

# J.L. Austin and the Book of Jonah

Terry Eagleton

The surrealist farce known as the Book of Jonah, surely the one consciously witty book in the Bible, is easily summarised. God commands Jonah to go and cry doom on Nineveh, a city whose viciousness has just come to his attention, but Jonah doesn't reckon much to this mission and takes off instead for Tarshish. A divinely engineered storm threatens his ship, and he requests the crew with remarkable *sang froid* to pitch him overboard. God sends a fish to swallow Jonah up and spew him out again three days later, whereupon Jonah does manage to get himself to Nineveh and wanders the city proclaiming imminent catastrophe. Unusually enough, the inhabitants of the city, prodded a bit by their king, take Jonah's prophecy to heart and repent, which infuriates Jonah so much that he goes and sulks outside the city hoping to die. God fools around with him briefly, sending a plant to shade him, then a worm to devour the plant, then a sultry wind to make him faint from heat, and finally treats him to a short homily about divine mercy.

Why was Jonah so reluctant to go to Nineveh in the first place? Perhaps because hectoring a seedy bunch of strangers about their vices isn't the best guarantee of a long life. But in the storm scene Jonah shows scant regard for his own safety, and indeed by the end of the text is betraying a powerful death wish. The fact is that he refused to obey God because he thought there was no point, and tells God as much after he has spared Nineveh. God is a spineless liberal given to hollow authoritarian threats, who would never have the guts to perform what he promises. Jonah understands divine psychology far too well to take such tetchy bumbings seriously, and is loath to embark on the tiresome, complicated business of getting himself to Nineveh (it takes three days just to cross the city) when he knows that there is no impending disaster to be averted. He is angry with God because he can foresee all this from the outset and feels that God, who after all is supposed to be omniscient, would foresee it too if only he wasn't so mystified by his own macho image of himself. The point of Jonah's getting himself thrown overboard is to force God to save him, thus dramatically demonstrating to him that he's too soft-hearted to punish those who disobey him. If God wheels up a fish to rescue Jonah, won't he do something equivalent for Nineveh?

164

Jonah is of course taking a fairly hair-raising risk here, but he calculates that if God rates him important enough to play the prophet in Nineveh it would be perverse of him to let him drown. In any case, Jonah's disobedience is a kind of subtle flattery of God, a bit of emotional blackmail which God would be churlish to respond to by letting him go under: he reminds God later, after the Nineveh *débauche*, that he had told him at the outset that he was too loving and merciful to live up to his bloodthirsty intentions. Disobeying God is a crafty way of telling him what a nice chap he is, and thus—so Jonah hopes—may be done with impunity. Fleeing to Tarshish is just a flamboyant way of trying to bring God to his senses, induce a little self-knowledge in him; but God obtusely fails to take the point, and Jonah, perhaps despairing of the Almighty's capacity for self-enlightenment, sets out for Nineveh after all with a deepening sense of existential absurdity.

Once in the city, Jonah shambles around playing at being a prophet, no doubt pretty perfunctorily, and is disgusted to find that his clichéd denunciations actually work. Disgusted, because of course, Jonah doesn't believe for a moment that Nineveh's suspiciously sudden repentance is anything of his own doing: it has been brought about by God, to save himself the mess, unpleasantness and damage to his credibility as a nice chap consequent on having to put his threats into practice. Jonah is enraged because God is simply using him as a fall guy to let himself off the hook of his own softbellied liberalism. What has happened is what Jonah knew would happen all along: he has been used as a cover for a massive climb-down on God's part, and God can now carry on persuading himself that he's a tough guy underneath. Jonah has merely been used as an instrument in the perpetuation of divine false consciousness. God would have spared the city even if Jonah had stayed at home; it's just that he needs some excuse to do so, and has manoeuvred Jonah, against his own better judgement, into providing him with one. Even if God *was* toying with the idea of blasting Nineveh, or at least thought he was, there would still have been no point, as Jonah sees it, in leaving home; for since God is omniscient he presumably knew when he asked Jonah to set out either that the city would be destroyed, in which case Jonah's journey was supremely unnecessary, or that it wouldn't be, in which case his journey was also unnecessary. Jonah doesn't know the outcome himself, but he knows that God does, and suspects that either way this renders his own part in the narrative ridiculously superfluous.

What happens in Nineveh is exactly what Jonah feared all along: that God's own chronic self-deception would drag him into its own wake and leave him looking a complete idiot. He has stomped around Nineveh proclaiming that its end is nigh, and now it isn't. God's view of the matter, of course, is that it's *because* Jonah has cried doom that the

doom hasn't come. The only successful prophet is an ineffectual one, one whose warnings fail to materialise. All good prophets are false prophets, undoing their own utterances in the very act of producing them. In the terms of J.L. Austin's *How to Do Things With Words*, prophetic utterances of Jonah's sort are 'constative' (descriptive of some real or possible state of affairs) only in what one might call their surface grammar; as far as their 'deep structure' goes they actually belong to Austin's class of 'performatives', linguistic acts which get something done. What they get done is to produce a state of affairs in which the state of affairs they describe won't be the case. Effective declarations of imminent catastrophe cancel themselves out, containing as they do a contradiction between what they say and what they do. In this sense they exactly fit the prototype of what the deconstructionist critic Paul de Man in his *Allegories of Reading* calls a 'literary' enunciation. The literary for de Man is the kind of speech-act within which the grammatical and the rhetorical are somehow at odds, and which thereby either subvert what they say by what they do or undo what they do by what they say. Yeats's celebrated line 'How can we know the dancer from the dance?' enquires, grammatically speaking, about how we can distinguish the dancer from the dance, perhaps with the implication that it's somehow important to do so; but as a performative or rhetorical utterance the line of course powerfully suggests that we neither can nor should. Literary language for de Man founders in a kind of fissure between its grammatical and rhetorical dimensions, and so do Jonah's prophecies of doom. All such prophets are self-deconstructing fools.

