs Turpin has a traumatic and bizarre reaction when a strange girl sitting in a doctor’s waiting room tells her: ‘Go back to hell where you came from, you old wart hog’ (217). Mrs Turpin is scandalized by this statement and that same evening, back at the farm, by herself, hosing down the pigs, she demands an explanation. Being Christian and superstitious (as well as grotesquely racist and class-prejudiced), Mrs Turpin regards the girl’s words as a message from God:

> ‘What do you send me a message like that for?’ she said in a low fierce voice, barely above a whisper but with the force of a shout in its concentrated fury. ‘How am I a hog and me both?’ (222)

What is striking here is not only the woman’s confusion and indignation at the apparently contradictory idea that she might be a human being and an old wart hog at the same time, but also the fact that her ‘fury’ is expressed in a direct, personal address to God. Mrs Turpin’s sense of outrage becomes outrageous in turn, as her questions addressed to God culminate in a questioning *of* God: ‘A final surge of fury shook her and she roared, “Who do you think you are?”’ (223). The strangeness of putting this question to God comes from the fact that it is a question that should properly, perhaps, only be asked of another human. Only humans are supposed to be able to reflect on who they are and at the same time be obliged to take seriously a questioning of their own identity. If the question ‘Who do you think you are?’ is one that cannot or should not be asked of God, nor is it a question one would normally ask of a wart hog. In this respect it would seem that there is something characteristically human about the question. ‘Who do you think you are?’ is the question that humans ask of others and try to answer about themselves. As Socrates said, ‘The unexamined life is not worth living’ (*Apology*, 38a, in Plato 1961). And the definition of being human must remain in the form of a questioning: Mrs Turpin’s ‘concentrated fury’ is, in this respect, pitifully, comically human.

At the same time, it could be said that this question (‘Who do you think you are?’) is most clearly raised and most fully explored in works of literature. This might in fact allow us to formulate another general definition: literature is the space in which questions about the nature of personal identity are most provocatively articulated. For many decades literary critics have talked about ‘the person’ and ‘the individual’. In more recent years, however, there has been a tendency to refer to ‘the human subject’ or just ‘the subject’. This may sound jargonistic but there are good reasons, in fact, for talking about ‘the subject’ rather than, say, ‘the person’ or ‘the individual’. The French poststructuralist Michel Foucault has written: ‘There are two meanings of the word “subject”: subject to someone else

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by control and dependence, and tied to one's own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge' (Foucault 1983, 212; cited by During 1992, 153). The word 'person', by contrast, perhaps too easily retains connotations of the 'I' or 'me' as detached from everything, a *free agent*. Likewise, the term 'individual' (etymologically from the Latin *individuus*, 'undivided' or 'not divisible') suggests a sense of the 'I' as simply free, as being at one with itself and autonomous or self-ruling. It is this idea of the sovereignty of the 'I' that Freud gestures towards and ironizes when he speaks of 'His Majesty the Ego' (Freud 1985f, 138).

The term 'subject' is useful, then, in that it encourages a more critical attentiveness to the ways in which the 'I' is *not* autonomous, to the fact that it does not exist in a sort of vacuum. Rather an 'I' or 'me' is always *subject* to forces and effects both outside itself (environmental, social, cultural, economic, educational, etc.) and 'within' itself (in particular in terms of what is called the unconscious or, in more recent philosophical terms, otherness). We are subjects in the sense of being 'subject to' others 'by control or dependence' (in Foucault's phrase) right from birth and even before: not only are we radically dependent on the father who sires us and the mother who bears us (or on their various surrogates), but also on the environment (ecological, economic, familial, social, etc.) into which we are born, as well as on the multiple forms of authority and government which condition our upbringing. A 'me' born to a single mother in Soweto is not the same kind of 'me' as a 'me' born to a duchess in Kensington, but they are both in their different ways *subjects*. Of course if the Kensington 'me' had been in line for the throne, things would have looked slightly different: in Britain, at least, one is subject not only to the authority of one's parent or parents, one's local authorities, the police and central government, but also – at least on paper – to the Queen (thus one is 'a British subject') and, beyond her, to the Christian God. That, then, is one way in which every 'I' is necessarily and fundamentally a *subject*. Rather differently, being a subject has specifically to do with language. You cannot be an 'I' without having a proper name, and in English-speaking countries you usually acquire a proper name around the time of birth or even before. We are born into language, we are born – more precisely – into patriarchal language, into being identified by a patronym, by a paternal proper name. (Even the mother's maiden name is, of course, usually a patronym.) We are also endowed with a forename, and again this is not something *we* choose, it is something to which we are *subject* – even if, in Britain for example, people do legally have the right to change their names at the age of 18. Juliet's complaint is haunting and even tragic precisely because it highlights the way in which we are *subject to* names, even if we wish to ignore or disown them:

> Oh Romeo, Romeo, wherefore art thou Romeo?
> Deny thy father and refuse thy name,
> Or if thou wilt not, be but sworn my love,
> And I'll no longer be a Capulet.
>
> (*Romeo and Juliet*, 2.1.75–8)

More broadly, questions of personal or individual identity are indissociably bound up with language. We may like to suppose that there is some 'me' outside language or that there is some way of thinking about ourselves which involves a non-linguistic 'me'. But the *idea* of this non-linguistic 'me' must found itself in language – beginning with the name itself, or with the words 'I', 'me', 'mine', 'myself' and so on. We cannot, in any *meaningful* way, escape the fact that we are *subject to* language. As Jacques Derrida has put it: 'From the moment that there is meaning there are nothing but signs. We *think only in signs*' (Derrida 1976, 50).

We can also consider this topic from a more explicitly historical perspective. The idea of the 'I' or

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'me', in other words, is not unchanging and unchangeable. It is in many respects historically and ideologically determined. The way we think about 'I' today is inevitably different from the way in which 'I' was thought about and defined in, say, seventeenth-century France by René Descartes. At the same time, the principle of the Cartesian *cogito* ('I think therefore I am') – that is to say, the model of the *rational subject* which Descartes theorizes in his *Discourse on Method* (1637; 1977) – in many respects continues to govern Western thinking. But there are other ways of thinking, and other ways of thinking about thinking. In the mid-twentieth century, for example, the German philosopher Martin Heidegger declared: 'Thinking begins only when we have come to know that reason, glorified for centuries, is the most stiffnecked adversary of thought' (Heidegger 1977, 112; cited by Judovitz 1988, 186). Likewise, and more recently, Jacques Derrida has been consistently concerned to demonstrate that, as he puts it, 'reason is only one species of thought – which does not mean that thought is "irrational"' (Derrida 1983, 16).

But perhaps the most obvious way of illustrating the changes over the past century in thinking about thinking, and in thinking about the model of the rational subject, is in terms of psychoanalysis. Psychoanalysis has changed the way in which we are obliged to think about 'the subject'. In the light of the psychoanalytic theory of the unconscious, the proposition '*cogito, ergo sum*' ('I think, therefore I am') becomes manifestly problematic. I do not, and perhaps strictly speaking never can know precisely *why* or *how* I think what I think, if only because of the extent to which what I think is necessarily determined by forces and effects of which I am (in many ways thankfully) unaware. In a short essay written as an encyclopedia entry on 'Psychoanalysis' first published in 1923, Freud suggests that the unconscious is evident not only in dreams but in

> such events as the temporary forgetting of familiar words and names, forgetting to carry out prescribed tasks, everyday slips of the tongue and of the pen, misreadings, losses and mislayings of objects, certain errors, instances of apparently accidental self-injury, and finally habitual movements carried out seemingly without intention or in play, tunes hummed 'thoughtlessly', and so on. (Freud 1986, 136–7)

The significance of Freud's theory of the unconscious thus consists in the demonstration that the subject who thinks (the subject of 'I think') is composed of forces and effects which are at least in part unconscious. 'I', let us remind ourselves, is not 'God' – even if it may be *subject to* fantasies of being so.

Psychoanalysis, then, has been a particularly disturbing but valuable discourse because it has promoted an awareness of the extent to which any 'I' or human subject is *decentred*: I, in other words, can never be simply or precisely who or what I think. What makes this idea disturbing and at the same time valuable is that it involves a dislocation of notions of human mastery and autonomy of self. It introduces instead the humility of recognizing that the human subject is not centred in itself, let alone centred in relation to the surrounding world or solar system. In an essay on 'The Resistances to Psychoanalysis' (1925), Freud talks about the 'emotional' difficulties people have in accepting the ideas of psychoanalysis and draws analogies between this and the theories of Darwin and Copernicus. In the case of psychoanalysis, he says, 'powerful human feelings are hurt by the subject-matter of the theory. Darwin's theory of descent met with the same fate, since it tore down the barrier that had been arrogantly set up between men and beasts.' Freud goes on to suggest that 'the psychoanalytic view of the relation of the conscious ego to an overpowering unconscious was a severe blow to human self-love', and that, 'as the *psychological* blow to men's narcissism', it compares 'with the *biological* blow delivered by the theory of descent and the earlier *cosmological* blow aimed at it by the discovery of Copernicus' (Freud 1986, 272–3). In this sense, psychoanalysis complements the Copernican revolution and nineteenth-century evolutionary theory in providing a powerful critique of

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anthropocentric or humanist values and ideas. Psychoanalysis demonstrates in uncomfortably clear terms how the 'arrogance' or narcissism of anthropocentrism – that is to say, every kind of thinking, including every kind of philosophy and politics, which puts the human at the centre of the earth and solar system, if not of the universe – is both unwarranted and unsustainable.

