Saying by unsaying

The redemptive outworking of Terry Eagleton’s irony

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All biblical quotations are taken from the New Revised Standard Version, unless cited otherwise.

Irony is conventionally associated with subversion and self-contradiction, leading toward scepticism. This thesis makes a Christian theological argument that irony can otherwise generate creativity, opening possibilities for redemptive engagements within present experience. Where ironic negation *unsays* substantiated perspectives, this need not lead to a withdrawal from community and ethical commitments, a posture often seen as consonant with ironic approaches, from romanticism through postmodernity.

A view toward the redemptive outworking of irony is opened through an exploration of Terry Eagleton's criticism and literary style. Eagleton's writings give expression to human experience through an ironic structure that does not simply undercut meaning but anticipates social and political renewal by underscoring common material constraints. Resonating with Christian faith, Eagleton emphasises distinctive tensions animating human experience as cusped between limitation and possibility, fragility and resilience, alienation and solidarity.

While purposed toward renewed community and purpose, Eagleton's ironic approach remains poised in the negative; his irony lacks an affirmative movement by which redemptive possibilities might, parabolically, cast across present experience. Expanding on Eagleton's approach, this thesis argues that irony alternatively functions within Christian faith as a redemptive *saying by unsaying*. Recognised with humility and engaged amid contingent experience, such ironic loss is embodied as *faith working through love*, whereby loss is gratuitously overfilled by life as comic gift.

Contents

Introduction vii

1 | Cultivated loneliness: irony from romanticism to postmodernity 1

Irony as negative freedom: Kierkegaard's alienated ironic subject

The lonely ironist: cynicism curtailed by humour

Negation by redescription: Rorty's liberal ironist

Ironic differentials: 'negating the negation' in Hegelian style

2 | Doubled back: ironic structure and enfolded perspective 13

Reassessing irony as a subversive vision

Ironic doubling: more than subversion

Ironic perspective and the pretence of perspicuity

3 | Eagleton's ironic project: anticipating material renewal 21

Eagleton's critical method: enriching experience by emphasising difference

Eagleton's literary style: renewing imagination beyond negation

Faith as a material practice: metaphoric sign or metonymic interruption?

4 | Reading Eagleton parabolically: ironic self-estrangement as an impetus to love 34

Eagleton's ironic subjectivity

Pharisaical illusions: Critiquing imaginary and symbolic ethics

The tax collector encounters the *Real:* an opening for renewal

Self-estrangement as humility: narrating loss as gain

5 | Creative irony: the comic outworking of negation 48

Generating meaning through self-referential structures

Taylor's constitutive language as a development of Eagleton's irony

The comic horizon of Christian witness

6 | Negation by *kenotic* excess: the redemptive outworking of the cross 58

Redoubling alienation: the cross as estrangement

Kenosis as radical historicity and the loss of abstraction

Redemptive excess: characterising Christian gratuitousness as humility

Conclusion

Bibliography 70

Introduction

Human life is pervasively ironic: what we say is readily undone by our actions; aspirations are undercut when they overreach material constraints; the haphazard nature of experience overruns any simple or supposedly comprehensive take on meaning. As such, irony, a posture which observes the eventful *unsaying* of what has been said, is frequently cast in a subversive role, revealing our slip-ups, contradictions, short-comings and pretensions. While irony can play an important role in negating a concept, identity or ideal—in the sense of a switch of movement or inversion of perspective that generates a more complex, doubled view[1]—an ironic perspective readily aggregates to become an attitude of cynicism and apathy. More than a means for critiquing hubris and hypocrisy, irony can overwhelm the ironist, leading toward a comprehensive withdrawal from relational, political and ethical commitments.

However, the prevalence of irony within human experience need not render meaningless the symbolic forms—our languages, cultures, identities and ethics—that shape speaking, action and relationality. Irony within Christian faith retains its critical edge, revealing hypocrisy and self-centeredness, while opening a renewed perspective on human dignity. Primary christological foci such as *gain through loss*, as in the refrain, 'For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted' (Lk 18:14), sustain this ironic tonality.

Beyond the unredemptive trajectory that characterises typical ironic approaches from romanticism through postmodernity, by which any movement toward fulfilment or renewal is considered void, Terry Eagleton's writings on language, culture and ethics

[1] Negativity, initially following Kierkegaard's approach to negation as a movement which has 'a double function – it infinitises the finite and finitises the infinite.' Here, Kierkegaard criticises Karl Wilhelm Ferdinand Solger's frequent gloss of negation as 'annulment' or 'destruction.' Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony with Continual Reference to Socrates; Notes of Schelling's Berlin* Lectures, trans. Howard Hong and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 310. In other words, negation entails the doubled recognition that provisionality is a universal quality, and that certainty is necessarily delimited. Similarly, Hegel's sense of *determinate negation* suggests that another position arises through negation, more than simply cancelling a claim. 'This is just the scepticism which only ever sees pure nothingness in its result and abstracts from the fact that this nothingness is specifically the nothingness of that from which it results. For it is only when it is taken as the result of that from which it emerges, that it is, in fact, the true result; in that case it is itself a determinate nothingness, one which has a content.' In the negation, 'a new form has thereby immediately arisen.' G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), §79.

open a view toward ironic creativity. Eagleton is a literary scholar and cultural critic whose imaginatively expressive writings abound with ironic insights into human experience. While Eagleton's approach to criticism is shaped by a keen sense of ironic negation, which seeks to ground human aspiration within the material constraints of experience, it is by means of such negation that he anticipates political and social renewal. Eagleton's ironic subject is poised before the redemptive outworking of ironic negation, in which the honest appraisal of life's contradictions and compromises does not void human experience but recognises where dignity and renewal might be most fully realised.

An exploration of the creative intent of irony within Eagleton's writings is significant for a theological consideration of irony in several ways. First, Eagleton's ironic method underscores the importance for politics and ethics to begin with the shared material limitations of the human body, rather than cultural identities or ideological schemes – the sorts of representations that irony regularly scuttles. Eagleton's reading of Christian faith therefore hinges on human fragility and attention to the outcast of society, whose brokenness prefigures renewal. While Eagleton readily appropriates this view of Christian hope embodied in humility, loss and sacrifice, he neglects the surprising, comic perspectives on life that such inversions might also produce.

Second, Eagleton's wide-ranging engagement with concepts such as hope, tragedy, evil, materialism and fiction, demonstrates an appreciation of meaning gained through the complex entanglements of concept and practice. That is, meaning for Eagleton extends from the complex, interactive forms of life we share as creatures, animated by bodies that both constrain and open the world to us. As in various New Testament narratives and parables, Eagleton's ironic style sharpens self-awareness and provokes recognition of the exigencies and contradictions shaping human identity and purpose.

Despite the significant role of irony within Eagleton's writings, there is an obvious lack of studies dedicated to his criticism as ironic. While such a focus might branch in various directions—literary, political, philosophical, etc.—this thesis takes seriously Eagleton's irony from a theological perspective, just as he too seeks to listen seriously to Christian tradition, in its availability to better enrich perspectives on human flourishing.

In treating Eagleton's writings as a springboard to develop a view of redemptive irony, a significant criticism of his approach to human brokenness and the cross emerges: constrained by his broader critical project, Eagleton's presentation of Christian faith is limited by a view of the cross as an ironic negation of present social and political life. Expanding on Eagleton's approach, irony is shown to function within Christian faith as a creative *saying by unsaying*, showing how ironic negation can be critical of present forms of life even as it opens a redemptive horizon by which human dignity and renewing expressions of love are recognised and grow.

To develop Eagleton's approach to irony in a more affirmative direction, in recognising the inherent dignity of human life amid its contradictions and short-comings, my own engagement with irony is decidedly parabolic, in looking to redemptive possibilities as they are *cast across* (*para-bolē*) present experience, rather than beyond it. A parabolic approach complements the hermeneutic play opened by irony, which this thesis also demonstrates. Both parables and irony generate meaning eventfully, within present experience, in between text and subject, concept and experience, said and unsaid. Similarly, the arguments presented throughout this thesis are shaped by a series of heuristic forays into New Testament narratives, showing how irony generates a surplus of new, interpretive openings beyond assumed perspectives.

When a preponderance for ironic negation as a pejorative posture characterises modernity, redemption seems a chimera: ironic negation is neither transformative of present antagonisms nor does provide impetus toward the redemptive outworking of human contradictions, shortcomings and pretensions. Here, Christian witness offers a refreshing, even comic, perspective on irony, short-circuiting the trajectory of negation toward scepticism, even as it perceives with clarity the contingencies, foibles and hubris of human experience.

Thesis structure

Chapters One and Two explore philosophical and literary approaches that understand ironic negation as the voiding of meaning and purpose—specifically, those observed by Søren Kierkegaard and the views of Richard Rorty—arguing that there is an inherent

creativity within ironic negation that is readily overlooked. This is first suggested by reference to Hegel (Chapter One) and the *doubled* structure of irony (Chapter Two), which short-circuits negation, provoking interpretation and engagement.

Chapters Three and Four look to Eagleton's irony as it renews social and ethical engagements, in contrast to the forms of negation described in previous chapters. Eagleton discerns in Christian faith an ironic structure in which negation is a sign of possibility, beginning with the bodies of those rejected by the current political setup (Chapter Three). His view of subjectivity, registered in the slippage between self and symbol, further underscores the importance of irony as an impetus toward ethical decisions and change (Chapter Four).

Chapters Five and Six develop from the apparent limitations of Eagleton's approach to irony within Christian faith, arguing that the self-negating ironic word can function as a redemptive *saying by unsaying.* Looking to the expansive qualities of narrative and language, a comic-ironic interpretation of Christian faith is suggested (Chapter Five). This structure is necessary to a view of the cross as redemptive, in which *kenotic* (self-emptying) loss generates relationality and presence, rather than alienation and distance (Chapter Six).

1

Cultivated loneliness: Irony from romanticism to postmodernity

From romanticism to postmodernity, irony has been characterised by a negativity that aggregates from a stance of critical differentiation to a perspective of scepticism in any substantiated meaning. This trajectory toward comprehensive, philosophical negativity—in the sense of cancelling any position or commitment maintained as truth—is introduced through the writings of Søren Kierkegaard and Richard Rorty, who understand the ironic subject to be poetically free from the perspectives of others, detached from tradition, society and ethical commitments. Consequently, both writers acknowledge that irony becomes all-consuming unless it is offset in some way. Having outlined this characterisation of irony, I subsequently show how irony can be deployed creatively, with potential for expansive or novel insights, rather than simply undercutting human expression and endeavour. This is initially suggested by Hegel's *negation of negation*, a structure which gives impetus to the productive outworking of difference rather than its mutual dissolution.

Irony as negative freedom: Kierkegaard's alienated ironic subject

Kierkegaard's understanding of irony provides an example of ironic negation that aggregates from rhetorical dissimulation to a position of comprehensive scepticism, the ironist supposedly freed from substantiated perspectives. While irony is integral to Kierkegaard's understanding of subjective awareness, by focusing on ironic negation as self-invalidating contradiction, Kierkegaard's ironist is ultimately alienated from society and tradition, a position which leaves the Christian without an affirmative witness within community or ethical practice.

A view of irony as 'infinite absolute negativity,' a definition originating with Hegel, is explored by Kierkegaard in *The Concept of Irony* (1841).[1] 'Infinite absolute negativity'

[1] G. W. F. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art* (vol. 1), trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 68.

captures what Hegel observed in the poetry and philosophy of romantics like Friedrich Schlegel, a notion that 'the writer, while still creative and emotional, should remain aloof and self-critical.'[2] In this sense, negativity is understood as a position of absolute subjective differentiation, the writer freed from the constraints of tradition and the 'vanity of everything factual, moral and of intrinsic worth.'[3] For Hegel's, such a posture leaves the subject hollowed out, lost to an 'unsatisfied abstract inwardness.'[4]

Kierkegaard also approaches irony by way of the poetic subject, who is freed to create because everything established is cast into doubt.[5] Yet while he affirms irony as the 'absolute beginning of personal life'—of the authentic individual over against the illusory representations of tradition—Kierkegaard does not seek to ameliorate the propensity for irony to slide toward comprehensive scepticism.[6] Rather, he appraises irony as a force which 'only negates' and which proliferates 'helter skelter,' a divine madness that rages like an invading horde and 'does not leave one stone upon another.'[7] Where irony might otherwise be understood as the strategic dissimulation of Socratic dialogue—in putting forward a point of differentiation to invigorate conversation—for Kierkegaard, ironic negation becomes a self-perpetuating spiral of antitheses, the goal of which is *aporia*.[8]

If this romantic account of irony affirms the creative subject—as 'subjectivity raised to the second power, a subjectivity's subjectivity, which corresponds to reflection's reflection'[9]—this is an understanding that is not gained relationally, within dynamics of difference and interaction, but self-reflexively. Irony is here a means of pejorative dissociation, the ironist wilfully alienated from community and tradition. Exacerbating this trajectory, Kierkegaard concludes that by composing themselves poetically, the ironist is not composed by God, as if to say, the ironist is made in their own image rather than shaped dialogically in relation with another. On this trajectory, 'The whole of

[2] Ibid., footnote, 69. Cf. Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony*, 261.
[3] Hegel, *Aesthetics*, 66.
[4] Hegel, *Aesthetics*, 68.
[5] Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony*, 242.
[6] Ibid., 242.
[7] Ibid., 269, 261.
[8] Jon Stewart, *Søren Kierkegaard: Subjectivity, Irony and the Crisis of Modernity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 85.
[9] Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony*, 242.

existence has become alien to the ironic subject and the ironic subject in turn alien to existence.'[10]

Kierkegaard's view of irony therefore lacks any redemptive movement of renewal or growth, for 'out of nothing comes nothing ... The ironist continually preserves his poetic freedom, and when he notices that he is becoming nothing, he includes that in his poeticising.'[11] Perceiving only the nullity of accepted ideas, beliefs and traditions, the ironist is suspended in a paradox of their own making: if such irony is the 'absolute beginning' of the authentic subject, it only serves to redouble alienation from God and neighbour.[12]

The lonely ironist: cynicism curtailed by humour

That irony is approached as a means of negation is not in itself problematic: Kierkegaard's incisive criticism of the Danish church shows a valuable role for irony in revealing hypocrisy and hubris, and his understanding of the ironic subject leads to some prescient observations on the nature of Christian faith. Rather, it is the view of irony as *only* subversive that leads toward the cynicism and withdrawal from God and neighbour described above. Nevertheless, Kierkegaard does not moderate this trajectory redoubles it, emphasising irony as comprehensive negativity. His view prefaces a distinctly modern malaise: if irony continually subverts human expression and endeavour, apathy seems just as likely an outcome as faith.

As a philosopher and theologian, Kierkegaard understood his goal to be like Socrates', 'keeping speculation afloat' through 'infinite polemic, a power to clear away any hinderance that may halt its movement.'[13] To this end, irony plays a valuable role in many of his writings. This is most evident in his incisive and colourful criticism of 'Christendom'—of hypocrisy and mediocrity within the Danish church. The following extract from the journal *The Instant*, typifies the ironic force of his criticism:

> In the magnificent cathedral the Honourable and Right Reverend Geheime-General-Ober-Hof-Prädikant, the elect favorite of the fashionable world,

[10] Ibid., 259.
[11] Ibid., 281.
[12] Ibid., 242.
[13] Ibid., 217.

> appears before an elect company and preaches *with emotion* upon the text he himself elected: "God hath elected the base things of the world, and the things that are despised" – and nobody laughs.'[14]

Kierkegaard's writings are laced with irony, in the stinging repudiation of assumptions that are shown to be false by reference to inherent contradictions. Revealing the slippage of meaning between word and substance, Kierkegaard's irony 'destroys the given actuality by the given actuality itself,' indicating where a 'phenomenon is not the essence but the opposite of the essence.'[15] Kierkegaard's irony is a perception of structures that negate themselves, whereby ideas or identities *unsay* themselves by reference to the very word they speak (see Chapter Two for an exploration of ironic structure).

Yet for Kierkegaard, irony as an awareness of misrelation and discord is more than a tool of criticism but gives impetus to prescient observations on the nature of Christian faith. Hinged on the ambiguity of the subject, his theological assertions can take on a paradoxical quality. For example, Kierkegaard announces, 'I do not call myself a Christian, do not say myself that I am a Christian.'[16] This is not merely to speak in opposites. Rather, to understand his 'peculiar task,' Kierkegaard's reader is asked to grapple with this seeming madness, especially for 'one whom Christianity concerns to the degree that it concerns me.'[17] Finding 'nothing analogous' between the substance of faith and the past eighteen-hundred years of 'Christendom,' Kierkegaard thinks that calling oneself a Christian is fraud, only to add to the perverse sophistry through which Christendom beguiles the public.[18] Here, the repudiation of the declaration—'I am a Christian'—indicates a more complex understanding of identity, representation and confession.

