

ON THE OCCASION OF TERRY EAGLETON'S HONORARY DOCTORATE, UNIVERSITY OF SANTIAGO DE COMPOSTELA, SPAIN¹

CON MOTIVO DEL DOCTORADO *HONORIS CAUSA* DE TERRY EAGLETON, UNIVERSIDAD DE SANTIAGO DE COMPOSTELA, ESPAÑA

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Abstract: My essay—very much in the original, tentative and exploratory sense of the word—takes retrospective stock of Terry Eagleton's (roughly speaking) early to middle-period work across its dauntingly diverse range of topics. I focus, naturally enough, on those books that have most strongly influenced my own thinking or—as so often—pointed me in new and deeply mind-changing directions. The approach is in part anecdotal as befits a recurrent crossing of paths that has kept me reading his work with a constant sense that, whatever the shifts in my own interest, his latest book or article is likely to open up some fresh and germane line of enquiry. Nobody has done more than Terry over the past fifty years to extend the possibilities of creative inter-disciplinary exchange that opened in the late 1960s and are now being closed down with ferocious zeal

¹ Note: the following talk was delivered impromptu, transcribed from audio tape, and then lightly edited for publication. It is therefore quite informal—at times anecdotal—in style, as was felt to befit the occasion of its delivery.

by a UK in government in quest of unthinking ideological compliance. In this tribute I focus chiefly on his successive approaches to the question of ideology as it figures not only in literary and cultural theory but in daily praxis and various contexts of communal experience.

Keywords: Eagleton; Marxist Literary Theory; Aesthetic Ideology; Cultural theory.

Resumen: Mi ensayo -en el sentido original, tentativo y exploratorio de la palabra- hace un balance retrospectivo de la obra de Terry Eagleton (en términos generales) de principios a mediados de su período, en su abrumadora variedad de temas. Me centro, naturalmente en los libros que más han influido en mi propio pensamiento o -como tantas veces- que me han llevado a direcciones nuevas y profundamente cambiantes. El enfoque es en parte anecdótico, como corresponde a un cruce recurrente de caminos que me ha mantenido leyendo su obra con la constante sensación de que, sean cuales sean los cambios en mi propio interés, su último libro o artículo probablemente abrirá alguna línea de investigación nueva y pertinente. Nadie ha hecho más que Terry en los últimos cincuenta años para ampliar las posibilidades de intercambio creativo interdisciplinario que se abrieron a finales de la década de 1960 y que ahora están siendo cerradas con feroz celo por un Reino Unido en el gobierno en busca de la conformidad ideológica irreflexiva. En este homenaje me centraré principalmente en sus sucesivas aproximaciones a la cuestión de la ideología, tal y como figura no sólo en la teoría literaria y cultural, sino en la praxis cotidiana y en diversos contextos de la experiencia comunitaria.

Palabras clave: Eagleton; teoría literaria marxista; ideología estética; teoría de la cultura.

This has been a happy but also a fairly ceremonious event so let me be as unceremonious as possible during the next hour-or-so. What I want to do is to introduce Terry Eagleton's work by giving you a sort of aerial survey from his earliest books to his latest writings. Some of you will be familiar with most, if not perhaps all of his prolific output but for others—undergraduates especially—this may be their first acquaintance with a corpus that extends across more than thirty years of intensive theoretical (as well as creative) activity. Anyway I shall try to put Terry's work in context from the viewpoint of someone who has grown up with it, who has read his books as they came out from the late 1960s on, and who has been constantly impressed, provoked, intrigued, often surprised, always stimulated by them.

I won't talk much about myself since obviously it is not the occasion for that. Still perhaps there is room for a few bits of personal anecdote before we get on to the main business. The first paper I ever gave (back in 1973) was to a weekly post-graduate seminar that Terry was running in Oxford. It was a very high-powered, often rather combative seminar devoted to new developments in Marxist literary theory, especially the latest ideas coming from France: Althusser, Macherey, "structural Marxism", already certain challenges from a post-structuralist quarter, although so far as I recall the term "post-structuralism" hadn't yet caught on. It was a very intense, very lively sort of hothouse atmosphere. Actually I wasn't "at" Oxford, just living nearby while working for a London Ph.D. and travelling up to London once a week for the odd spot of supervision and for another weekly postgrad "theory" seminar, this one organised by Frank Kermode. They were both great occasions and main points of entry for these new ideas; perhaps the only places in Britain at the time where debates like this were being carried on among people fairly up-to-date with the French sources. Still they were very different in other ways, since Kermode's group (actually quite a floating population, with occasional star-turn appearances, including Roland Barthes) didn't have so much of an interest in Marxist developments but focused more on issues in hermeneutics, poetics, narrative theory, and deconstruction. So I used to shuttle back and forth, telling each group what the others had been talking about and sometimes feeling (to borrow a favourite metaphor from Kermode) like someone who wanders into no-man's land offering cigarettes all around and then gets shot at by both sides.