This, however, isn't exactly why Jonah is so furious. He is angry, as we've seen, because he has been shamelessly used as a pawn in God's self-mystifying game; and it is this which plunges him into the existential *angst* and nausea we find overwhelming him at the end of the narrative. If Jonah wants to curl up and die, it is because he can no longer stomach a history struck utterly pointless by God's self-blindness and self-indulgence. If the Creator himself is stupid enough not to know that he's the helpless victim of his own over-sanguine temperament, what hope for human self-insight? And if God just goes around forgiving everybody all the time, what's the point of doing anything? If disobedience on the scale of a Nineveh goes cavalierly unpunished, then the idea of disobedience also ceases to have meaning. God's mercy simply makes a mockery of human effort, which is why Jonah ends up in the grip of *Thanatos* or the death drive.

There is another way of accounting for Jonah's final depression and melancholia, his resolute 'decathecting' of reality and withdrawal of libido back into himself. Paul de Man, as we have seen, speaks of the discrepancy or aporetic relationship between the grammatical and the rhetorical (or performative) in literary discourse; but, drawing on

Nietzsch's notions of rhetoric, he also strives to deconstruct the very idea of performativity itself. For if performance is caught up in language, and if language is irreducibly figurative or tropological, then there may come a point, so de Man argues, when *we cannot know whether we are doing anything or not* (see his *Allegories of Reading*, New Haven and London 1979, pp. 121ff.) 'Rhetorical' discourse, in the sense of language intended to have definite public effects, is marred and insidiously undone by 'rhetoric' in the sense of verbal figuration. Something like this, I would suggest, is the abyss or aporia, the vertiginous collapse of meaning, in which Jonah is finally embroiled. For even if he could console himself by surmising that his journey really *was* necessary, that his crying doom was performatively effective rather than farcically redundant, there is no way in which he can ever know this for certain, no way in which he can ever know whether he was doing anything or not. There is no means of precisely determining the hair-thin line between describing and getting something done, being a spectator and being a participant. You can never know how far a particular narrative has already included you in, because to do so would require an impossible kind of meta-move. Jonah thinks he occupies such a meta-position in respect of God, outdoing God's omniscience in his superior insight into divine psychology; but it could just be that God had one over Jonah all along. For what if God's narrative had always already reckoned Jonah's into it, and the whole point of this pantomime was to bring Jonah to the point where he knew that he did not know whether he was doing anything or not? Jonah's initial presumption implies that action isn't important, and his subsequent despair implies the same; indeed these two conditions aren't in the least opposites for him, since the source of his despair is precisely his presumptuous belief that human initiatives are struck superfluous by God's mercy. But there is also a more subtle kind of despair, which springs from a 'deconstructive' insight into the ambiguous, problematical nature of action as such. To assume that human practice isn't necessary is to assume you know what it is, and it's perhaps this ground which is now crumbling from beneath Jonah's feet.

The book ends with a small Dadaist drama in which God conjures up a plant, worm and wind in rapid succession, like a magician on a rosy night at the Hammersmith Palais. This bizarre sadistic taunting is presumably meant among other things to show Jonah that God isn't such a nice chap as he seemed; if he can indulge in this sort of nasty insensitive trifling then he might just have blasted Nineveh after all. There's a darkly malevolent humour about this divine tomfoolery, which suggests in quick symbolic notation that God can either save Jonah or scupper him as the fancy takes him. If he can clown around as aggressively as this, setting Jonah solicitously on his feet one moment only to kick his legs from under him the next, God isn't perhaps quite the patsy Jonah

thought he was. What seems particularly callous about God is that his flashy, second-rate conjuring act is a kind of grisly parody of Jonah's black despair; God's gratuitous cavortings, pulling worms and winds from his sleeve like so many rabbits, writes cruelly large on Jonah's on nauseated sense of the gratuitousness of all meaning under God's libertarian regime. It's in that sheer unfounded gratuitousness of meaning, that abyss of all signification, that God brutally, therapeutically, rubs Jonah's nose. God's mercy is indeed a kind of absurdity, but there's no need for Jonah to make a song and dance of it, which is why God makes a mocking song and dance of it. Jonah just has to find some way of living with the fact that he can never know whether he is doing anything or not, which was perhaps the point of the whole futile narrative after all.

## **Religious Experience and the existence of God**

**Selwyn Gross OP**

Philosophers of religion sometimes appeal to religious experiences as evidence for the existence of God. To take one notable and philosophically sophisticated example, Professor Swinburne argues that religious experience constitutes good C-inductive ground for belief in the existence of God; and that the contribution of the argument from religious experience to the ensemble of arguments for the existence of God as a whole makes the ensemble a good P-inductive rather than just a C-inductive argument.<sup>1</sup> This is a substantial claim: a C-inductive argument merely adds to the probability of some claim, without making it more probable than not. A P-inductive argument, by contrast, establishes that the probability of the claim it defends is greater than fifty percent.