Deploying his irony hyperbolically, indeed acerbically, it is unsurprising that Kierkegaard suggests the need to curtail the subversive force of irony. Within Christian faith, he understands this to be achieved by a dialectic tension between irony and

[14] Søren Kierkegaard, *Attack upon 'Christendom,' 1845–1855*, trans. Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), 181. Cf. 1 Cor. 1:28.
[15] Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony*, 263, 246. Kierkegaard gives the example 'that Judaism destroyed itself by itself,' and that the law reveals an inability to fulfil the law. Cf. Ex. 20:6, Deut. 5:10.
[16] Kierkegaard, *Attack Upon Christendom*, 282
[17] Ibid., 282.
[18] Ibid., 182.

humour, a continual oscillating movement 'like a see-saw.'[19] Kierkegaard therefore approaches irony as a means of intensifying contradiction, rather than looking to any inherently redemptive aspect within ironic negation: the greater the contradiction between irony and humour, the greater any redemptive movement that rises above irony.[20]

Because Kierkegaard's irony is devoid of any positive content, his view prefaces a distinctly modern malaise: if irony continually subverts human expression and endeavour, apathy seems just as likely an outcome as faith. Any dialectic tension that irony holds with humour is lost if irony consumes all things. Stanley Hopper aptly describes modernity as an ironic era that is neither tragic nor comic; rather, in this 'pathos of the middle,' the drama of Christian faith dies.[21] Exemplified by Samuel Beckett's play *Waiting for Godot*, 'the action consists in the fact that there is no action; the plot is that there is no plot ... what happens is that nothing happens.'[22] The artist of modernity grapples with human 'discrepancies, pretensions, and contradictions, without the depth of tragedy or the release of comedy: the result is irony turning more and more deeply in upon itself.'[23]

This unredemptive aspect of irony identified by Hopper is also explored by Terry Eagleton, for whom the 'post-tragic world of postmodernism' has lost the potential for any redemptive movement through negation or death, in contrast to the meaningful loss that Christian sacrifice entails (see Chapter Six).[24] If, as Eagleton argues, modernity undermines the possibility of redemption, for postmodernism, 'There is nothing to be saved.'[25] Also interpreting the world of Beckett, Eagleton discerns 'a steady process of disintegration' in which even death 'would prove too brutally definitive an event in such

[19] Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony*, 427.
[20] Kierkegaard, Ibid., 327, 426.
[21] Hopper writes of religion with a sociologist's vocabulary: the 'religio-ontological (or mythological) ground,' 'the Christ symbol,' etc. For Hopper, the 'mythic power' of religious symbols and forms underpins artistic and literary creation. Stanley Hopper, 'Irony: The Pathos of the Middle,' *Cross Currents* 12.1 (1962), 37.
[22] Ibid., 35.
[23] Ibid., 37.
[24] Terry Eagleton, *After Theory* (London: Penguin, 2004), 58.
[25] Ibid., 58.

an aporetic universe, in which the act of hanging oneself from a tree demands more resoluteness than one can muster.'[26]

These contemporary assessments of modernity seem haunted by the same emptiness that beset Kierkegaard's romantic ironist, whose sense of negative freedom proliferates indefinitely: 'Irony overwhelmed him; he became dizzy and everything lost its reality.'[27] In considering humour its necessary antithesis, Kierkegaard's irony remains trapped in the negative. Consequently, his reading of Christian faith suggests a perpetual oscillation between contradictory polarities, just as 'life is a constant pendulum movement between' dialectically opposed positions such as irony and humour.[28] How this might generate passionate discipleship rather than indifferent vacillation or even schizophrenic confusion remains unclear.

If there is redemptive humour to be discerned in the Right Reverend's oration cited above, this is only recognised by the solitary ironist who, with subtle conceit, divulges an 'elated smile' at the self-contradictory word.[29] If Kierkegaard's ironist is dissociated from meaningful interactions within community and tradition, any subsequent experience of humour is bound to be haunted by loneliness.

Negation by redescription: Rorty's liberal ironist

Richard Rorty's *liberal ironist* is introduced here as a more recent portrait of the ironic subject who is poetically free from substantiated languages and understandings. Viewing ironic destabilisation as the epitome of creative possibility, Rorty imagines freedom as continual displacement of the beliefs and structures of society, a view which redoubles the ironist's alienation from any political or ethical commitment. This portrait is problematic for Christian understandings of redemption as a movement of change, rather than displacement.

Rorty's *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (1989) explores a comprehensively negative view of irony, building from his view of language as a passing coincidence of

[26] Terry Eagleton, *Radical Sacrifice* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2018), 75.
[27] Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony*, 264.
[28] Ibid., 427.
[29] Ibid., 426.

understanding between people and cultures.[30] For Rorty, language is the product of 'haphazard matings,' 'a result of thousands of small mutations finding niches (and millions of others finding no niches), as are the orchids and the anthropoids.'[31] For Rorty, irony produces freedom through the continual subversion of language and thought by revealing the arbitrariness of any belief or commitment.

Within the flotsam of a random, symbolic universe, Rorty understands irony as a capacity for 'redescription,' a poetic change in the vocabulary that describes the world and shapes our engagement with it. An ironic posture allows the subject to disengage from the 'final vocabularies' and assumptions that constitute cultures and societies by recognising these as changeable and provisional. For Rorty, a 'final vocabulary' is a

> set of words which [someone] employ[s] to justify their actions, their beliefs, and their lives. These are the words in which we formulate praise of our friends and contempt for our enemies, our long-term projects, our deepest self-doubts and our highest hopes. They are the words in which we tell, sometimes prospectively and sometimes retrospectively, the story of our lives.[32]

For Rorty, there are no enduring points of connection between people and cultures, other than the recognition of passing similarities and dissimilarities that 'strike us as salient.'[33] He claims that the 'foundations of the "we-consciousness" which lies behind our social institutions' are 'merely poetic': concepts like *humanity*, *democracy* or *love*, which allow some form of mutual recognition or responsibility, are tenuous at best.[34] On this view, irony dissolves the bonds of community. Rorty therefore proposes the character of the liberal ironist who, while committed to ironic scepticism in private yet, maintains a public acceptance of liberal inclusivity for the wellbeing of others.[35]

In Rorty's description of irony, we again find a withdrawal from political and ethical commitments. Rather than working through the inherent challenges or differences

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[30] Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 10.
[31] Ibid., 16. So too, ideas like Paul's *agape* – perhaps 'the results of cosmic rays scrambling the fine structure of some crucial neurons in their respective brains. Or, more plausibly, they were the result of some odd episodes in infancy.' Ibid., 17.
[32] Ibid., 73.
[33] Ibid., 192.
[34] An imaginary focal point, after Kant's *focus imaginarius* – a public ideology which is wholly invented and provisional. Ibid., 67–8.
[35] Ibid., 197.

within society, Rorty's liberal ironist navigates conflicts by *redescribing* them: where differing preferences are shown to be contradictory, the liberal ironist attempts 'to invent a new vocabulary to replace both.'[36] For example, this character would not take a *principled* stance on the provocative cartoons of Charlie Hebdo—with reference to secularism, free speech, the will of God or shariah law—but instead emphasises the contingent nature of conflicting perspectives.

Outwardly, Rorty's ironist appears to ameliorate 'cruelty,' which supposedly comes about when individuals and societies hold to strongly to their beliefs, at the expense of others.[37] Not only is Rorty's *redescription* is potentially a justification for endless prevarication over decisions. In continually evading commitment to a position, he or she seems only to miss out on the possibility of a deeper understanding or redemptive movement through the development of identities or ideas – perhaps gaining the view that in bearing transgression or *turning the other cheek*, conflict can be short-circuited, and a new relational paradigm opened (see Chapter Six).

On Rorty's approach, change within society or within the perspectives of an individual, does not occur through transposition, integration, expansion or reinterpretation – movements which incorporate difference within a more complex conceptualisation or practice. This view resembles critical theory as the continual pursuit of self-cancelation, whereby subjective freedom from inherited languages or structures constitutes an embrace of the so-called *other.*

Progress rather than development is the catchcry of Rorty's liberal ironist: 'to invent a new vocabulary to replace both' conflicting positions, allowing a new, poetic identities to be imagined that are entirely dissociated from the old.[38] Indeed, 'Nothing can serve as a criticism of a final vocabulary save another such vocabulary; there is no answer to a redescription save a re-re-redescription.'[39] Because the ironist is at the vanguard of change—as one with 'as much imaginative acquaintance with alternative final vocabularies as possible'—progress becomes the remit of a thoroughly cultured, well-

[36] Ibid., 12.
[37] Ibid., 67.
[38] Ibid., 12.
[39] Ibid., 80.

travelled, educated elite, who readily dismiss social conventions and traditions as parochial and outdated.[40] Withdrawing from any affirmative stance, Rorty's liberal ironist fosters tolerance without substance, nothing more than a borrowed pastiche of identities; culture and society become a perpetual reconfiguration of symbol, effecting nothing.

In a similar vein, Christy Wampole considers the irony of the hipster, which can be taken as a present-day characterisation of Rorty's liberal ironist. The hipster's carefully curated shabbiness and fondness for outdated technologies and hobbies symbolises detachment from the dominant culture. For Wampole, this 'ironic frame functions as a shield against criticism. The same goes for ironic living. Irony is the most self-defensive mode, as it allows a person to dodge responsibility for his or her choices, aesthetic and otherwise. To live ironically is to hide in public.'[41] As such, irony is nothing more than a changeable aesthetic façade, or as Rorty puts it, a 'talent for speaking differently, rather than arguing well.'[42]

Rorty's ironist has no impetus to decide anything, preferring instead to observe the world poetically, through a decidedly private, Proust-like diarising of happenstance. If such ironic dislocation is the epitome of creative possibility, this is neither transformative of present antagonisms nor does it allow the realisation of any present hope. Imagining freedom as the continual displacement of the beliefs and structures of society, the future of the liberal ironist is untethered from any present claim to enduring value or significance, an 'endless, proliferating realisation of Freedom' or 'utopia upon utopia.'[43] Coming chapters will touch on Eagleton's critique of this propensity for difference at the expense of continuity or repetition, a significant critique he makes of postmodernity: 'If history can be dissolved into pure difference, then the result is a massive haemorrhage of meaning.'[44] On such a trajectory, redemption is an illusion.

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[40] Ibid., xvi.

[41] Christy Wampole, 'How to Live without Irony,' *New York Times*, Nov. 17, 2012, https://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/11/17/how-to-live-without-irony/?_r=0 (accessed Oct. 5, 2020).

[42] Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, 7.

[43] Ibid., xvi.

[44] Terry Eagleton, 'Estrangement and Irony,' *Salmagundi* 73 (1987), 28.

Ironic differentials: 'negating the negation' in Hegelian style

Might a redemptive tonality be discovered in an alternative approach to the negation that irony effects? While Kierkegaard and Rorty define irony through the unsaying of substantiated traditions or vocabularies, this section approaches ironic negation as a structure of self-differentiation. This approach, which allows for development and change within inherently complex concepts and identities, will later be shown to resemble Eagleton's understanding of irony. Akin to Hegel's *negation of negation,* irony generates movement within a concept through the productive outworking of difference rather than its mutual dissolution.

On Kierkegaard's definition, irony 'destroys the given actuality by the given actuality itself.' Structurally, if irony registers the slippage of meaning within a concept, this also applies to the negative position itself, which cannot be considered comprehensive. Hegel's notion of sublation helps to illustrate this point: new forms arise through negation—achieved through a variety of relations, including translation, transposition, expansion or integration[45]—and the negative position is itself negated.[46] For Hegel, sublation carries a doubled meaning as it both negates *and* preserves the given definition or determination.[47] Hegel's dialectic, described as an 'overcoming which preserves what it overcomes,' here shows the trajectory of irony toward an absolute, scepticism, described above, to short-circuit itself.[48]

John Burbidge's understanding of Hegel's dialectic emphasises a 'continuing process in which beginnings pass over into something else, only to have both reconnected by a structure of mutual implication and reciprocity.'[49] Burbidge suggests that the dialectic movement is one in which the recognition of contingency is, at the same time, an ongoing process of formation and development – not only a movement 'from simplicity to difference' but 'from contradiction to reciprocal relationship.'[50] The recognition of

[45] John Burbidge, *Hegel's Systematic Contingency* (Hampshire: Palgrave McMillan, 2009), 102.
[46] Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, §113.
[47] Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, §79.
[48] Lloyd Spencer and Andrzej Krauze, *Hegel for Beginners* (London: Icon Books, 1996), 20. Cf. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, §79, cited above.
[49] Burbidge, *Hegel's Systematic Contingency*, 101.
[50] Burbidge, *Hegel's Systematic Contingency*, 103.

contingency is therefore incorporated into new understandings which continually update, to form new connections and configurations.

Eagleton understands the 'dialectical habit of mind' as one that 'tries to think both sides of contradiction simultaneously,' a capacity he believes to offer an important check on the postmodern preference for subversion, difference and plurality.[51] For Eagleton, irony is a critical function that revels the inherent differentials of a concept (explored in Chapter Three). Likewise, Slavoj Žižek's philosophy takes on a decidedly ironic tone, in which ideas, 'once they are allowed to realise themselves, negate themselves or, if you want, self-destruct.'[52] This is not to invalidate the potential for meaning but to show, through internal differentiation, ideological totalities to be fraught. Žižek explains,

> Totality is not an ideal, organic whole but a critical notion. To locate a phenomenon in its totality does not mean to see the hidden harmony of the whole, but to include into a system all its distortions, antagonisms, inconsistencies, to see these distortions as integral parts of the system.[53]

A similar approach can be discerned in Roger Scruton's understanding of irony, albeit from a conservative cultural perspective. Rather than treating irony as a sceptical attitude, Scruton begins with irony as a self-reflexive process, to *see oneself from the outside*, a view he understands to be amplified by 'Christ's judgements and parables, which look on the spectacle of human folly and wryly show us how to live with it.'[54]

For Scruton, various institutions of Western society can be characterised by an ironic dynamic of self-critical development. For example, English common law as a 'bottom-up system' is not something imposed by 'sovereign power' but developed cumulatively through the negotiation of disputes at a local level.[55] Gained over many centuries, common law entails careful judicial discernment though real tensions and disputes;

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[51] Terry Eagleton, *The Illusions of Postmodernism* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1996), 25.
[52] Slavoj Žižek, 'Let us be Realists and Demand the Impossible: Communism.' Sydney Festival of Dangerous Ideas, Oct. 2, 2011. See also Slavoj Žižek, *Less than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (London and Brooklyn, NY: Verso, 2012), 378.
[53] Žižek, 'Let us be Realists.'
[54] Roger Scruton, *Confessions of a Heretic* (Devon, Exeter: Notting Hill Editions, 2016), 183–4. Kierkegaard makes a similar point: it is 'only through the contemplation of sin in the world that the ironic interpretation of nature really emerges.' Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony*, footnote, 255.
[55] Scruton, *Confessions of a Heretic*, 175.

development occurs as an original antagonism is assimilated into its resolution—both negated and preserved—establishing legal precedent.

By approaching ironic self-negation as a movement that also entails the *negation of negation*, irony can be characterised as the productive outworking of difference rather than its mutual dissolution: 'two opposed moments are "reconciled" when the gap that separates them is posited as inherent to one of the terms.'[56] In this sense, Hegel understood Socrates' irony as a way to enliven understanding through dialogue, 'more a manner of conversation, sociable pleasantry, and not that pure negation, not the negative attitude.'[57] On this trajectory, the possibility of *redemptive irony* might be suggested, in drawing forward that which is surpassed, as if to say, 'You have heard it said of old, but I say to you …' (cf. Mt 5:17–48). Rather than voiding substantiated meanings and undercutting human expression and endeavour, such an approach is creative, in opening toward the continual development and outworking of meaning, within the intractable tensions and differences that constitute community and experience.

[56] Slavoj Žižek and Boris Gunjević, *God in Pain: Inversions of Apocalypse*, (New York, Seven Stories Press, 2012), 179–80.
[57] Hegel, in Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony*, 267.

2

Doubled back: Ironic structure and enfolded perspective

Extending from the prevailing philosophical approach outlined in Chapter One, this chapter explores recent studies of irony within biblical literature that emphasise its subversive function. On this view, irony promotes a vision of alterity beyond instantiated assumptions and the dominant social structures that shape interpretation. An alternative approach is introduced by reference to New Testament narratives—specifically, Matthew's account of the Centurion's faith (8:5–13) and Luke's 'Parable of the Unjust Judge' (18:1–8)—in which irony entails a more nuanced engagement with human experience through the text, doubling back on the interpreting subject rather than simply undercutting perspective. This *doubled* structure provokes meaning through a dynamic interplay of said and unsaid, text and hearing, distance and proximity.

Reassessing irony as a subversive vision

Recent studies of irony within biblical literature emphasise the disruption of assumed meanings and the conventional structures that shape interpretation, with focus given to issues of power, authority, violence and empire.[1] Here, irony opens a perspective of alterity, presupposing a truer *said* beyond the context in which the ironic text is heard. By privileging ironic subversion, this approach can flatten the inherent complexity of concepts such as authority, as in Matthew's account of the Centurion's faith (Mt 8:5–13).

Seeking to destabilise the naïve acceptance of dominant or ideological views, biblical scholar Carolyn Sharp emphasises the subversive potential of irony:

[1] Caroloyn Sharp, *Irony and Meaning in the Hebrew Bible* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2009); Dorothy Weaver, *The Irony of Power: The Politics of God within Matthew's Narrative* (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2017).