The Cartesian 'I think, therefore I am' can be further considered specifically in relation to language. Language determines the 'I' and the 'I think'. This can be illustrated simply by reflecting on the idea that Descartes's phrase is usually cited in Latin as '*cogito, ergo sum*'. We anglophone subjects are already adrift in effects of language and translation, but so too was Descartes himself: although the phrase was first published in his native French, it is famous for its later appearance in Latin. He was subject to the scholarly protocols of his own time and often wrote (and in some sense presumably thought) in Latin. What is at stake in this logic of being *subject to language* is a conception of language as not simply *instrumental*: language is not simply something that we *use*. Language governs what we (can) say as much as we govern or *use* language. Language is not simply an instrument: we are, unavoidably, *agents* of language. Moreover we are, more precisely perhaps, secret or double agents of language: we do not necessarily know, from one moment to the next, *how* we are being used by language or where it might be leading us. As in the most compelling kind of espionage story, however, this is not a situation we can get out of. As the narrator neatly puts it, in Margaret Atwood's short story 'Giving Birth' (1977): 'These are the only words I have, I'm stuck with them, stuck in them' (225–6). The 'in' is, no doubt, more difficult to reflect on than the 'with', but it is no less important.

How do these various questions and ideas relate to literary works more generally? First of all, let us emphasize that, if literature is concerned with exploring and reflecting on the nature of personal identity, it is also a space of exhilarating, even anarchic openness and imaginative or transformational possibility. Literature can be thought of as being, in Derrida's words, 'the institution which allows one to *say everything*, in *every way*' (Derrida 1992a, 36). In particular, there is this astonishing, anarchic freedom in literature: at least in principle, the author of a literary work can be any 'I' he or she wishes to be. To put it like this is to imply that the author is an 'I' before or outside the literary work. But who is to say that there is an 'I' anywhere that is not in part *literary*? This rather strange question is a focus of one of the greatest comical literary or philosophical works in the twentieth century, Samuel Beckett's *The Unnamable* (first published in English in 1959). This text is preoccupied with the idea that it is the 'I' itself that is in a sense the unnamable: the 'I' that speaks, or that seems to speak, is never true, never precisely itself, never the same, for example, as the 'I' who has spoken or the 'I' that writes 'I'. *The Unnamable*, then, starts off from the apparently simple but perhaps unfathomable remark, 'I, say I', and from the paradox that 'I seem to speak, it is not I, about me, it is not about me' (293). Nearly 50 pages later the narrator is still impelled to observe that 'on the subject of me properly so called … so far as I know I have received no information up to date' (338). In Beckett's wonderfully funny, but also dark and unnerving text, the Cartesian-rationalistic 'I think' becomes: 'I only think, if that is the name for this vertiginous panic as of hornets smoked out of their nest, once a certain degree of terror has been exceeded' (353). As with so much of Beckett's writing, this sentence is at once quite straightforward and semantically dense, unsettling, surprisingly resistant to a single interpretation. We might note, for example, the explicit attention to the uncertainties of language ('if that is the name') and of the relationship between terror and thinking. To think about this sentence can induce vertiginous panic and become terrifying. It succinctly illustrates literature's complex and unsettling effects when it comes to thinking about thinking – when it comes to thinking about identity and about the 'I' that claims to think.

We could conclude by trying to say a little more about the ways in which, as we suggested earlier,

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the 'I' or 'me' is in fact historically determined. One very broad but decisive example of this would be the question of the 'I' or 'me' in relation to romantic and post-romantic literature. In *Of Grammatology* (1967), Derrida argues that the importance of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's work consists in the fact that he 'starts from a new model of presence: the subject's self-presence within *consciousness* or *feeling*' (Derrida 1976, 98). European Romanticism in general might be characterized in terms of this kind of 'new model of presence', and in particular in terms of a new emphasis on the centrality and importance of the 'I' as a subject who both thinks and feels. This could be exemplified by a celebrated stanza written by George Gordon Byron on the back of a manuscript-page of canto 1 of *Don Juan* (1819–24):

> I would to Heaven that I were so much Clay –
> As I am blood – bone – marrow – passion – feeling –
> Because at least the past were past away –
> And for the future – (but I write this reeling,
> Having got drunk exceedingly to day,
> So that I seem to stand upon the ceiling)
> I say – the future is a serious matter –
> And so – for Godsake – Hock and Soda-water.

The poet situates himself and the very act of writing in the comical immediacy of being drunk and feeling as if he is upside-down, standing on the ceiling.