> Irony is a performance of misdirection that generates aporetic interactions between an unreliable 'said' and a truer 'unsaid', so as to persuade us of something that is subtler, more complex, and more profound than the apparent meaning. Irony disrupts cultural assumptions about the narrative coherence that seems to ground tropological and epistemological transitions, inviting us into an experience of alterity that moves us toward new insight by problematizing false understanding … In addition to enacting the implicit construction of community [comprising those who *hear*], irony also deconstructs community through its performance of negation and through its fomenting of division within the implied audience … [between] those who understand it and those who do not.[2]

In Sharp's view, irony within scripture entails resistance, as the text is read against dominant understandings and the conventional structures of culture and society that shape interpretation. To detect irony is to recognise the radical alterity of scripture, which *unsays* the 'overconfident subject,' 'nationalistic rhetoric,' 'misunderstandings of tradition,' 'bibliolatry' and 'literalism.'[3] Within this purview, irony is thoroughly subversive, 'a powerful weapon against idolatries of all kinds, against smugness, ignorance and the self-absorption of individuals and communities.'[4]

Sharp's view is typical of approaches that extend from postcolonial methodologies, which seek to unsettle the implicit prejudices, languages and structures brought to bear on any text. Walter Brueggemann's appraisal, that 'truth readily subverts power in the exposé of irony,' usefully sums up this approach, where 'power' becomes shorthand for instantiated perspectives.[5] Something of this approach might also be discerned in earlier biblical literary studies. Although he predates postcolonial theory, Edwin Good discerns in ironic destabilisation a 'vision of the truth' beyond present possibilities, and which is directed toward the 'amendment of the incongruous.'[6] For Good, such irony is *prophetic*, looking toward 'meaning behind the mask' of appearances. On this approach, irony cancels assumed meanings and encourages an interpretive leap beyond situation, rather than an engagement with meaning through those situations.

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[2] Sharp, *Irony and Meaning*, 12–13.
[3] Ibid., 241–42.
[4] Ibid., 9–10.
[5] Walter Brueggemann, *Truth Speaks to Power: The Countercultural Nature of Scripture* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2015), 8.
[6] Edwin M. Good, *Irony in the Old Testament* (Sheffield: The Almond Press, 1981), 25, 27.

For Dorothy Weaver, irony within scripture indicates that things are not as they seem. Weaver considers Matthew's frequent contrasting of power and vulnerability, as in the brute Herod with the innocent infants: ironically, it is the all-powerful Herod who is truly afraid of a potential rival. Throughout her study, Weaver's basic argument is that 'the violence of the powerful serves only to reveal the limits of their power and to make a mockery of their trust in the use of violent force.'[7]

While Weaver's approach gives a compelling account of the attitude of non-violence embedded in Matthew's text, her theological interpretation is limited by her thoroughly subversive view of irony. She promotes a *two-tiered* model for Christian interaction with society and politics, arguing that Matthew encourages Christians to make an interpretive leap beyond a 'lower-level portrait' of power—typified by political manipulation and violence—to an 'upper-level portrait' of power as God's sovereignty and eventual 'cosmic and salvific reign.'[8] By focussing singularly on the self-invalidating flaws of power, Weaver precludes a more complex or nuanced understanding of issues such as power *in* vulnerability. Nor is the necessity of power—even if it is compromised—addressed, as in the use of force to protect the vulnerable from murder, rape and extortion.[9]

That irony can provide a more nuanced critique of power is shown in Matthew's account of the Centurion's faith (8:5–13). Rather than effacing the concept of Roman military authority—a form of power—this scene hinges on the Centurion's appeal to that authority:

> Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; but only speak the word, and my servant will be healed. For I also am a man under authority, with soldiers under me; and I say to one, 'Go,' and he goes, and to another, 'Come,' and he comes, and to my slave, 'Do this,' and the slave does it' (Mt 8:8–9).

Ironically, the Centurion's first-hand experience of the Roman imperial system that shapes his understanding and interaction with Jesus as Lord. This sting of this irony is

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[7] Weaver, *The Irony of Power*, 245.
[8] Ibid., 283.
[9] For a compelling study of the necessity of law and power to overcome poverty, from a Christian perspective, see Gary Haugen and Victor Boutros, *The Locust Effect: Why the End of Poverty Requires the End of Violence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

only exacerbated by Israel's experience of Roman imperialism. As Weaver notes, the Roman occupation was one of 'compulsory labor, unrequited humiliations, cruel torture and bloody executions … As military leaders who issue commands to soldiers and civilians alike … centurions are clearly men whose word is to be feared.'[10]

Jesus' response to the Centurion, 'Truly I tell you, in no one in Israel have I found such faith,' challenges the assumed righteousness of those who might presume privileged access to a *truer unsaid*, to borrow Sharp's term, or a purer vision of God's character beyond any present political setup. The scene therefore redefines rather than displaces understandings of present authority and power. The Centurion encounters Jesus' authority through a critical perspective on his own experiences, which are opened to development and redefinition. This is a redemptive scene precisely because it casts renewed possibility across present experience—*parabolically*—rather than beyond it.

Unsaying intimations of God's power *over and against* Roman imperial power, irony engages the interpreting subject with meaning through the text and the interplay of perspectives it generates. Such ironic narrative is eventful, as the listener grapples with the power of God as one who condescends to come under the roof of those, like the Centurion, who are unworthy.

Ironic doubling: more than subversion

The above exploration indicates the following more general possibility: rather than simply subverting concepts such as authority, irony is eventful, provoking a dynamic engagement with such concepts through a play of representation, intention and assumption. This section extends this observation by exploring the *doubled* structure of irony, in which an assumed trajectory of meaning switches back on itself. This structure is hinged on the ironic subject who perceives the doubled or enfolded trajectories of meaning and situation, rather than their mutual displacement.

A common definition of irony is meaning the opposite of what is said, as in naming a hairless cat 'Fluffy.' This is often specified as 'rhetorical irony.' The simplicity of this definition can be misleading, as if the ironic word only indicates a lack – in this case,

[10] Weaver, *The Irony of Power*, 48.

the apparently missing fluff.[11] Yet the evident slippage of meaning between signifier and signified is more than a clever play on words: by drawing attention to the representations, assumptions and perspectives involved in understanding, irony shows interpretation to be open-ended: if 'Fluffy' is derisive regarding the cat, it might also be heard as a name of endearment and distinction.

By another common definition, sometimes referred to as 'situational irony,' irony marks the perception of an unintended outcome or event. More specifically, a naïve expectation is disrupted by actuality. For example, a psychic reading is cancelled due to unforeseen circumstances. Applied to a situation, irony marks an actuality observed by some and not by others. Good identifies this trait as typical Greek drama, in which the audience perceives a tragedy set to befall the protagonist, who has yet to recognise their fate.[12]

Irony, which is readily characterised by its doubled structure—in which a meaning or trajectory switches back on itself—also *doubles back* on the interpreting subject. That is, irony involves the interpreting subject in the creation of meaning. By foregrounding a gap between said and unsaid, intention and actuality, irony provokes interpretation. This can sharpen self-awareness as the subject registers their own role within meaning-making, hinged between alternate trajectories of meaning. As such, ironic dissimulation is maieutic, understood as a midwife assisting the birth of meaning and purposed towards self-critical awareness in coming to understand.

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[11] Closely aligned to this definition, *apophasis* draws attention to a view by claiming its opposite, as in Donald Trump's tweet: 'Why would Kim Jong-un insult me by calling me "old" when I would NEVER call him "short and fat"?'

[12] Good, *Irony in the Old Testament*, 19, 37.

The interleaved doublings of ironic sign, signification and subject are most evident when irony plays on simple, direct commands, as in a 'STOP' sign with the words 'DEFACING STOP SIGNS' stencilled underneath.[13] Simple commands like 'stop' depend on an assumed immediacy or directedness – a lack of interpretive flexibility. Yet heard ironically, the directedness of the command is refracted back on itself: meaning is gained through the self-referential play that has been effected.

On one level, the doubling back of the command 'stop' might be viewed as subversive, effacing the simple directive to stop driving. Yet the interpretive play opened by this negation might turn still further, in the recognition that irony itself is derivative of the authority it seeks to subvert. That is, the defaced stop sign confirms that conventional, legal meaning is not readily abrogated by rhetorical play: despite face-value appearances, anyone with common sense knows that to run this sign is still to risk a fine and potentially endanger others. As Žižek has argued about jokes, in effacing authority, irony may confirm it – itself an ironic proposition.[14] If irony doubles back on authority, it can also redouble that authority.

To approach irony through this doubled structure expands on approaches to irony as subversive: the destabilisation of assumed meaning through inversion, contradiction or an altered trajectory opens an interpretive play, the subject themselves hinged between multiple and complex doublings. This play is open-ended, susceptible to further ironic interpretations that might proliferate to reveal significant critical implications. With regards to the defaced stop sign, we might ask: How does a simple command interface with conventional meaning? That is, what are we to stop? Driving forwards or defacing public property? Is creativity anything more than disruption of seamless repetition or reading? What is the interplay between art and function?

[13] 'Stop Defacing Signs,' *Wikimedia Commons* (CC BY-SA 3.0).

[14] 'Many, many leftist idiots still think that irony, jokes are subversive. No! They can also serve power absolutely. They are the ultimate resource of power.' Slavoj Žižek, Chapo Trap House podcast, Oct. 17, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1-2129Q4Gu4&list=PLTnQf_UWQ-fLufSQ9gZDIB3vXMxaIwkrL&index=8 (accessed 5 Oct., 2020).

Recognition of the slippage of meaning via ironic negation opens a complex interplay of representation, intention and assumption, allowing multiple layers of interpretation to be held together. This can be both subversive and affirmative. While irony can function as a critical invalidation of assumed meanings or ideologically charged agendas, it is potentially more creative than such definitions allow, in generating new perspectives and possibilities. As coming chapters will show, this is crucial to Christian faith which grapples with trajectories of loss that double back as gain, and death as life.

Ironic perspective and the pretence of perspicuity

Luke's Parable of the Unjust Judge (18:1–8) provides a cameo of the ironic structure outlined above, through ironic doublings that encourage a more nuanced engagement with concepts like justice and righteousness. This parabolic foray prefaces the subsequent exploration of Eagleton's iroinc method, which provokes an awareness of situated perspectives that both open and constrain human experience. To approach meaning parabolically is to explore wider implications through a narrative interpretation that *casts across* present experience, rather than beyond it.

The *unjust judge* (*ho kritēs tēs adikias*, Lk 18:6) of Jesus' parable is identified by a contradiction in terms: this supposedly righteous character perceives his dishonesty with clarity: 'Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, yet because this widow keeps bothering me [*moi kopon*, lit. 'beating me'], I will grant her justice so that she may not finally come and strike me under the eye [*hupōpiazē me*]' (Lk 18:5).[15] Despite an assumed standing as one with authority, the judge's unscrupulous character is evident in his behaviour. Most significantly, he recognises his own judgements to be compromised, born of a desire for self-preservation rather than any respect for human dignity or God.

The widow too is a suspect character, whose evidently pious persistence is carried by threat of violence, even as she seeks the resolution of a greater injustice. This widow likely knows the judge's reputation, as one who can be manipulated to deliver justice

[15] Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke* (vol. 3), *Sacra Pagina Series*, ed. Daniel J. Harrington (Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 1991), 270.

the community has failed to uphold to widows (cf. Deut. 24:17-18).[16] As the vulnerable know too well, such rough justice is a necessity if life is to be preserved, the ideal resolution being an impossible dream.

Like the honest dishonesty of the judge, irony is eventful as it strikes under the eye, revealing the bruised vision of human perspective: discernment is readily compromised; desires are easily manipulated; experience is riddled with contradictions and contingencies. Doubling back on the interpreting subject, an ironic perspective recognises that justice cannot be gained in purity, nor meaning perceived with crystalline clarity. Rather, it is the pretence of perspicuity that makes one blind. This is the very hubris that Jesus' repudiates: 'Why do you see the speck in your neighbour's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye?' (Lk 6:41)

If the judge recognises the pervasive corruption of character and law, such ironic refutations need not end in cynicism or resignation. Heard with humility, irony might underscore a more realistic view of human possibility, which countenances aspiration within the contingencies of experience. Concepts like justice, power or authority might be better engaged through an ironic perspective that sharpens awareness of the entangled trajectories of text and subject, concept and experience. Perceived through the blackened eye of the unjust judge, recognition of the underlying ironies of human experience might give greater definition to righteousness.

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[16] Ibid., 269.

3

Eagleton's ironic project: Anticipating material renewal

Where previous chapters explored the ironic subversion of meaning and withdrawal from relational and ethical commitments, this chapter turns to the irony of Terry Eagleton as he seeks to renew social and political imagination. Eagleton's fondness for the ironic doublings of human experience is shaped by a view of the human body cusped between differences such as nature and culture, repetition and distinction, where a sense of irony hedges any ideological distortion that preferences one over the other. Over against the smooth totality of ideas, irony registers the interleaved textures of materiality.

In Christian faith, Eagleton discerns an ironic structure allied to his critical approach. Interpreting Christian faith as a paradigm for social renewal that begins with those rejected by the current political setup, he underscores the importance of faith as a material practice, realised through tangible expressions of solidarity and love. However, in treating Christian faith as ironic *metaphor*, signifying a renewed future beyond present brokenness, he overlooks any affirmative movement that Christian witness might provoke, in provoking a wholehearted and dignifying embrace of material experience.

Eagleton's critical method: enriching experience by emphasising difference

Eagleton's approach to philosophical and cultural criticism is substantiated by a view of the human body cusped between intractable differences, such as fragility and resilience, alienation and solidarity. Underscoring such differentials that shape our ideas and projects, Eagleton does not deploy irony as an outright subversion of one position by another, voiding the inherent tensions within experience. Rather, because he looks to the dialectic outworking of ideas within materiality, Eagleton's irony is more affirmative than the ironic negativity explored in previous chapters.

Eagleton's concern for meaning within human experience begins with the body as our characteristic mode of being. That is, human experience is not just what we make it to be through the language that gives definition to our identities and projects. Rather, the possibilities that constitute human life are both enabled and constrained by the strange, material creatures we are. By emphasising the inherent contradictions of the body—'It is not quite true that I have a body, and not quite true that I am one either'—Eagleton develops a portrait of human experience as 'cusped between nature and culture,' freedom and determinism, extremes and norms, constraint and creativity, regulation and spontaneity, recalcitrance and autonomy, being made and making, necessity and freedom, anticipation and surplus, fragility and resilience.[1]

An illustration of these contrasting registers is given in Eagleton's discussion of nature and culture. Drawing on a metaphor from Shakespeare, he imagines a swimmer prevented from drowning by beating against the water in surges that lift him up, while that water also provides a medium in which to float and be buoyed along: to swim is at once to resist nature and to be carried by it.[2] For Eagleton, nature and culture are not contradictory, nor one potentially overwritten by the other: 'Nature itself produces the means of its own transcendence,' which is to say, nature is inherently cultural.[3] Likewise, human experience is cusped between the natural and cultural, limitation and possibility. In emphasising this tension, Eagleton pushes against a postmodern fondness for hybridity which can press difference to a point of annulment: 'The point is not to flatten distinctions ... but to acknowledge the precariousness of such differences while continuing to hold fast to their necessity. This, too, involves a certain ironic mode of living.'[4]

This can be further illustrated by Eagleton's interpretation of Milan Kundera's novels. An important theme in Kundera's writing is the ready exchange or repetition of bodies, seen in the absolutist state and gulag, that obliterates individual value and distinction.[5]

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[1] Eagleton, *The Illusions of Postmodernism*, 54, 74–5, 90.
[2] Terry Eagleton, *The Idea of Culture* (Oxford and Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2000), 3. After Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, act 2, scene 1.
[3] Eagleton, *The Idea of Culture*, 3.
[4] Eagleton, *Radical Sacrifice*, 165.
[5] Cf. *Radical Sacrifice*, 164. 'The orgy and the act of genocide are alike indifferent to the particularity of human bodies.'

Kundera also explores this theme through scenes of sexual promiscuity and characters that display a certain detached, ironic relativism – an 'unbearable lightness of being' that buffers the subject from the weightiness of real decisions and commitments. This ideological view of pure difference, Eagleton supposes, has no value when it comes to human flourishing, 'for value is a relational term; but repetition is an enemy of value too, because the more something is repeated the more its meaning tends to fade.'[6]

Eagleton interprets in Kundera's novels a continual juxtaposition of scenes and characters typifying *lightness* and *weightiness*. In this, Kundera seeks to offset any definitive position that preferences either lightness or weightiness at the expense of the other.[7] According to Eagleton, this maintains a necessary tension 'hedged round continually with an irony which represents the borderline between too much meaning and too little, the portentous solemnity of the ideological and the bland dissociation of the cynic.'[8]

With a propensity 'to try to think both sides of contradiction simultaneously,' Eagleton's favours a nuanced engagement with the inherent tensions shaping human experience, rather than theoretical abstractions from experience.[9] For example, in critiquing the claims of *culturalism*—one of the 'dominant ideologies' of our time—Eagleton argues that an incessant personalisation of bodies and identities denies their essential impersonality and givenness.[10] For culturalism, he argues, the body is wholly malleable and everything mellifluously cultural; this obsession with the signifier displaces ethical concerns for common, material things like food and security.[11]

Rather than deploying irony as a posture of scepticism, Eagleton's criticism looks to the variegated richness of life, 'the shape, texture and quality of a whole life in its practical social context.'[12] Against the smooth totality of curated ideas, identities and ideologies,

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[6] Eagleton, 'Estrangement and Irony,' 28. Cf. Radical Sacrifice, 165: 'The individual who does not cherish some feature of the world more than others is yet to see the light of day.'
[7] Eagleton, 'Estrangement and Irony,' 26.
[8] Ibid., 31. This is further enhanced by Kundera's style, which is typified by a 'relaxed, unfussy lucidity' and lack of metanarational closure (lightness) that counters the rigours of the Eastern European state and its 'pathological overreading' of symbol (weightiness). Ibid., 25, 28.
[9] Eagleton, *The Illusions of Postmodernism*, 25–6.
[10] Eagleton, *After Theory*, 165–6.
[11] Eagleton, *The Illusions of Postmodernism*, 17.
[12] Eagleton, *The Illusions of Postmodernism*, 109.

Eagleton throws the reader into the *rough textures* of experience, recognising our bodies as those things which open to the world from the inside, giving us a 'field of activity'[13] – dynamically, we are 'pitched into the world' rather than 'quarantined from it.'[14] Expanding on this approach, he writes that Husserl's phenomenology has 'helped us understand that our bodies are not things we are "in," as in an ink bottle, so much as projects, centres of relation, practical orientations, ways of being bound up with a world.'[15] Consequently, Eagleton's irony is articulated with a tone that is more affirmative than the 'infinite absolute negativity' of Kierkegaard, and more engaged than free-wheeling contingency of Rorty, and his writings explore perennial human experiences like community, love and hope through the dynamic of ironic, bodily existence.

Eagleton's method is therefore significant for Christian faith, in which redemption is a material concern, anticipated and experienced in bodies that are both created and creative, fragile and resilient, unique and universal, estranged and accepted, suffering and hopeful, old and new, encumbered and transformed. The body is where God's redemptive possibilities might be encountered in Christ, who is also pitched into the world rather than quarantined from it. Christian faith grapples with such complex interactions of human experience christologically, through the ironic body of Christ which holds together word and deed, anticipation and renewal, judgement and redemption, death and life.

Eagleton's literary style: renewing imagination beyond negation

Eagleton's emphasis on the inherent differences and tensions animating human experience, explored above, can also be seen in his literary style. By drawing together a rich sweep of authors and themes. Eagleton emphasises the capacity for language and thought to develop through juxtaposition and counterintuitive interactions. Rather than subverting one position by reference to another, his playful, ironic style provokes

[13] Terry Eagleton, *Materialism* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2016), 37.
[14] Eagleton, *After Theory*, 62
[15] Terry Eagleton and Matthew Beaumont, *The Task of the Critic: Terry Eagleton in Dialogue* (London and New York: Verso, 2009), 88.

an imaginative engagement with ideas, rather than separating them off into discrete, theoretical containers.

Within a postmodern appraisal of the contingency of language, irony can become a posture of scepticism and indifference. If irony exposes life as a free-wheeling play of words and values, this can lead toward an 'abdication of responsibility,' seemingly antithetical to the critic's concern for meaning.[16] For Stephen Webb, a postmodern ironic culture is one in which

> all values and beliefs are suspended, neither affirmed nor negated, in a self-parody that hovers between the comical and the cynical … Irony, the trick of saying one thing while meaning another, is an effective figure of speech for those who are not sure what they believe but firmly doubt the beliefs of all others.[17]

For Webb, irony in this mode becomes paralysed 'in a pyrotechnics of unpredictable prose, snaring us in webs of our own making.'[18] To suggest an alternative approach, he explores irony as an interactive trope, not a discrete function of rhetoric but one integrated with other figurations and tonalities of language such as hyperbole, 'an effective way of stretching the imagination outward.'[19] Without hyperbole, irony would have nothing to critique, fond as it is of showing the contradictions of human overreach; without irony, hyperbole 'would lose much of its urgency and edge.'[20]

Similarly, by emphasising the inherent differences and tensions within language, Eagleton's criticism shows ideas to be dynamic and interactive with one another, cross-cutting rather than mutually exclusive. For example, if 'postmodernist theory casts a jaundiced eye on the science, rationalism, empiricism and individualising of the modern age … it remains deeply indebted to that epoch in its rampant nominalism.'[21] A rich and creative conversation is generated through such ironic doublings that exacerbate tension and interaction, rather than separating ideas into discrete, theoretical containers.

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[16] Stephen H. Webb, 'A Hyperbolic Imagination: Theology and the Rhetoric of Excess,' *Theology Today* 50.1 (1993), 59.
[17] Ibid., 58.
[18] Ibid., 60.
[19] Ibid., 61.
[20] Ibid., 60.
[21] Terry Eagleton, *The Event of Literature* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2012), 16.

Such irony holds together the critical and affirmative, which is for Eagleton something very human: 'To praise and to criticise in the same breath seems to me the most natural attitude. We do it every day – we do it about people, we do it about institutions, we do it about critical thought.'[22] This can lead him to make observations that are perceived as counterintuitive but are also broadly orthodox. For example, his understanding of the formation of subjectivity through estrangement—within a Lacanian paradigm—dovetails with his understanding of *original sin* (see Chapter Four). His writing abounds with similar interactions that open conversation rather than foreclosing on the potential relevance of a perspective or tradition.

Consequently, Eagleton's irony gives his criticism an expansive, open-ended quality. With irreverent and witty turns of phrase, he delights in an ironic play of language that can help us become more agile, engaged and imaginative. Citing Wittgenstein, the point of philosophy for Eagleton is 'not to furnish our ways of talking with a foundation, since they have one already in our form of life,' but to locate concepts within the 'rough ground' of experience.[23] His ironic style is therefore tinged with comedy rather than cynicism, after his own definition: 'Comedy embraces roughness and imperfection from the outset and has no illusions about pious ideals. Against such grandiose follies, it pits the lowly, persistent, indestructible stuff of everyday life.'[24]

It is this comic-ironic *tonality*, as in music, which gives Eagleton's writing a distinct sonority, as well as generating movement and interaction within component elements. For example, to critique Cartesian dualism and the separation of materiality and essence, externality and internality, sign and meaning, Eagleton begins by asking the provocative question, 'Do badgers have souls?' His answer, that they 'do indeed have souls, since they enjoy a peculiar form of existence,' locates meaning within the specific way different creatures experience the world.[25] Just as the person whose leg has been blown off by a shotgun does not '"infer" that he is in torment,' neither do we 'feel our

[22] Eagleton and Beaumont, *The Task of the Critic*, 236.
[23] Eagleton, *Materialism*, 146.
[24] Eagleton, *After Theory*, 186.
[25] Ibid., 46–7.

way tentative from the physical sign to the inner meaning. The two are given together, like body and soul.'[26]

Eagleton's comic-ironic method—to show how 'one position is inscribed within the other'[27]—also shapes his perspective on the history of ideas. This is evident in the basic, ironic premise of *Culture and the Death of God* (2014), in which he explores different stand-ins for God from romanticism to postmodernity:

> God is indeed dead, and it is we who are his assassins, yet our true crime is less deicide than hypocrisy ... We have also dissembled our deicide with various shamefaced forms of pseudo-religion, as though in expiation of our unconscious guilt. Modern secular societies, in other words, have effectively disposed of God but find it morally and politically convenient—even imperative—to behave as though they have not.[28]

Likewise, in *The Illusions of Postmodernism* (1996), Eagleton observes a hidden foundationalism—culture 'all the way down'—and a preference for difference that only betrays a predisposition to hierarchy.[29] Such observations should not be taken as dismissing the postmodern in its entirety. Rather, Eagleton wants the reader to gain a clearer, more nuanced view of what is at stake in such concepts. For example, in looking to the impetus of postmodernism in Nietzsche, he discerns an aversion to false doctrines and principles: inherent to postmodern thought is a desire for freedom and the recognition of human capacity to exist amid ambiguity.[30]

A further example can be given. Eagleton observes in the Enlightenment that radical notions of universality did not accord with the actual freedoms and rights of individuals like women, non-Europeans or the lower classes.[31] In this observation, his goal is not to scuttle the Enlightenment project but to observe potential for its continuing development: 'Middle class society could now be challenged by those it suppressed *according to its own logic*, caught out in a performative contradiction between what it said and what it did.'[32] Ideas and events, then, contain their own means of self-critique,

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[26] Ibid., 41.
[27] Eagleton and Beaumont, *The Task of the Critic*, 236.
[28] Terry Eagleton, *Culture and the Death of God* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2014), 157.
[29] Ibid., 191.
[30] Ibid., 193–4.
[31] Eagleton, *The Illusions of Postmodernism*, 113.
[32] Ibid., 113.

and this is necessary if their value and relevance is to be more fully realised. Ironic criticism observes these inherent dynamics that can generate movement and development within language and thought.

This critical approach can be likened to Hegel's *immanent critique*, a comparison which is helpful in further appreciating the creativity of irony, even as it registers an apparently self-voiding contradiction within a concept or event. According to Titus Stahl, Hegel 'argues that we should investigate forms of knowledge using their own presuppositions, being conscious that each such form already contains standards for self-evaluation.'[33] In his *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807), Hegel depicts the philosopher as one who observes the possibilities for critique inherent in a concept: 'That we thus do not need to bring standards with us and in the investigation to apply *our* ideas and thoughts. By leaving these aside, we succeed in considering the matter at issue as it is *in* and *for itself*.'[34]

Understood as the recognition of immanent tensions within concepts that allow for critical development, Eagleton's irony is oriented toward the expansion of imagination. If irony reveals an inherent flaw, it also indicates an opening for the reconfiguration of assumptions without the ideological evasion of conflicting aspects. This critical process is open-ended: language is a marker of excess that 'continually generates the unpredictable' and is therefore the 'paradigm' of the human body as distinct from other animals.[35] Ironic language becomes a means of expanding ideas and possibilities, even as that language is itself in need of continual renewal:

> If we cannot yet provide any less abstract response to the problem, it is not because we lack the intelligence, but because, as with most recalcitrant theoretical questions, we find ourselves here running our heads up against the current limits of language – which is of course to say the current limits of our political world.[36]

[33] Titus Stahl, 'What is Immanent Critique?' University of Groningen working paper (Nov. 21, 2013), http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2357957 (accessed 5 Oct., 2020).
[34] Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, §84.
[35] Eagleton, *The Illusions of Postmodernism*, 72.
[36] Ibid., 92.

Faith as a material practice: metaphoric sign or metonymic interruption?

This chapter has shown Eagleton's ironic method to be creative rather than subversive: by emphasising the rough, interleaved textures of ideas and language, irony can enliven imaginations that are otherwise constrained. Through his ironic method, Eagleton seeks a more nuanced engagement with human experience, anticipating social and political renewal without recourse to ideological totalities.

In Christian faith, Eagleton discerns an ironic structure allied to this critical approach, and 'one of the 'few surviving enclaves of materialist thought in these political patchy times … often more revolutionary in its political implications than much secular leftist thought.'[37] However, his understanding of Christian faith is limited by a view of the *anawim* or outcast of society as an ironic metaphor or inverse likeness of God's redeemed future. This approach overlooks the *metonymic* transition of New Testament witness by which God's futurity is figured presently, through tangible expressions of love.

It is the paradoxical reversals of the gospels that Eagleton has in mind when he interprets Christian faith as basically ironic, as 'folly to high-minded Greeks, a carnivalesque affair which pits the common life against hermetic ideas, exalting the lowly and toppling the mighty from their thrones.'[38] This is considered paradigmatic:

> The whole of Judaeo-Christian thought is cast in this ironic, paradoxical, up-ending mould … The wretched of the earth … have no stake in the current set-up, and so are an image of the future by their very destitution. The dispossessed are a living sign of the truth that the only enduring power is one anchored in an acknowledgement of failure. Any power which fails to recognise this fact will be enfeebled in a different sense, fearfully defending itself against the victims of its own arrogance.[39]

Eagleton emphasises the surprising reversals of Christian faith, as they suggest the negation of established cultural and political systems by casting a renewed vision of solidarity through brokenness and power through powerlessness (cf. 1 Cor. 1:27).[40] This focus hinges on Jesus' broken body and the wretched *anawim* of Hebrew Scripture,

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[37] Terry Eagleton, *Trouble with Strangers: A Study of Ethics* (Chichester, U.K.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), vi.
[38] Eagleton, *Materialism*, 49.
[39] Eagleton, *After Theory*, 175–6.
[40] Eagleton, *Culture and the Death of God*, 207.

defined by Eagleton as the refuse of society, reflecting Paul's 'scum of the earth' (1 Cor. 4:13). The *anawim* are those 'destitute' who have 'nothing but God' and therefore can depend only upon faith.[41] If the despised and rejected symbolise the failure of the current political setup, they are also those with most to gain.

Eagleton is fond of the term *anawim*; he repeats it regularly and throughout numerous publications (similarly, *gratuitousness*; see Chapter Six). Such concepts take on a symbolic quality, as if paradigmatic of his basic interests. While such terms give colourful and prescient expression to the structure of Eagleton's thought, his writing lacks the provision of theological nuance beyond his preferred interpretation; certain terms can be overused as catchphrases, with little modification. A similar observation has been made by Roland Boer, who outlines the layered meanings of *anawim*, which can also refer to the humble and pious, not just the wretched and despised.[42] Expanding on Eagleton's favoured translation as 'the shit of the earth,' a richer appreciation of *anawim* might be gained by looking to the productive interplay of humility and humiliation, an approach which would seem more closely aligned to his ironic project, as explored above.

For Eagleton, the *anawim* resemble Marx's proletariat, those garment factory workers and call centre operatives whose destitution reveals the limits of our attempts to create a flourishing society, yet whose alienation is not only a 'symptom of sickness but promise of cure.'[43] The *anawim* are therefore symbolic of this promise, an ironic foretaste of renewal. On this view, the 'good news' a paradigm of revolutionary inversion: 'The Gospel proclaims the vaingloriousness of all worldly power, the wreckage of all grandiose spiritual schemes and bright-eyed political panaceas. Only a solidarity with non-being, pressed if necessary to the point of death, can confound the principalities of this world.'[44] Here, Eagleton underscores the importance of faith as a material practice, realised through tangible expressions of solidarity and love.

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[41] Eagleton, *Radical Sacrifice*, 147.
[42] Roland Boer, 'Terry Eagleton and the Vicissitudes of Christology,' *Cultural Logic: An Electronic Journal of Marxist Theory and Practice* 8 (2005), 6.
[43] Eagleton, *Radical Sacrifice*, 179. See also Terry Eagleton, *Why Marx was Right* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2011), 170.
[44] Eagleton, *Radical Sacrifice*, 102.

Significantly, Eagleton's radically new future might only be gained by the inclusion of those who have been rejected, lest it become yet another episode in the 'endless reconfiguration of rationales that seek to justify the social order.'[45] As such, he anticipates this future by negation: 'The *sign* of that dissolution is a solidarity with the poor and powerless. It is here that a new configuration of faith, culture and politics *might be* born' [my emphasis].[46]

As to when such a future 'might be' brought about, Eagleton is enigmatic, countenancing this possibility in the subjunctive mood. His sense of negation is therefore hinged on absence, in contrast to the orthodox christological affirmation of God's future which becomes a radically real rather than symbolic possibility in Christ, in whom 'the new has come' (2 Cor. 5:17). Eagleton's focus on Christian faith as an ironic paradigm of reversal—which becomes more apparent in his 2018 book *Radical Sacrifice* (explored in Chapter Six)—therefore detracts from his view of faith as a material practice. If salvation, for Eagleton, is 'not primarily a matter of cult and ritual but of feeding the hungry and tending the sick,' we might add, salvation is not the *symbolic* inversion of society but 'faith working through love' (Gal. 5:6).[47] On this point, Paul proclaims God's future that casts across present experience, through tangible expressions of love, reconciliation, honesty, commitment and generosity, generating hope in the midst of brokenness and suffering (Rom. 5:1–5).

In the sense that the broken material body represents God's future *by comparison*—albeit as an inverse likeness—Eagleton's reading of Christian faith is *metaphoric*, and therefore limited to its analogical function. This assessment can be given further definition by teasing out a difference between metaphor and metonym, suggesting that a parabolic engagement with Christian faith entails a *metonymic* aspect that seems lacking in Eagleton's interpretation. Metonymy figures the conceptual through the material or corporeal, as in the *leg* of a chair, or *new blood* in an organisation.[48] The

[45] Eagleton, *Culture and the Death of God*, 207.
[46] Ibid., 208.
[47] Eagleton, *Materialism*, 48.
[48] George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 36. For Lakoff and Johnson, metonymy is not only grounded in experience but organises our thoughts and actions. 39.

metonymic signifier is inseparable from the signified, and meaning is constituted experientially, within materiality.