The new emphasis on the 'I' in romantic culture is consistently articulated in terms of the polarity or gulf between a subject ('I feel') and an object (the clouds, a skylark, a nightingale). The (impossible) desire for a fusion between subject and object (the idea for example of being, in Matthew Arnold's words, 'in harmony with nature') is one of the most striking characteristics of the work of the English romantic poets. It is clear, for instance, in John Keats's 'Ode to a Nightingale', in which the speaker is eventually compelled to admit defeat in his attempt to fuse or dissolve into the nightingale's song: the word 'forlorn' is 'like a bell / To toll me back from thee to my sole self'. This emphasis on the 'sole self' broaches the notion of solipsism – that is to say the refusal or inability to believe in the reality of anything outside or beyond the self. The idea of such an isolation of the self has its representatives in classical philosophy and literature, but it is particularly pervasive in nineteenth- and twentieth-century European culture. It is evoked by the pathos, or bathos, of the opening lines of Arnold's poem, 'To Marguerite – Continued' (1849):

> Yes! in the sea of life enisled,
> With echoing straits between us thrown,
> Dotting the shoreless watery wild,
> We mortal millions live *alone*.

It is also implicit in the work of Freud, to the extent that psychoanalysis suggests that everything comes down to the power and significance of *projection*, of the qualities, moods or emotions which we *project on to* people and things. Wallace Stevens sums this up when he says:

> [F]ew people realize on that occasion, which comes to all of us, when we look at the blue sky for the first time, that is to say: not merely see it, but look at it and experience it … – few people realize that they are looking at the world of their own thoughts and the world of their own feelings. (Stevens 1951, 65–6)

But as we hope will by now be clear, solipsism is a myth, a delusion or mirage. Solipsism presupposes the idea of something like what Wittgenstein calls a private language (Wittgenstein 1984). There is no

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such thing as a private language: the phrase ‘private language’ is an oxymoron. Language is social or, at least, language comes from elsewhere, from others and from otherness in general. Even to say, as a self-avowed solipsist might, ‘I do not believe in the reality of anything apart from myself’, is to demonstrate a dependence on what is not ‘me’, not oneself. It is to demonstrate that one is *subject to* language. As the voice, or one of the voices, in *The Unnamable* puts it: ‘I’m in words, made of words, others’ words…’ (390).

Literature, like art more generally, has always been concerned with aspects of what can be called the unconscious or ‘not me’ or other: it is and has always been centrally concerned with dreams and fantasy, hallucinations and visions, madness, trance, and other kinds of impersonality or absences of self. But we could say that romantic and post-romantic literature has been increasingly sensitive to the role of otherness and increasingly aware of what might be described as our *responsibilities* in relation to otherness. Beckett’s writing is perhaps only the most philosophically refined recent example of post-Romantic literature which is concerned to explore, deflate and transform our understanding of the question, ‘Who do you think you are?’ In this respect his work might be seen to anticipate and encapsulate much of what is called poststructuralism. Poststructuralism demonstrates that the ‘I’ or human subject is necessarily decentred. It argues against the reductiveness (and even the possibility) of rationalism, in particular through its attention to what is other (though not simply ‘irrational’) as regards Western ‘rational’ thinking. And it persistently shows up the presumptuousness of the model of an autonomous, supposedly masterful human being, and thus points beyond ‘merely’ literary questions, exposing the limits and constraints of anthropocentrism in general. Some of this may be felt in a faltering, haunting few words from *The Unnamable*:

> [I]f only I knew if I’ve lived, if I live, if I’ll live, that would simplify everything, impossible to find out, that’s where you’re buggered, I haven’t stirred, that’s all I know, no, I know something else, it’s not I, I always forget that, I resume, you must resume… (417)

Further reading

For some very clear and stimulating introductory accounts of psychoanalysis and its implications for ‘me’, see Freud 1986. For a complex and challenging analysis of Freudian thinking on the idea of the subject, see Borch-Jacobsen, *The Freudian Subject* (1988). For a careful and thought-provoking discussion of the human subject from the perspective of the social sciences, see Paul Hirst and Penny Woolley, *Social Relations and Human Attributes* (1982). While also not directly concerned with the question of literature, Anthony Elliott’s *Concepts of the Self* (2014) offers a useful overview of various aspects of the topic, including psychoanalysis, and the writings of Foucault and Judith Butler. A highly influential account of romanticism stressing the importance of conflicts and disjunctions between subject and object, me and the world, etc., is M.H. Abram’s classic study, *The Mirror and the Lamp* (1953). Another influential discussion of these issues, this time from the perspective of the history of philosophy (particularly from Descartes to the Romantic period) is Charles Taylor’s wide-ranging and informative *Sources of the Self* (1989). For a challenging but compelling work that explores the nature of the self in the context of psychoanalysis, violence and the value of what they call ‘impersonal narcissism’, see Leo Bersani and Adam Phillips’s *Intimacies* (2008). Also on the subject of rethinking the concept of narcissism, see Pleshette DeArmitt’s subtle but powerful study, *The Right to Narcissism* (2013).

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