For Charles E. Winquist, metonymy 'alters the 'economy of the discourse' as a *horizonal* interruption or reconfiguration of meaning, whereas metaphor suggests a *vertically* layered epistemology, as if moving toward a hidden truth by comparison.[49] For example, to speak of God metonymically *as love* shifts engagement with 'God' as a concept, not by a literal or metaphysical claim that progresses *deeper* into the truth, but by altering the way a concept is engaged experientially. Metonym therefore alters a subject's attentiveness to the way that 'God' might come about in and through tangible interactions and experience: metonymically, 'understanding folds into specific linguistic, social and historical situations.'[50] Similarly, irony disrupts the horizontal economy of discourse by playing with the inherent differentials of concept and experience, generating meaning experientially rather than presupposing a 'truer unsaid' beyond present materiality.[51]

While Eagleton's general ironic style exhibits a similar metonymic disruption of the economy of concepts, entangling the reader with the interactive and interwoven textures of human experience, his view of Christian faith lacks this same parabolic or cross-cutting movement. Here, Eagleton overlooks a significant resonance between Christian faith and his critical project: it is precisely Jesus' brokenness—which embodies bifurcated trajectories of meaning and materiality, word and deed, anticipation and renewal, death and life—that *unsays* abstractions of redemptive possibility. God's redemptive possibilities are perceived as a present reality in Christ, rather than anticipated as future vision.

In the humility of Christ, 'God'—that potentially most vacuous symbol that can be filled with all sorts of ideological content—comes to be known tangibly, through the interactive outworking of generosity and hope. Ironically, God in Christ casts across

[49] Charles E. Winquist, in Robert P. Scharlemann (ed.), *Theology at the End of the Century: A Dialogue on the Postmodern* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1990), 17.
[50] Ibid., 38.
[51] Cf. Sharp, *Irony and Meaning*, 12–13. See Chapter Two.

present experience a redemptive word of dignity and worth, provoking a wholehearted embrace of material experience rather than a view beyond it.

4

Reading Eagleton parabolically: Ironic self-estrangement as an impetus to love

The previous chapter examined the ironic tonality of Eagleton's critical method and literary style. Contrasting with approaches to irony as the subversion of meaning, Eagleton's irony generates engagement with the inherent differentials animating human experience. Yet in treating Christian faith as finally symbolic of his broader political interests, Eagleton overlooks the gains that might be made through a similarly discursive, heuristic approach to New Testament literature. In this chapter, I seek to show how Eagleton's exploration of subjectivity and ethics can be enriched through a discursive engagement with New Testament parable and narrative, especially those passages in which irony is an impetus to ethical engagement rather than detachment.

Considering what Eagleton's engagement with Christian faith *lacks*, we find evidenced an *opening* that might generate a meaningful interplay of perspectives, between Eagleton's ethics in *Trouble with Strangers* (2017), Luke's Parable of the Pharisee and Tax Collector (Lk 18:9–14) and John's account of Mary's hospitality (Jn 12:1–8). These selections are held together by their various depictions of the subject whose awareness of renewal is gained through self-estrangement and loss. I argue that Eagleton's understanding of the ironic subject lacks the characterisation of humility and thankfulness offered by these New Testament selections.

Eagleton's ironic subjectivity

If, for Eagleton, the human body is cusped between matter and meaning, self and symbol, so too is subjective experience. He draws on Jacques Lacan to show how subjective awareness is formed in *misrecognition*, in the gap that such differentials entail. To become aware of this is to perceive self-estrangement at the heart of subjectivity that is redolent with irony. Resonating with a Christian awareness of self-compromise, this view suggests that irony can be an impetus for ethical decision, rather than foreclosing on ethical endeavour as inherently compromised.

‘Consciousness,’ Eagleton explains, ‘itself is a structure of misrecognition,’ in the slippage between anticipation and actuality: we are neither who we are nor who we might be.[1] Citing Lacan’s rewriting of Descartes’ famous maxim, ‘I think where I am not, therefore I am where I do not think,’ Eagleton’s subject is poised before a more authentic awareness of self through an ironic structure that recognises the inherent gaps that define and animate experience.[2]

While characteristically modern in his emphasis on self-consciousness, Eagleton’s view seems a contemporary rendering of Paul’s subjectivity gained by ethical culpability: ‘For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do’ (Rom. 7:19). Paul’s yearning for the good is continually frustrated by his awareness of the law—in giving definition to righteousness—and the slippage between real circumstances and symbolic ideals. Likewise, for Eagleton, the representations and projects that shape experience are readily shown as insufficient or contradictory, susceptible to ‘ironic self-scuppering.’[3]

Modern psychoanalysis and linguistics have observed that subjectivity is negotiated and animated within a vast network of signs, a view which readily incorporates ironic recognition. In what seems a definition of ironic unsaying, Eagleton surmises from Lacan that ‘the body articulates itself in signs only to find itself betrayed by them.’[4] For Eagleton, human experience, although opened through language, is also limited by this symbolic framework. Disrupting language and representation, ‘reality is always more than our questioning anticipates. It exceeds our own interpretations of it and is not averse to greeting them from time to time with a rude gesture or knocking the stuffing out of them.’[5]

One only need think of the self-assured representations of fortitude projected by various governments at the beginning of the COVID19 pandemic. In one instance, Iran’s Deputy Health Minister Iraj Harirchi appeared at a press conference, sweating profusely while

[1] Eagleton, *Trouble with Strangers*, 10.
[2] Ibid., 6.
[3] Eagleton, *The Illusions of Postmodernism*, 63.
[4] Ibid., 75.
[5] Terry Eagleton, *The Meaning of Life: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 71.

updating the country on COVID19. The following day, he tested positive. Ironically, it was observed that the government was 'deliberately understating the extent of the virus,' even as it was eating away at the body of the nation.[6] Symbolic identities—which include representative governments that *stand for* a people—are readily dissolved by a sneeze.

While representation and language demonstrate a propensity for ironic unsaying, human activity is not irreparably compromised. Indeed, the above example might be taken as an endorsement of the democratic project, in which communities and nations are nothing more than the vulnerable individuals that constitute them. Equally, authentic leadership of these communities or nations should be concerned with society as a fragile body, rather than the curation of ideal representations or policies that are developed for their public relations value, as in the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's television series *Utopia*, a satire set in the fictional Nation Building Authority, in which policy is made on a whim, to create a positive image of innovation and vision.

Rather than decrying our alienation from the words and images that can never truly represent us, that 'we are never quite identical with ourselves' is, for Eagleton, a *happy fault* or *felix culpa*, a traditional Christian formulation: what is awry with human experience is at once tragic and fortuitous, and the original impetus for change and development.[7] An ironic perspective on subjective experience, then, need not subvert human activity and identity by compromising irreparably but might form an *opening* for change, or in the case of Paul, only serve to deepen his passion for renewal.

Pharisaical illusions: critiquing imaginary and symbolic ethics

Sustaining his characteristic focus on human experience cusped between limitation and possibility, Eagleton's *Trouble with Strangers* explores the ways differing views of subjectivity both constrain and open ethical engagement. Structured on Lacan's three registers of subjectivity, these involve: 1) an *imaginary* perspective that is absorbed with

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[6] 'Coronavirus: Iran's deaths at least 210, hospital sources say,' BBC News, Feb. 28, 2020, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-51673053 (accessed 5 Oct., 2020).

[7] Eagleton, *Materialism*, 24. Cf. Eagleton, *Trouble with Strangers*, 84–86.

fictive representations of self, society and world; 2) a *symbolic* perspective, with a prominent view of social norms, responsibilities and law; 3) a *realistic* view that encounters life without flinching from its difficulties and distortions. In what follows, I transpose these categories onto Luke's Parable of the Pharisee and Tax Collector, expanding on Eagleton's ethics by illustrating how differing understandings of self-before-God might constrain or constitute a Christian approach to ethics.

I begin by considering the Pharisee's curated image and pious sentiment (*imaginary*) and the ritual and legal patterns shaping his behavior (*symbolic*), arguing that without a sense of ironic self-estrangement, these profiles are unable to generate love for the stranger who is beyond the orbit of sentiment and obligation. Luke's parable carries an implicit critique of the imaginary and symbolic registers as they turn back on the narcissistic individual, whose concern for others evinces thankfulness that is nothing more than hubris and cynicism.

> [Jesus] also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: 'Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, "God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income." But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.' (Lk 18:9–14)

As a religious expert whose life and actions are defined by expressions of temple, tithing, and Torah, the Pharisee of Luke's parable exemplifies Eagleton's *imaginary* ethics: the Pharisee's self-exaltation is cultivated through decorous image, pious behaviour and vocational distinction, his projected image understood as a 'tangible incarnation of selfhood.'[8] The Pharisee's declarations of thankfulness suture together any gap between image and self, as if these were directly correspondent. Ultimately, his is a concern with separation from the lives of others, rather than implication, which might entail the

[8] Cf. Eagleton, *Trouble with Strangers*, 5.

disruption of a carefully curated façade: to be thankfully *unlike* other people is to be estranged from them.[9]

For Eagleton, this imaginary mode of subjectivity leads toward ethics characterised by sentiment and sensibility, aestheticised refinement and polished behaviour: the Pharisee sees himself in a situation and acts with appropriate empathy and decorum.[10] Eagleton's primary critique of an imaginary ethic is that it cannot recognise those outside of the immediacy of experience, 'the nameless hoards languishing in the outer darkness.'[11] Sentiment and sensibility cannot generate a code of ethics that encompasses those who we feel no immediate empathy for, let alone those who elicit revulsion rather than endearment. This has significant implications for the poor, marginalised and vulnerable:

> Morality is too vital a question to be left to the capricious big-heartedness of those who can afford to be affable. The vulnerable need a material bond or code of obligations to cover their back. A rule-bound ethics may seem less agreeable than a genial impulse, but its point is that you should behave humanely to others whatever you happen to be feeling.[12]

The above portrait of the Pharisee can be extended: in an era of social media, online representations can become the definitive language of self-understanding. Posting to Facebook, the blogger, a contemporaneous Pharisee, projects an image of his or her values to be read by others. This curation is *on-the-pulse*, shaped in direct response to contemporary issues with the click of a 'like' button, and conspicuous in evincing one's values. Yet in this imaginary mode, decisive ethical decisions are delegated to virtual representations and human bodies remain distanced from living interactions.[13] As the

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[9] While Donahue recognises the Pharisees' prayer as typical of thanksgiving and an account of fidelity to God (cf. Phil. 3:4–6; Gal. 1:14, 2:15), what makes it seem hypocritical is the use of personal pronouns ('I fast,' 'I tithe,' etc.) and his explicit contempt for the tax collector. John Donahue, *The Gospel in Parable* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), 189. cf. Mt 6:5.

[10] Eagleton cites 'style, grace, wit, lightness, polish, frankness, discretion, geniality, good humour, a love of company, freedom and ease of manner, and courteous self-effacement.' Eagleton, *Trouble with Strangers*, 17.

[11] Ibid., 57.

[12] Ibid., 24.

[13] Žižek follows a similar argument: 'Are we not more and more monadic in this sense, with no direct windows onto reality, interacting alone with the PC screen, encountering only virtual simulacra […]?' Žižek and Gunjević, *God in Pain*, 35.

blogger remains in the bedroom, the Pharisee remains in the temple, orbiting within a personalised and restricted community.

For Eagleton, an imaginary ethic is 'in reality a sympathy with one's own act of sympathising, a self-devouring affair in which the world is reduced to so much raw material for one's lust for sensation, or to so many occasions for exhibiting one's moral munificence.'[14] Supposed concern for others is, on this view, nothing more than narcissism, the other a mirror for self-delight. In his acts of charity and piety, the Pharisee perceives only his benevolence, a view which fosters distance from others, rather than involving him in the experiences of others. As a result, the Pharisee lives in an illusion, unable to conceive of an encounter with God through human brokenness.

Eagleton follows Lacan beyond the imaginary and into the *symbolic*, which entails an awareness of responsibilities toward others, attuned through law, ritual and custom. A symbolic ethic is expressed linguistically, through the interactions of signs that constitute ethical codes and traditions, providing a reference point for human behavior beyond the variable inclinations of perspective and emotion.[15]

Within the symbolic, subjectivity is mediated through language, that 'great stockpile or repository of codes, rules and signifiers.'[16] Just as meaning in language emerges through the distinction of linguistic signs, a symbolic ethic is constituted intersubjectively and difference is framed positively. For Eagleton,

> the subject must be weaned from mistaking itself for an autonomous entity and come instead to confess its dependence upon others in the domain of the intersubjective ... Only when one ventures upon the intersubjective exchanges of the symbolic order can one become conscious of oneself as an individual.[17]

For the Pharisee, engagement with God and neighbour is shaped by religious law. The law prods the Pharisee toward humility and justice, structuring behavior through tithing, fasting and regular prayer. To read the Pharisee as a character type in this sense is not unusual within Christian tradition or theology. For example, Bonhoeffer regards

[14] Eagleton, *Trouble with Strangers*, 27–8.
[15] Ibid., 83–5.
[16] Ibid., 85.
[17] Ibid., 7.

the Pharisee as anyone who, in any time, lives by their perception of 'disunion,' in which the fractured self is continually caught between possibilities for good or evil.[18] The law, as a response to an awareness of disunion—given because of transgressions (Gal. 3:19)—engages the subject with a world beyond the naïve immediacy of self-concern and encourages a view of human flourishing through mutual reciprocity.

But even this symbolic portrait entails significant shortcomings. Although religious law prods the Pharisee toward love for God and others, the satisfaction of such responsibilities can become transactional or obligatory, constraining generosity. In numerous gospel scenes, Jesus critiques a Pharisaic inflexibility in responding to situations through a symbolic ethic. For example, having healed a man with edema on the Sabbath, Jesus challenges the lawyers and Pharisees, 'If one of you has a child or an ox that has fallen into a well, will you not immediately pull it out on a sabbath day?' Jesus regularly decries such hypocrisy that maintains the letter at the expense of the spirit of the law (see Mt 23).

Ironically, where one might assume the tax collector was a stickler for symbolic obligation—his own livelihood bound up as a fiscal cog sustaining the state economy—it is the Pharisee whose actions are tightly bound within the maintenance of a religious and moral economy. As such, the Pharisee who is overly demonstrative in his symbolic obligations achieves nothing more than an imaginary display of piety.

The Pharisee's understanding of self-before-God—expressed as a form of thankfulness—is nothing more than a self-assured citation of contractual fulfilment. Remaining in the temple, the Pharisee stands by himself to pray, buffered from the everyday entanglements of human experience and the stranger who is beyond the orbit of religious sentiment and obligation.

[18] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics,* trans. Neville Horton Smith (London: SCM Press, 1955), 151.

The tax collector encounters the *Real:* an opening for renewal

Having shown the limitations of an imaginary and symbolic ethic, I now turn to the tax collector of Luke's parable as a dramatic characterisation of Eagleton's ironic subject. In contrast to the self-awareness of the Pharisee, the tax collector's self-estrangement gives impetus to ethical decisions that embrace the stranger in their fragility, registering a contingency that is universal within human experience. While the tax collector's traumatic encounter with self-before-God might seem terrifying, in displacing the imaginary and symbolic patterns of religion and ideology, this encounter with the *Real* opens new possibilities for community and relationality. On this trajectory, ironic self-estrangement resounds with humility rather than cynicism.

Compared with the Pharisee's imaginary and symbolic existence before God, the tax collector's cry for mercy resembles Eagleton's understanding of the *Real* as a register of human subjectivity, Lacan's term for reality behind representation, from which we are exiled by our entrance into language. As such, the *Real* is confronting in its elusiveness, continually thwarting imaginary or symbolic expressions and encountered in material and linguistic meaninglessness – in 'contingent traumatic events, unbearable bodily intensities, anxiety and death.'[19] Similarly for Eagleton, the *Real* is gauged through an eventful recognition that 'what is most permanently awry with us' is 'most truly of our essence.'[20]

Luke's tax collector, who 'would not even look up to heaven but was beating his breast and saying, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!"' (Lk 18:13), confronts himself in the way that Eagleton describes Lacan's *Real*, as a 'stain of senseless material contingency which the symbolic order can never fully assimilate.'[21] For Eagleton, this encounter with the Real is revolutionary: it 'throws us out of joint, re-totalises our world and violently recasts the foundations of our existence.'[22] The tax collector's repentance registers the inadequacy of life before God and the gap between desire for righteousness and actuality. While this might suggest the undercutting of human projects and

[19] Adrian Johnston, 'Jacques Lacan,' *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2018 edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2018/entries/lacan/ (accessed 5 Oct., 2020).
[20] Eagleton, *Trouble with Strangers*, 143.
[21] Ibid., 146.
[22] Ibid., 298.

perspectives, Luke's parable frames the tax collector's fundamental misrecognition of self ironically: it is the tax collector's humility that instantiates renewal, rather than the hubris of the Pharisee.

For Eagleton, this is the meaning of the traditional Christian formulation *happy fault* (*felix culpa*), which indicates an inherent bifurcation of prevarication and prospect: what seems most awry with human nature is also that which substantiates change and renewed relationality.[23] Similarly, Lacanian philosopher Alenka Zupančič writes of a 'failed finitude' at the heart of human experience. That is, human limitations are not comprehensive: 'Our finitude is always-already a failed finitude – one could say a finitude with a leak in it ... Not only are we not infinite, we are not even finite.'[24] On this view, a basic non-correspondence of self entails the possibility of change.

The structure of irony in Luke's parable turns on a similar redoubling of alienation that transitions into renewed possibilities: the tax collector does not remain in mourning outside the temple but heads home 'having been justified,' a decisive event with ongoing implications. Significantly, the parable is open-ended: the tax collector's repentance prefaces ongoing responsibilities among family and neighbours, whose demands continually press in on us, constraining or challenging our imaginary and symbolic identities, a drama continually playing out through the *givenness* of human bodies. Considered as a critique of imaginary and symbolic ethics, this parable orients toward the real resistances and challenges that confront everyday life: the tax collector 'went down to his home justified rather than the other.' Outside of the temple and its ritual and legal obligations, the tax collector encounters others through an awareness of his own fraught identity before God, as a basis for renewed relationality.

Put another way, Luke's parable anticipates renewed community and purpose christologically, *in the flesh*, rather than through the smooth curations of piety and law. This suggests a priority for tangible things like food, shelter, security, love and trust, needs common to all human bodies and therefore necessary to a more inclusive community, in which there is neither Jew or Greek, slave or free, male and female (Gal.

[23] Eagleton, *Trouble with Strangers*, 84–86.
[24] Alenka Zupančič, *The Odd One In: On Comedy* (Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press. 2008), 52–3.

3:28). This reading resonates with Eagleton's materialism, for whom the particularity of the material body is universal and therefore, where a truly inclusive community and purpose might be anticipated.[25]

However, where Luke's parable and Eagleton's ethics show similarities in their critique of symbolic and imaginary identities, it is Luke's understanding of the alienated subject that is more affirmative of present dignity and relationality. Read within its literary context, this parable is just one of many scenes that, together, paint a rich and tangible picture of God's redemptive work in Christ. Consequently, while the irony in this parable is critical of temple, tithing and Torah, it is also heard redemptively, in the faith that God's generosity and veracity is encountered substantially in the material brokenness of Christ, cast across the variegated interactions of religion, society and politics, rather than distanced from them.

Self-estrangement as humility: narrating loss as gain

The New Testament offers further portraits of self-estrangement as an opening for renewal and change. This section looks to John's portrayal of Mary anointing Jesus' feet (Jn 12:1–8) as a dramatic expression of thankfulness (*eucharista*) that is both critical and affirmative: ironically, while Mary's lavish devotion *unsays* imaginary and symbolic concerns for appropriate, ethical behaviour, her love also sustains and renews community. This reading contrasts with Eagleton's sacramental approach to *eucharist*, which further shows his understanding of Christian faith to be limited to the symbolic negation of social and political structures.

For Eagleton, the liturgical performance of the eucharist is an sign of negation, in which the symbols of bread and wine 'signify their own emptiness.'[26] After Lacan's famous dictum, 'the symbol is the death of the thing,' Eagleton sees in the eucharist a tidy definition of irony, which he gives explicitly as 'a signifier which stands in for its own impossibility': the ironic signifier, as meta-sign, is the sign of a non-sign, that is, of an

[25] Cf. Eagleton, *After Theory*, 166.
[26] Terry Eagleton, 'Irony and the Eucharist,' *New Blackfriars* 83.981 (2002), 515.

absent sign.[27] In other words, the bread and cup are not the real thing but indicate a lack of God in present fullness. The eucharist, then, is paradigmatic of that 'traumatic kernel' of existence that defines human experience, or Lacan's *Real*.[28] That the bread, as sign of Jesus broken body, indicates *what is not*, is to anticipate that time in which 'material stuff is at one with its meaning.'[29] This is Eagleton's gloss for the resurrection, in which irony is presumably lacking: that 'non-discursive reality' when God is known face-to-face.[30]

Eagleton's citation of Paul's 'For now we see in a mirror dimly' (1 Cor. 13:12), suggests a view of present experience as inherently fractured, incapable of registering the future with any clarity or fullness, without the mediating function of image and symbol. In this, he observes a seamless link between the eucharist and Marxist revolution: 'Both Marxism and Christianity practise a form of irony in this respect, engaging in the actual but also grasping it in the light of its passing away.'[31] Thus, for Marx, the goal of socialism is beyond any present articulation of it: 'The content goes beyond the phrase.'[32] In this sense, Eagleton's eucharist is an ironic sign that stands for a possibility beyond the current symbolic arrangements of society, its content beyond the given word.

If God's future can only be represented ironically as present impossibility, Eagleton's focus throughout his writings on the historical Jesus seems sensible. He gives little consideration to the enigmatic figure who appears to the disciples as they break bread (Lk 24:30–31), or to the Christ of the *kerygma* (cf. 1 Cor. 15:3–8; see Chapter Five), preferring instead a portrait of Jesus as political scapegoat, martyr and agitator – a portrait which Boer argues is typical of the desire of those on the political left to champion figures of historical change.[33] This focus depicts Jesus' as a victim of the

[27] Eagleton, 'Irony and the Eucharist,' 515. 'Signs of a non-sign, a doubled, self-negating piece of semiosis, for which our common term is irony.' Ibid.
[28] Eagleton, *Radical Sacrifice*, 153.
[29] Eagleton, *Materialism*, 24.
[30] Eagleton, 'Irony and the Eucharist,' 515.
[31] Eagleton, *Radical Sacrifice*, 164.
[32] Eagleton, 'Irony and the Eucharist,' 515.
[33] Boer, 'Eagleton and the Vicissitudes of Christology,' 12–13.

current political setup and, as such, harbinger of a radically different future which can only be represented by his present brokenness.[34]

In *Radical Sacrifice* (2018), the eucharist is described as a paradigm of revolution, in which 'the traumatic kernel of the Real is inserted into the symbolic order in order to reconfigure it. That which was rejected as unclean is ploughed back for a renewal of human life.'[35] While Eagleton here indicates the potential creativity of sacrifice, he remains focused on the sacramental form rather than proclaiming the advent of any such renewal, within tangible events or character. Therefore, for Eagleton, faith seems 'a fundamental longing that appears to be purely intransitive, and that can thus never be assuaged.'[36] He speaks little of hospitality that nourishes and renews the community of those who meet around a table.

Similarly, Eagleton's reading of Christian hope is qualified as 'hope without optimism.'[37] Eagleton's hope is a power that divests the current setup (language, institutions, ideologies) of influence and assumed finality, as well as dissociating 'all times to come of their false appearances as absolute futures.'[38] Hope is therefore 'a species of permanent revolution ... because there is no end to it, it refuses to make an idol out of any specific setup.'[39] This view is at once radically open—that we lack the capacity to comprehend what we hope for—but also 'in some inscrutable sense well founded' in the character of God.[40]

Yet he never expands on the *character* of this God and his focus remains the structure of revolutionary inversion offered by Christian faith. Like his capital-E 'Eucharist,' Eagleton treats Christian faith as a signifier dissociated from what it signifies, an ironic sign of anticipation rather than witness to the living character of God that nourishes and sustains. Here, Eagleton's critique of John Milton's poetry and the 'self-flaunting

[34] Cf. '[Christian faith] also believes that the very frailty of the human can become a redemptive power. In this, it is at one with socialism, for which the harbingers of a future social order are those who have little to lose in the present.' Terry Eagleton, *Reason, Faith, and Revolution: Reflections on the God Debate* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009), 48.
[35] Eagleton, *Radical Sacrifice*, 153.
[36] Terry Eagleton, *Hope Without Optimism* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2015), 62.
[37] Eagleton, *Hope Without Optimism.*
[38] Ibid., 69.
[39] Ibid., 69.
[40] Eagleton refers to the God of Israel and the gospels. Ibid., 80, 82.

sign' suggests a critique of his own treatment of the eucharist: 'The busier the sign … the more it draws our eye to itself, displacing it from what it denotes.'[41] Like the sacramental Eucharist in its ritual weightiness, *thankfulness* within Christian faith becomes constrained as a metaphor of absence and anticipation.

Rather than approaching the eucharist as a symbolic paradigm, a narrative rather than sacramental approach to thankfulness (*eucharista*, literally 'good-gift') can better express the dramatic outworking of redemptive possibilities as *faith working through love* (Gal.5:6). Here, John's account of Mary anointing Jesus' feet (Jn 12:1–8) portrays thankfulness as an opening for renewal and change: Mary's self-effacement is both critical and creative, upholding the dignity of fragile human bodies, around which a renewed community might be formed.

In John's scene, Mary sits at Jesus' feet, her hair slipping gently around his ankle and the aroma of expensive perfume filling the air. This intensely personal, aesthetic and lavish expression of love is cast within tangible experience. Presumably, Mary does not act to ingratiate herself with Jesus by an ostentatious display of wealth or piety – an imaginary identity. Indeed, the intimate nature of Mary's actions seem almost erotic, a scandalous lack of decorum and breach of accepted sensibilities. The anointing is sensual, concerned with the real body before her: if perfume was used in burial to beautify a stink, it is here an indisputable sign of the givenness of the corporeal body, embraced in hospitality. Judas' concern is otherwise, and he points out that Mary's actions efface the symbolic exchange value of the perfume: 'Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?' (Although John notes that Judas' concern is but a cultivated façade; Jn 12:5).

Jesus' retort, 'You will always have the poor among you, but you will not always have me' (Jn 12:8), indicates his subsequent death, his body an ironic sign of its absence. Yet through her devotion to the body before her, Jesus' impending absence is redoubled as presence: loss is figured as gain, in recognising the *momentous* givenness of Jesus' body, which is profoundly significant in the definition it gives to the present *moment*. Mary's thankfulness—characterised by self-effacing humility—is therefore an event of renewal

[41] Eagleton. *The Event of Literature*, 38.

in which loss figures as gain. Compared with Judas' abstracted notion of 'the poor,' Jesus' broken body gives impetus to love as real and present, expressed gratuitously *in the flesh* and not through the paucity of image and signification.

5

Creative irony:
The comic outworking of negation

The hope held out in the previous chapter for a redemptive tonality within ironic criticism prompts a broader exploration of irony within literary structure and narrative. Here, Eagleton's understanding of language as expansive—producing meaning that exceeds its narrative staging—helps establish a view of ironic negation as an impetus for new and relevant insights, through words that are conspicuously insufficient in and of themselves. Charles Taylor's work on the constitutive dimension of language is introduced to strengthen the view that ironic *unsaying* generates new *saying*, gained heuristically through the problematisation of denotive meaning. Further, in looking to New Testament witness as *comic*, after Dan Otto Via's description, Eagleton's reading of Christian faith is further shown to be constrained, poised in the negation of meaning rather than giving impetus to its expansion.

Ironic narrative: generating meaning through self-referential structures

A view toward ironic creativity might be gained by exploring ironic structures within literary narratives, rather than the function of the ironic word as a sign of negation. While the ironic word is self-referential, doubling back on itself to unsay the simple, given *said*, irony also generates meaning that exceeds the given word. This expansive quality is a feature of language more broadly, which Eagleton understands to be a key feature of literature. Literary narratives create meaning by drawing attention—if only subtly—to the relationships and situations that constitute a narrative. Irony can intensify this self-referential aspect of narrative, generating meaning through conspicuous doublings of plot and character.

Literature can provoke the recognition of meaning through staging, often fictional, that creates a world in and of itself. For Eagleton, 'Literature would seem to depend for its existence on a certain loss or distancing of the real, and this absence is vitally

constitutive of its presence.'[1] For example, carrying a basket of sconnes through the woods, Little Red Riding Hood unknowingly reveals her sick grandmother's address to the wolf. This opening, as well as the action the follows—'My, what big eyes you have, Grandma'—establishes a view of innocence and vulnerability, through character, plot and setting. If such staging is fictional and 'fundamentally about itself,' which is to say an event 'inseparable from its act of utterance,' literature nevertheless intersects with real life through such intrinsic or self-referential structures.[2]

A similar observation has been made by Frank Kermode in relation to history, which becomes meaningful and relevant through its literary construction. For Kermode, 'the historical account is an invention, founded on a repertory of texts brought to fulfilment by a literary narrative.'[3] On this view, history is always and already an interpretation, existing only as it is perceived and spoken. Through the self-referential structures of narrative, history is worked into meaningful themes and events. For example, the synoptic gospels abound with pleromatic conformities: John records Jesus' side being pierced and his legs remaining unbroken on the cross, perhaps recalling the imagination of the Psalmist, 'He keeps all his bones, not one of them will be broken' (Ps 34:20, RSV), and Isaiah, 'He was pierced for our transgressions' (Isa. 53:5). Jesus' death becomes meaningful through John's narrative, as it evokes such parallels 'that the scripture might be fulfilled' (Jn 19:36).

The doubled structure of irony (see Chapter Two) intensifies such self-referential aspects of narrative meaning, especially if this structure is conspicuously displayed. For example, the critical force of the phrase, 'All who draw the sword will die by the sword' (Mt 26:52), depends on an ironic doubling: the trajectory of a life of violence switches back on itself, to be undone by violence. Conspicuous in its aphoristic compression, this ironic structure generates a play of meaning that expands beyond its given staging, revealing similarly enfolded trajectories of violence, death, valour, defence or retribution, that pervade human experience.

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[1] Eagleton, *The Event of Literature*, 172.
[2] Ibid., 137–8.
[3] Frank Kermode, *The Genesis of Secrecy: On the Interpretation of Narrative* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1979), 105.

Because ironic structure doubles back on the given word or narrative, it is a useful literary device for questioning the reliability of representations. For example, Isaiah denounces the venerated image by introducing the idol craftsman who carefully marks his lines and carves the wood into a beautiful human form; with the offcuts, he kindles a fire and bakes bread (Isa. 44:9–20). The carpenter is caught in a carefully crafted narrative and cries, 'Shall I fall down before a block of wood?' (Isa. 44:19). Again, the critical force of the irony hinges on a switch of perspective, achieved through a self-referential structure.

Artfully conspicuous in its composition, irony catches the listener in a crafty play of words, through the event of recognition that irony readily entails. Irony therefore generates an interpretive play of meaning, as the hearer considers their own relation to the narrative text, as in Nathan's parable that breaks upon King David with the charge, 'You are the man!' (2 Sam. 12:1–15). Because of this, irony is not often used to offer simple, direct moral imperatives. Rather, meaning is gained as the subject grapples with their interpretations in relation to a text or situation. An example of this can be seen in a television campaign from the New Zealand Human Rights Commission, which challenges the public to get involved with racism in small, everyday ways:

> I'm calling on every one of my fellow Kiwis to help support a very important cause: racism needs your help to survive. You may not be in a position to give much to racism but whatever you feel comfortable giving will make a huge difference ... a smile, a cheeky giggle ... it all adds up.[4]

This message, delivered without a hint of sarcasm by 2017 New Zealander of the Year Taika Waititi, is not a matter of speaking in opposites, as if circuitously to give the imperative, 'Don't be racist.' The light-hearted nature of these words mirrors the seemingly innocuousness of 'everyday' racism, and it is this tonal juxtaposition that constitutes the message. What is gained through this ironic play on words is a new awareness of the prevalence of light-hearted, racist gibes, opening the ears of those who might otherwise dismiss direct moralistic injunction on the issue. Here, irony is a

[4] New Zealand Human Rights Commission, 'Give Nothing to Racism,' https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g9n_UPyVR5s (accessed Oct., 5, 2020).

literary process that opens a reflexive view of the world rather than deducing a moral abstraction from it.

For Eagleton, this is the power of literature that is crafted to generate a meaningful interplay between text, subject, situation and possibility:

> In granting us images of the inseparable interweaving of language and the world, [literature] reveals something that is already imperceptibly before our eyes. By laying bare the process by which certain entrenched conceptual relations determine our form of seeing, works of literary art play a role in prising us loose from them, setting us free for other ways of perceiving.[5]

To register irony is not simply to take an obverse view that looks behind the given word, or which delights in the iconoclastic breaking of the sign. Through its self-referential structure, irony opens an interpretive play that is open-ended, in which meaning is gained through words that are conspicuously insufficient in and of themselves.

Taylor's *constitutive language* as a development of Eagleton's irony

If narratives generate meanings and perspectives that exceed their literary staging, irony does so by showing simple, denotive *said* to be insufficient. This capacity for language to create meaning beyond the denotive word has been given careful treatment by Charles Taylor in *The Language Animal* (2016). Taylor argues that words do not simply designate meaning but constitute it, shaping rather than describing the world. Taylor's work suggests an important development on Eagleton's approach to irony, strengthening the view that ironic unsaying is creative, in beginning to constitute its resolution heuristically.

Like Eagleton, for whom language is not just nomination but 'the power that makes human action possible in the first place,'[6] Taylor understands language to be 'the medium we are in,' rather than a tool that encodes information.[7] Language 'brings about the stance whereby we relate to things in the linguistic dimension,' allowing reflection on a situation as well as response to it.[8] Importantly, this occurs in joint space: language

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[5] Eagleton, *The Event of Literature*, 101.
[6] Eagleton, *The Event of Literature*, 173.
[7] Charles Taylor, *The Language Animal: The Full Shape of the Human Linguistic Capacity* (Cambridge, MS and London: The Belknap Press, 2016), 33, 90.
[8] Ibid., 30, 6.

is dialogical and opens new kinds of relations. Taylor's view directly challenges Rorty's approach to communication and meaning as 'haphazard matings' between utterly contingent vocabularies, and irony as a position of detachment from the vocabularies of others (see Chapter Two).[9]

Significantly, Taylor is concerned with the way language constitutes and shapes concerns for things like friendship, equality or freedom, rather than just describing these as features of life.[10] He explores this possibility through three counter-enlightenment thinkers, Johann Herder, Alexander von Humboldt and Johann Hamann, who critique a designative theory of meaning as developed by Thomas Hobbes, John Locke and Étienne Condillac. As contrasting capacities of language, the *constitutive* and *designative* are usefully described by Merleau-Ponty as the difference between 'speaking speech' and 'spoken speech' – between words that create or engender meaning through their speaking, and words that describe meaning.[11] Taylor is concerned with the way language constitutes experience in ways not encompassed by the designative view. That is, the way language: articulates and brings things to awareness; foregrounds something within public space, drawing an interpretive community into discourse; shapes and give expression to foundational human concerns.[12] For example, rather than simply describing a relationship, speaking of 'friendship' opens a shared concern for companionship while effecting something of it.[13]

The Hobbes–Locke–Condillac theory described by Taylor begins with the singular, observing subject who senses the world and describes it to others, through words that 'stand for' things. The linguistic sign is considered both arbitrary and transparent, without an excess of meaning and allowing for clear and efficient thinking.[14] On this

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[9] Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity,* 16..
[10] Taylor, *The Language Animal,* 93; Charles Taylor, *Human Agency and Language: Philosophical Papers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 277.
[11] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, cited in Taylor, *The Language Animal*, 30.
[12] Taylor, *Human Agency and Language*, 263–5.
[13] This differs slightly from the 'performative' force of language explored by J. L. Austin. A performative is a word that achieves an action, as in the utterance 'I consecrate this ship.' See J. L. Austin, *Philosophical Papers* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961), extracted in 'J. L. Austin,' *Words About God: The Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Ian T. Ramsey (London: SCM Press, 1971), 222–23.
[14] Taylor, *The Language Animal*, 13, 105–09.

view, irony might be defined as the outright subversion of the truth or as a purposefully invalid ascription, demonstrably unverifiable against self-standing reality.

By contrast, a constitutive approach might conceive irony as open-ended: meaning is grasped heuristically in the dialogical movement between speaker and hearer, anticipation and event. On this view of language, the slippage of meaning characteristic to irony indicates the need for continual reinterpretation and a sensitivity to understanding as necessarily partial and provisional. This is not to subvert meaning as utterly contingent or haphazard. Rather, irony can be productive, shaping engagement with real situations, representations and events as a 'strategic labour' – a term Eagleton uses to describe literature. For Eagleton,

> The [literary] work itself is to be seen not as a reflection of a history external to it, but as a strategic labour – as a way of setting to work on a reality which, in order to be accessible to it, must somehow be contained within it ... The literary work or cultural object, as though for the first time, brings into being that very situation to which it is also, at one and the same time, a reaction.[15]

The prophetic denunciation of hubris and wrongdoing in the Hebrew Bible provides a good example of irony as a 'strategic labour.' For example, Nathan's parable, cited above, confront King David with the need for greater self-awareness. So too, Jesus' words, 'You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of the bones of the dead and everything unclean' (Mt 23:27), open a concern for righteousness as more than representation, by indicating a discrepancy between the Pharisee's deportment and character. Encouraging humility or generating resistance, irony sets to work on the listener, who must consider the directedness of the ironic word and not simply deduce an obverse meaning.

Here, a similarity can be indicated between Eagleton and Taylor's approach to language within critical endeavour. By indicating the intractable tensions of human experience, Eagleton's vision is expansive, in the sense that language can generate perspectives beyond instantiated meanings: 'If we have the means to raise a question in the first place, the answer might not be too far distant.'[16] However, where Eagleton understands

[15] Eagleton, *The Event of Literature*, 170.
[16] Eagleton, *The Event of Literature*, 177. Cf. Eagleton, *Hope Without Optimism*, 122; 114. Speaking of hopelessness 'must logically presuppose the idea of hope.'

language as that which might 'point us in the direction of a solution or at least suggest what would count as one,'[17] Taylor's exploration of the constitutive force of language is expansive in another sense. Taylor's focus suggests that language, in giving expression to foundational human concerns, already begins to constitute their resolution, by bringing into being a stance through which we incorporate those tensions into a more complex understanding. This reading of Taylor strengthens the view that irony, conspicuously insufficient in and of itself, is inherently creative as an opening for renewal and change.

The comic horizon of Christian witness

This constitutive aspect of ironic negation can be given greater definition through an understanding of the comic tonality of New Testament witness (*kerygma*). Here, Dan Otto Via's approach to the comic structure of Jesus' death and resurrection supports a view of Christian faith in which loss constitutes a surprising surplus of gain. While Eagleton emphasises the tragic as the necessary route toward redemption, a comic-ironic approach to Christian faith is open-ended, in generating an excess of creative possibilities through perceived loss.

For Sally McFague, metaphor shows language to be a material phenomenon, in which meaning is forged in association with what is 'concrete, sensuous, familiar and bodily.'[18] As such, language opens toward an excess of meaning beyond its symbolic presentation. For Eagleton, this is most evident in poetry, in the sense that 'in the sense that the poem's material body opens to a world beyond itself precisely by virtue of its internal workings … The more thickly textured the poem's language, the more it becomes a thing in its own right, yet the more it can gesture beyond itself.'[19]

That meaning overfills the intention, form and context of language could be described as comic. This is to suggest a basic contradiction within language, which relies on

[17] Eagleton, *The Event of Literature*, 177.
[18] Sallie McFague, *Speaking in Parables: A Study in Metaphor and Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), 51.
[19] Eagleton, *The Event of Literature*, 205. Cf. Eagleton, *Materialism*, 132: Poetry is 'where meaning is bound up with such somatic aspects of language as tone, pitch, pace, texture, volume and rhythm.' See also Terry Eagleton, *Humour* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2019), 66.

conventions and the constrained patterns of representation yet thrives on creative diversions from the normal. This definition of the comic dimension of language reflects Alenka Zupančič's approach to comedy which, she argues, not only subverts power and reveals a shared finitude, but recognises that 'humanity' contains a contradiction: it is a failed finitude or a 'finitude with a leak in it.'[20] Likewise, Eagleton's approach to human nature, that 'it belongs to our nature that we are able to go beyond it,' implies a similar structure of comic excess, especially where one's sense of possibility is constrained.[21]

The misadventures of Charlie Chaplin illustrate comic structure well. While Chaplin inadvertently thwarts the strength of a ruffian or the authority of a policeman, the tone of his comic films is more than subversive. Chaplin is no cynic, laughing haughtily at the subversion of power and hubris; rather, his small and guileless character is refracted through the surprising, accidental surplus of his body, in which an awkward and unseeming foolishness proves to be wisdom. Similarly, Via describes the classical ironic character of antiquity: 'The agonist-hero is often an *eirōn* (ironical man) who feigns stupidity and makes himself out to be less than he is. But in the end his shrewd humility proves to be wisdom.'[22] This definition makes a clear link between comic uplift and irony.

A comparable structure characterises Via's approach to comic parables.[23] Via contrasts tragic and comic parables in their directedness toward degradation or amelioration – such as the Parable of the Ten Maidens (tragic) and the Parable of the Prodigal Son (comic). He describes the comic as a genre that leads to the eventual wellbeing or inclusion of the protagonist.[24] Comedy offers surprising, counterintuitive openings where the inevitable fate of tragedy forecloses on possibilities for life.

For Via, to attend to genre or structure is to recognise what holds a text together, the 'hidden or underlying configuration' that makes sense of the visible patterns of the

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[20] Zupančič, *The Odd One In*, 49.

[21] Eagleton, *The Illusions of Postmodernism*, 73. A similar comic surplus can be discerned in John's prologue: 'After me comes a man who ranks ahead of me because he was before me' (Jn 1:30).

[22] Dan O. Via, *Kergyma and Comedy in the New Testament: A Structuralist Approach to Hermeneutic* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), 45.

[23] Dan O. Via, *The Parables: Their Literary and Existential Dimension* (Philadelphia: The Fortress Press, 1967).

[24] Via, *The Parables,* 145.

text.[25] In this sense, he understands the *kerygma,* or proclamation of Jesus' death and resurrection as comic, as it provides grammatical cohesion to the New Testament. For instance, Via argues that Paul's *kerygmatic* witness was not an apologetic attempt to convince others of the resurrection; 'he rather wanted to represent the form in which we have the resurrected one – as the crucified.'[26] For Via, it is the comic structure of the *kerygma* that allows a redemptive horizon to be gained within suffering: 'The resurrection situation is the promise of life in the midst of death, and if the word brings this life to existence then the structure of the word must qualify the structure of the life.'[27]

To attend to the comic structure of Christian witness is to perceive gain constituted through loss. Therefore, for Paul, 'The message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God' (1 Cor. 1:18). By contrast, Eagleton's view of faith is tinged with lingering tragedy, even as it anticipates a more realistic hope: 'Tragedy for me concerns the paradox by which we can begin to move beyond our desperate plight in the very act, and by the very power, by which we confess that this state of permanent catastrophe is how things fundamentally are with us.'[28] While none could claim this tragic dimension is not a significant feature within Christian faith, Eagleton's presentation does not entail any comic resolution beyond his prescient questioning. Rather, he seeks to reassert the necessity for a tragic vision within western culture, that hope itself might become meaningful, for 'what is the point of faith or hope in a civilization which regards itself as pretty well self-sufficient?'[29]

If the message of Jesus' death and resurrection can be heard as meaningful through its tragic and comic aspects, Eagleton's preference for the tragic—in his critique of ideology and hubris—contrasts with Via's affirmation of the comic. This difference can also be

[25] Via, *Kerygma and Comedy*, 7.
[26] Ibid., 42.
[27] Ibid., 58. Similarly, Via approaches the Gospel of Mark as a *tragicomic* genre, animated by an interplay of loss and gain, in which 'a given situation is seen *simultaneously* as both tragic and comic … The new which finally issues in resurrection is there from the beginning.' Ibid., 99.
[28] Eagleton and Beaumont, *The Task of the Critic*, 277. Also, tragedy entails 'the passage of a humble, victimised thing from weakness to power.' Eagleton, *Radical Sacrifice*, 31.
[29] Eagleton, *Reason, Faith and Revolution*, 45. Cf. Eagleton, *Hope Without Optimism*, 37: 'One might claim that part of what disappears when the Christian doctrine of hope becomes the secular ideology of progress is precisely its tragic dimension.'

seen in their contrasting portraits of Jesus. Eagleton regularly describes Jesus as a figure of history whose suffering becomes meaningful as a radical critique of society and politics. By contrast, for Via, meaning is not to be gained through a purported non-linguistic, socio-historical context behind the text, which is to say, through the historicist account of Jesus' crucifixion as a 'bloody political murder' without reference to the *kerygma*.[30] Rather, the received biblical text becomes meaningful within Christian faith as it is heard comically—as *good news*—through a structure of creativity that exceeds loss, life that exceeds death.

Where a tragic sense of irony may lead to cynicism and withdrawal from ethical commitments—poised in the negation of meaning rather than giving impetus to the expansion of meaning—a comic-ironic approach to the cross is creative. For Christians, Jesus' death is understood through the excess of comic reverberations which this event sets up; proclamation of Jesus' death generates meaning beyond any inherent literary structure or arrangement of verbal sounds. If Christian faith is a material practice, then Christian witness is also a material phenomenon, in which meaning is forged in association with what is 'concrete, sensuous, familiar and bodily,' shaping human experience comically, as an occasion for renewal and transformation.[31]

This comic-ironic structure is radically open-ended. Thus, John concludes his account of Jesus' life and death comically, not by recalling an image of Jesus as political martyr but by indicating the unprecedented creativity of the Word made flesh: 'But there are also many other things that Jesus did; if every one of them were written down, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written' (Jn 21:25).

[30] Via, *Kergyma and Comedy*, 23. Eagleton, *Radical Sacrifice*, 28.
[31] Cf. McFague, *Speaking in Parables*, 51.

6

Negation by *kenotic* excess: The redemptive outworking of the cross

This chapter develops the preceding account of ironic creativity by looking critically to Eagleton's understanding of the cross. For Eagleton, the cross is a gratuitous transgression, a self-negating sign that embraces death and redoubles alienation and loss. On this view, Christian faith functions like a midwife, guiding the subject through an experience of trauma that desire for a radically new future might be born. Yet in emphasising the transgression of the cross, the character of Eagleton's God remains elusive. By considering the potential creativity of ironic negation, a more affirmative witness is offered: *kenosis* or self-emptying loss generates redemptive openings for renewal and growth, within the contingencies of experience. Approached as the humility of God, the cross unsays alienation by constituting presence and relationality, a dramatic *saying by unsaying*, figuring the radically new through the unprecedented excess of gratuitous love.

Redoubling alienation: the cross as estrangement

For Eagleton, 'It is the pure negativity of loss that will confound the powers of this world'; that which cannot be assimilated within the current setup—the broken and outcast—prefigure a radically new political terrain.[1] Likewise, Eagleton understands the cross as an ironic critique of present society and politics. This is underpinned by an apophatic theology characterised by Jesus' experience of God's absence in the cry, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' (Mt 27:46) By redoubling alienation, the cross pushes the subject to confront loss and death, that desire for the radically new might be born.

More than an event entailing Jesus' estrangement from God, the cross for Eagleton epitomises God's own self-estrangement, in which God is alienated from God. In a 'carnivalesque parody' inverting the donor-recipient structure of ritual sacrifice as

[1] Eagleton, *Radical Sacrifice*, 152.

exchange and propitiation, it is God himself who is flayed on the cross.[2] For Eagleton, the cross therefore offers an ideal 'critique of the ethic of self-sovereignty'; it is a sign of self-negation that reveals the emptiness and futility of imaginary and symbolic projections concerning God, created in service to philosophy, culture or ideology.[3]

On this view, God's character remains enigmatic, revealed with the greatest intensity in the silence confronting Jesus, who can only understand God as the object-cause and impetus of his desire.[4]

> His [Jesus'] self-surrender must thus be without an assured ground. Yet if it is groundless, it is also thus in the sense that the Father who sustains [Jesus' fidelity to the Father] is an unfathomable abyss of love rather than a copper-bottomed metaphysical guarantee. It is the Father himself who lies at the source of Jesus' faith, as the object-cause of his desire, and it is in this sense that he has not been forsaken. On the contrary, God is present on this scene as the power that enables Jesus to forsake himself.[5]

In this passage, Eagleton understands Christian faith as a desire for God's loving fidelity, which sustains the individual through the extremes of suffering an alienation.[6] The traumatic event gives birth to desire for a God who is beyond the paucity of imaginary sentiment or symbolic obligation, as in religious piety or law. Eagleton's view of Christian faith could therefore be summed up by the image of the midwife, guiding the subject through an experience of trauma—a confrontation with the Real—that desire for a radically new future be born, beyond the current purview of religion, philosophy, culture or politics.[7]

Closely aligned to Eagleton's notion of tragedy as an embrace of death that demonstrates freedom over against fate and determinism, God emerges as a subject

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[2] Ibid., 31.
[3] Ibid., 12.
[4] Ibid., 40.
[5] Ibid., 40. There are numerous parallels between Eagleton and Žižek's reading of the cross, some of which are indicated in the footnotes below. For Žižek, 'Man's alienation from God [...] must coincide with the alienation of God from himself.' Žižek and Gunjević, *God in Pain*, 169.
[6] Cf. Žižek. The suffering endured by God is necessary for theology to articulate the depths of human suffering, as in the *Shoah*, after Bonhoeffer's observation, 'Only a suffering God can help us now.' Ibid., 157.
[7] Against the assurances of ideology, Eagleton also understands Christian faith to entail self-sacrifice as willingly forsaking oneself despite any foreknowledge of consequence. Eagleton, *Radical Sacrifice*, 40.

through the authenticating act of self-sacrifice.[8] Indeed, God is the 'power' to forsake oneself despite any foreknowledge of consequence.[9] In understanding God's identity through act of self-estrangement and therefore the possibility of more authentic relationships with others (see Chapter Four), Eagleton comes close to an intimate portrait of God as 'friend, lover and fellow accused,' which he understands to be characteristic of Christian faith.[10]

Yet at this point of potential affirmation, in which the possibility of relationality is opened by God's self-differentiated nature, Eagleton choses to portray God as a ponderous psychotherapist, an analyst who remains silent in response to their patient's cries. Offered no word of comfort or explanation, the patient must come to confront his or her their own trauma, thereby emerging as a 'new kind of subject' who recognises that 'only by living its wretched condition to the full can it hope to annul it and in doing so to abolish itself' and achieve emancipation.[11] Anticipating this emancipatory act of the alienated human subject, Eagleton views Christian faith as a paradigm for revolution, rather than the recognition of a comforting or reconciling word heard in the midst of suffering.

In some ways, Eagleton's silent God resonates with Christian apophatic tradition, which seeks to foster a consciousness of God as 'always greater than what one can say of God,' offsetting any positive valuation of suffering or dismissive theodicy.[12] However, where God-as-psychotherapist confronts the speech of humankind with silence, for the apophatic tradition, God's presence is not simply registered in absence but cusped between negation and affirmation – between silence *and* speech. That is, God is encountered as an excess beyond comprehension within the rich, narrative drama of the church, whose life and worship expresses God's character through innumerable

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[8] Ibid., 31. This view also structures Eagleton's reading of *kenosis* as 'a precious spiritual tradition which knows how to conjure force out of failure, and by which necessity is transformed into freedom and agency discovered in affliction.' *The Illusions of Postmodernism*, 91.

[9] Eagleton, *Radical Sacrifice*, 40.

[10] Eagleton, *Culture and the Death of God*, 160.

[11] Eagleton, *Radical Sacrifice*, 180–1.

[12] Lieven Boeve, *God Interrupts History: Theology in a Time of Upheaval* (New York and London: Continuum, 2007), 140. See also Karen Kilby, 'Negative Theology and Meaningless Suffering,' *Modern Theology* 36.1 (2020), 103.

perspectives.[13] On this point, Eagleton's approach to the cross is at odds with his own critical method, which similarly seeks an ironic tensioning of contrasting concepts like silence and speech.

An apophatic theology need not dismiss all symbolic expressions or redouble alienation from God. Just as ironic criticism can provoke meaning by showing the interwoven, even contradictory, trajectories of experience, for David Newheiser, apophatic theology offers a dynamic approach to God:

> In contrast to an unmodulated negation that simply obliterates its object, [negative political theology] exemplifies a negativity that holds affirmation open to future revision. Because this negativity is reflexive, it cannot become hegemonic … Rather than foreclosing creativity, this critical practice encourages experimentation by rendering every attempt provisional, fungible, fresh.[14]

Rather than reflecting the creative aspect of apophasis that encourages 'revision' and 'experimentation,' the comprehensive silence of Eagleton's God might breed incurious apathy as much as revolutionary passion. Eagleton's understanding of the cross seems finally like his assessment of Marxism, as no longer 'a living political reality' and through which any prospect of socialist change is 'exceedingly remote.'[15] One might imagine Jesus alongside Lenin in his mausoleum, his wax-like fist clenched as a symbol of the impossibility of attaining one's desire.

Kenosis as radical historicity and the loss of abstraction

While Eagleton's view of the cross emphasises alienation from God, a Christian view of the cross as the *kenosis* (self-emptying loss) of God emphasises the dramatic outworking of God's character; this view sustains witness to the substantial and creative life of God within history. Ironically, while the cross problematises metaphysical and ideological conceptions of God, it also substantiates God's *coming to be* in Christ, generating relationality and presence rather than alienation and distance.

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[13] See David Newheiser on Dionysius the Areopagite. 'Desacralizing Political Theology: Dionysius the Areopagite and Giorgio Agamben,' *Modern Theology* 36.1 (2020), 77.
[14] David Newheiser, 'Why the World Needs Negative Political Theology,' *Modern Theology* 36.1 (2020), 12.
[15] Eagleton, *Illusions of Postmodernism*, ix.

Eagleton's view of the cross as a radical disruption of hubris and ideology begins with an emphasis on the fragility and suffering of God in Christ. On face value, this approach seems typical of what Sarah Coakley has defined as a 'distinctly modern' approach to *kenosis* (from *kenoō*, 'to make empty'), a focus on God as one who 'becomes intrinsically devoid of omniscience and omnipotence.'[16] This view is tethered to Eagleton's broader political interests: if *kenosis* 'knows how to conjure force out of failure,' it 'can figure only as folly to the prevailing powers, which is the exact measure of its wisdom.'[17] A similar view can be discerned in Jürgen Moltmann's theology, for whom God's suffering in Christ is a radical disruption of the metaphysical project of theism:

> Christian faith effects liberation from the childish projections of human needs for the riches of God ... It brings liberation from the divinized father-figures by which men seek to sustain their childhood. It brings liberation from fear in the ideas of political omnipotence with which the powers on earth legitimate their rule ... and with which the impotent compensate their impotence in dreams.[18]

If the suffering of God on the cross entails the radical disruption of culture and politics, it is foundational for Christian theology that this also figures a renewed and redemptive relationality. For example, Martin Luther finds reconciliation in mutual forsakenness: 'In the cross, Father and Son are most deeply separated in forsakenness and at the same time are most intimately one in their surrender.'[19] Likewise, for Paul, through the cross, 'God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven' (Col. 1:20). Where Eagleton understands the *kenotic* identity of God as the power to forsake oneself of pretentious certainties about God, Christian theology looks to the cross as the definitive revelation of God's character. Here, Eagleton's theology differs from

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[16] Sarah Coakley, *Powers and Submissions: Spirituality, Philosophy and Gender* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2002), 18, 24. For a basic definition of *kenosis*, see Albrecht Oepke, 'Kenos,' in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, trans. Geoffrey Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1985), 427. Oepke's reading of *kenoō* in Philippians (2:6–7) emphasises the laying aside of the 'divine form' to take the form of a servant, a movement which suggests humility but also indicates the disruption of speculative metaphysics.
[17] Eagleton, *The Illusions of Postmodernism*, 91.
[18] Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, trans. R. A. Wilson and John Bowden (London: SCM Press, 1974), 215–6.
[19] Martin Luther, in Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 244

Moltmann, who looks not only to the death of God on the cross, but to *Jesus' death in God* and the character of *God in Jesus' death*.[20]

Kenotic (self-emptying) loss might therefore be approached as a movement that constitutes a new relational paradigm, in the loss of abstraction between persons and the intimate recognition of mutuality. This has been expressed succinctly by Karl Rahner, for whom God is given genuine and not derivative reality in Christ, who is God's 'coming to be.'[21] God's character is subsequently affirmed in the identity and purpose of the church, in bearing in suffering and servitude with 'the same mind' that was in Jesus Christ (Phil. 2:5): 'Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves' (Phil. 2:3). As such, *kenosis* for the church is a redemptive paradigm that opens a horizon of gain through loss.

This view of *kenosis* as a dramatic outworking of God's character, or God's *coming to be* in history, offers a fruitful way of reading Paul's letter to the church at Philippi, especially the hymn of chapter 2:5–11, which is the primary reference point for Christian talk about *kenosis.*[22] In a crowded and complex terrain of scholarship consisting of doctrinal, philosophical, historical and ethical approaches, it is refreshing to recall, as does Bonnie Thurston, that Paul sung hymns in prison (Acts 16:25).[23] Just as African-American slaves sung of God's faithfulness to Israel, this hymn related to the church at Philippi can be considered an event of God's *kenosis*, the *coming to be* of God's redemptive presence in the midst of strife and loss.[24] By singing this hymn, Paul and the church discover in the humiliation of the cross the very possibility redemptive gain.

Short-circuiting potentially endless speculation as to the nature of God, Paul's letter performs within concrete situation what the hymn proclaims: 'Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ' (Phil. 1: 2); his letter *speaks* the very

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[20] Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 201, 207.
[21] Karl Rahner, in Hans Küng, *The Incarnation of God*, trans. J. R. Stephenson (Edinburg: T. & T. Clark, 1970), 542.
[22] Recent studies on *kenosis* have looked to the performative aspect of this hymn, likely derived from an earlier baptismal or eucharistic setting. Coakley, *Powers and Submissions*, 6. For Coakley, Paul's views on *kenosis* were 'largely non-speculative and non-dogmatic.' Ibid., 12.
[23] Bonnie B. Thurston and Judith M. Ryan, *Philippians and Philemon*, ed. Daniel J. Harrington (Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2005), 86.
[24] On the difficulties facing the church at Philippi, see Thurston, *Philippians,* 11.

hospitality it brings into focus.[25] It is this creative, constitutive dimension that Eagleton's theology lacks, in which the *kenosis* of God does not simply signify loss and abstraction but substantiates God's loving fidelity.

While Eagleton's view of the cross seems finally symbolic, as a *promise* of renewal rather than present reconciliation, the loss which the cross entails—of life, hope and fidelity to God—need not lead away from history, ethics or politics but can open a view of God's radical involvement in these things. For Moltmann, Christ does not only represent God's kingdom as an inverse sign, but 'this kingdom is already present in him and has been given a fundamental definition in his history.'[26] Similarly, for Lieven Boeve, it is important to situate an apophatic consciousness within a hermeneutic that perceives a transcendent God active in history.[27] On this view, the self-negating sign might be recast through a 'continuous radical hermeneutics of history,' in grappling with the creativity of God that exceeds any symbolic circumscription.[28]

It is perhaps Eagleton's understanding of love, more than the tragedy of sacrifice, which better resembles the character of God in Christ. Eagleton writes of love as the more 'fulfilling' mode of sacrifice, 'in which the self is enriched by being bestowed, augmented by being yielded up.'[29] If love is epitomised by a *kenotic* encounter with 'the other at his or her most needy or desolate,' than in Christ, the authentic difference of God is known relationality, in being there for others.[30] If, for Eagleton the critic, the cross redoubles alienation from God, 'for Christian faith, the death of God is not a question of his disappearance. On the contrary, it is one of the places where he is most fully present.'[31] The cross is not only a sign of negation but a narrative of relational intimacy and love, the redemptive outworking of the ironic sign.

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[25] Thurston observes that Paul's writing also demonstrates hospitality by deploying language that is meaningful for both Jewish and Hellenistic audiences. Ibid., 88.
[26] Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 263. Moltmann formulates this proposition through Hegelian dialectic: reconciliation through the cross becomes meaningful in the eventful play between present situation and future hope. 'The negation of the negative is formulated in the historical anticipation of the eschatological positive, because only here does the experience of the negativity of the negative emerge.' Ibid., 285.
[27] Eagleton, *Radical Sacrifice*, 179.
[28] Boeve, *God Interrupts History*, 154–55.
[29] Eagleton, *Radical Sacrifice*, 98.
[30] Ibid., 99–100.
[31] Eagleton, *Culture and the Death of God*, 160.

Redemptive excess: characterising Christian gratuitousness as humility

While the character of God remains enigmatic within Eagleton's treatment of the cross, he nevertheless indicates certain qualities that might define God's future through the cross. Indeed, 'profligate excess' and 'gratuitousness' are qualities favoured by Eagleton when describing both creation and the cross, prefiguring a view of God's future as decidedly avant-garde, extravagant *jouissance*, an excess that surpasses present frames of understanding. However, where such excess might readily refract into meaninglessness, New Testament witness emphasises the humility of the cross as the defining characteristic of God's creativity, thereby perceiving this gratuitousness event as redemptive rather than ambivalent or destructive.

Eagleton writes of Jesus' crucifixion as an event that 'inaugurates the unimaginably avant-garde reality of the kingdom of God.'[32] Understood as the comprehensive displacement of present structures and the constrained vision of institutional religion—a 'passage through the very sacrificial institution that has now been definitively surpassed'—the cross proclaims an 'impending upheaval' which surpasses context, form and established values.[33] Yet without giving further definition to this radically new existence, such gratuitousness might readily branch along divergent trajectories, alternatively redemptive, ambivalent or destructive.

Eagleton's use of 'avant-garde' to describe God's future is conspicuous. A regular feature of the avant-garde is a play of movement, colour or sound intended to shock, supplanting the old by transgressing inherited forms and expectations. More than deviating from convention, the avant-garde is self-negating, as in the expressionist gesture that seeks to dissipate established assumptions about art—as representational, commercial, etc.—thereby signalling a radical freedom from expectations. Conceived through this metaphor, God's future seems beyond anticipation and, like much of the avant-garde, intentionally beyond grasp.

A similar view can be discerned in Eagleton's approach to creation, which is linked closely to his notion of human flourishing. Following Marx, for whom human

[32] After Alain Badiou's definition of an event. Eagleton, *Radical Sacrifice*, 29.
[33] Ibid., 29, 179.

flourishing was closely aligned with aesthetics as *praxis*—in which the performance itself is self-grounding and self-realising—Eagleton concludes that 'the meaning of life is interestingly close to meaningless': needing no 'utilitarian purpose or earnest metaphysical end, it is a delight in itself.'[34] Creation is radically pointless, a wholly contingent gesture, and such *meaninglessness* is the goal of emancipation.

Imagined as excess, gratuitousness and aesthetic *praxis*, God's purposes for creation are definitively ambiguous. Eagleton's 'unimaginably avant-garde' view of the 'kingdom of God' might readily be aligned with *jouissance*, transgressing everyday utilitarian constraints by self-abandonment and the acceptance of death.[35] Whether God's future is to be discerned in Mary's self-effacing hospitality or the throws of eroticism remains unclear. If both love and evil can be typified as excessive for their own sake, any distinction between the two remains unchecked; there is nothing to suggest that profligate excess might not lead to a narcissistic enthralment with self-indulgence the destruction of the body.[36]

In contrast to the shockingly new proposed in *Radical Sacrifice* (2018), Eagleton's use of jazz as a metaphor for the meaning of life offers a more subtle reading on the aesthetics of human flourishing. Jazz improvisation depends on a 'receptive sensitivity to the self-expressive performances of the other musicians.'[37] This entails a certain degree of loss: the 'development of each' becomes 'the condition for the development of all.'[38] Eagleton's metaphor could be extended: jazz can be typified by a conversational interplay between individual expression and compositional structure. Without this dialogical interplay between musicians, animated within the frames of a composition—or less rigidly, any preceding sonority or gesture—collective improvisation is nothing more than a cacophony of sound.

If self-limitation and conversational receptivity to others underpin the creativity of jazz—as a mode of collective, aesthetic flourishing—these traits might also enrich

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[34] Eagleton, *The Meaning of Life*, 100. See also Eagleton, *The Event of Literature*, 203–4.
[35] Thus, 'to live in anticipation of that end is the reverse of living abstemiously.' Eagleton, *Radical Sacrifice*, 98. On creation as *jouissance*, see *Trouble with Strangers*, 116.
[36] Eagleton observes profligate excess as a feature common to evil and love. Terry Eagleton, *On Evil* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2010), 84.
[37] Eagleton, *The Meaning of Life*, 100.
[38] Eagleton and Beaumont, *The Task of the Critic*, 297.

Eagleton's interpretation of the cross as gratuitous excess. That is, the humility of the cross might be heard as the definitive characteristic of God's creativity, through which gratuitous transgression becomes redemptive rather than ambivalent or destructive. Narrated through the tangible openings for love and fidelity that it generates, the cross constitutes renewal and flourishing within contingent experience.

Conclusion

This proposition, that God's renewing creativity is gained through the exigencies of loss and death, indicates a redemptive trajectory for philosophical and cultural approaches to irony, which otherwise tend toward cynicism and apathy. Opening toward this view, this thesis has explored ironical tonalities of Eagleton's critical method and literary style, demonstrating that irony does more than subvert hubris and ideology, by sharpening self-awareness and provoking recognition of the exigencies and contradictions shaping human identity and purpose.

Where irony unsays the supposed reliability of instantiated assumptions and conceptual totalities, such unsaying is surpassed by the interactive complexity that irony generates—a dynamic interplay of said and unsaid, text and subject, distance and proximity—tensioned to develop, transpose and expand. In other words, if irony reveals inherent flaws within a perspective, it also indicates an opening for the reconfiguration of assumptions as they play out within experience.

While this expansive sense of irony animates Eagleton's critical project, his approach to Christian faith overlooks the potential for ironic negation to constitute present, redemptive possibilities; Eagleton's vision remains poised in the negative, anticipating future renewal. This can constrain his interpretation of Christian faith, which emphasises material brokenness, the *eucharist* and the cross as signs of negation, *unsaying* the supposed sufficiency of the current political and social setup.

Developing Eagleton's presentation of Christian faith in direction more affirmative of present human dignity, the possibility of gain within loss was emphasised through the narrative dimensions of Christian witness, rather than the symbolic. More than

anticipating the revolutionary inversion of society and politics, scenes of repentance and humility in the New Testament dramatise the redemptive power of God in Christ, giving impetus to love beyond the constraints of imaginary or symbolic constructs. Emphasising God encountered *in the flesh*, Christian faith disrupts the economy of discourse by casting redemptive possibilities across the exigencies of material experience.

Further still, by looking to the expansive qualities of the literary word, ironic negation was shown to entail a comic aspect. Likewise, Christian witness was considered expansive, an comic-iroinc event that exceeds its literary staging. On this view, the message of the cross is heard as a dramatic *saying by unsaying*, by which the radically new is constituted in the unprecedented excess of gratuitous love.

This difference between New Testament witness and Eagleton's theology, which treats the cross as an iroinc sign of absence, might finally be articulated in response to the question, how might the cross affirm human experience, without sidestepping the very real unsaying of cultural hubris, political ideology and religious hypocrisy that it entails? For Jean-Luc Marion, the cross is confronting as a brutally real exhibition of 'the history of murder and of hatred toward God and the innocent.'[39] The cross does not only signify transgression, as the mark humankind inflicts upon God, but is unprecedented as a visible negation of God's-self, a paradoxical imprint 'received by the invisible in the manifest wound that the invisible imposes on it.'[40]

What is therefore radical about the cross is not the symbolic transgression—for there is nothing new in transgression as such, nor in a political murder, other than degrees of magnitude—but the possibility of encountering creativity in loss, or the futurity of God in Christ: 'So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! (2 Cor 5.17). Heard through Christian witness to the life and character of God in Christ, the radical and gratuitous *new* is marked by humility, just as Jesus' resurrected life is marked by his scars (Jn 20:20). Rather than redoubling alienation from God, the cross is an ironic doubling that folds back into the

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[39] Jean-Luc Marion, *The Crossing of the Visible*, trans. James K. A. Smith (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004), 72.
[40] Marion, *The Crossing of the Visible*, 74.

drama of human experience as ‘faith working through love’ (Gal. 5:6). This dramatic *unsaying* constitutes an abundance of new saying; loss is overfilled by life as a creative, comic gift, engaged amid contingent experience.

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