Anyway I was nervous about giving that paper—something about Althusserian Marxism from a fairly critical standpoint—and was trying to steady my nerves while travelling into Oxford on a motorbike. Half-way there (on a three-lane stretch of road) one car overtook another coming very fast from the opposite direction, missed me by a couple of inches, and very nearly put an end to all my anxieties. I swerved off the road and all my papers went flying to the wind, including the text of my seminar presentation. (I used to write things out at full length in those days, not like now!) So I sat by the roadside for a half-hour or so in a state of shock-induced false tranquillity and then got back on my bike, finished the journey, and gave my paper. Predictably, it was attacked from all quarters, except by Terry who managed to parlay some of the more awkward questions, to play a kind of tactful moderating role, and get me through the session with my sanity and intellectual dignity more or less intact. So—to cut short this self-indulgent ramble—I have always been grateful for that, as for a good many other personal kindnesses and acts of loyalty on his part. Academic and intellectual distinction of the highest order don't always go along with qualities like these but in Terry's case they do—outstandingly

so—and this is all the more reason to celebrate his Honorary Doctorate.

So what I want to do really is to talk about the development of his work and about some of its more salient cultural and intellectual contexts. In many ways this story has also been the story of Marxist literary criticism and theory in Britain since the early 1970s. That is to say, he has shown an extreme, almost barometric sensitivity to each successive wave of theorizing, not only Marxist theorizing, but structuralism, post-structuralism, postmodernism, deconstruction, various forms of feminism, New Historicism, and Cultural Materialism. He has taken all these on board, sometimes (in fact very often) in a critical way but usually finding something of interest or value, something that is worth salvaging, even if in a form that might not please their more orthodox-minded proponents. So it has been a remarkable work of synthesis, quite apart from anything else, but also a highly distinctive and original mode of engagement. You could well write a history of post-1970 Marxist literary and cultural theory—along with its various crises, turning-points, intellectual conjunctures, and so forth—which took its main bearings from Eagleton's work of the past three decades. Each of his books in a way marks a new departure, a fresh engagement with some challenge or provocation thrown up the *Zeitgeist*.

I will not talk much about his very earliest work, that is to say, a couple of small print-run (and now very hard-to-find) books that he wrote from a radical-left Catholic but also a phenomenologically inspired perspective. Time was when mischievous opponents would seize on the fact of his having written these books (without, one supposes, having actually bothered to read them) and treat it as some kind of scandalous revelation: "Monsignor Terry Eagleton: the missing years". Anyway they have now come in for more intelligent treatment by various commentators and will surely be of interest to anyone who has read his recent fragment of autobiography *The Gatekeeper*. However my own acquaintance with his work was through books like *Shakespeare and Society* and *Exiles and Emigrés*, works which can now be seen to have belonged within a certain distinctive (no doubt highly complex and overdetermined) cultural context. Probably the dominant strain of English criticism at that time was one that bore the mark of F.R. Leavis and his fervently evangelical approach to the "great tradition" of English poetry and fiction. Now, to people from other intellectual cultures, people who read English literature and criticism in other countries, Leavis will most likely be seen as a rather strange, eccentric, fiercely embattled character; one who taught at Cambridge for most of his working life yet conceived himself as locked in struggle with the Cambridge establishment; who insisted on the absolute centrality of English Literature, on the teaching of English as the living heart of the university; and who argued that such teaching should concern itself

only with those poems and novels that made up the canon of indisputably great works. This attitude found expression in the title of his book *Mass Civilization and Minority Culture*. Leavis claimed to be speaking up for certain values that were everywhere under threat: for “maturity”, for an “open reverence before life”, for the “creative-exploratory” use of language as a means of preserving and enhancing those values. That to say, Leavis conceived the activities of reading and teaching in terms of their experiential significance, their capacity to enrich and deepen our experience of life. And this went along with a fiercely moralistic (even, at times, puritanical) tone which dismissed any work that didn't measure up to his own high standards in that regard.

Now this is at least one part of the formative cultural background to Eagleton's early books. And, typically, it is not something that he has ever gone on to reject or denounce outright, despite taking a critically distanced and sharply diagnostic view of it in texts like *Criticism and Ideology*. He is not one for rejecting things out of hand. He tends to take the best of what he finds and put it to use in often distinctive and original ways while not for one moment passing over its blind spots of doctrinal or ideological prejudice. What he finds in Leavis, what he found at that time, during the early 1970s, was a commitment to certain important human values, modes of experience, the recording of whole generations of experience that would otherwise be forgotten, buried (as E.P. Thompson memorably put it) under the “vast condescension of posterity”. What he found objectionable about Leavis was that parochial narrowness of vision, the exclusive and doctrinaire nature of Leavis's “Great Tradition”. Also, its failure to adequately theorise or conceptualise the conditions of experience, in other words, the lack of any kind of informing theoretical background which Eagleton felt to be a drastic limitation of that kind of criticism. Then again, he had some shrewd points to make about its unrecognised class bias, that is, a kind of rather puritanical, humourless, self-righteous, lower middle-class moralism. So this formation, this cultural formation of English studies, this distinctively “Leavisite” formation, he found both important for various reasons and indicative of much that was wrong with the state of English literary culture.

That particular kind of reading, that way of reading texts (both literary and critical texts) for their symptomatic absences, blind spots, gaps, unconscious elisions, and so forth, is something that Eagleton was doing long before it became an orthodox approach in various (e.g., Marxist, and post-structuralist) academic quarters. It was the main topic of those Oxford seminars—at the time when he was reading Althusser and Macherey and writing the first draft of *Criticism and Ideology*—and has continued to play a large role in his work since then, albeit in various qualified and nuanced forms. Yet he never goes so far in this theoreticist direction as to treat all appeals to “experience” as

the product of bourgeois-humanist illusion or ideological mystification. This is important partly because the very idea of literary texts (or any kinds of text) as possessing an experimental dimension became deeply suspect to many theorists of a post-structuralist or Althusserian Marxist bent. The appeal to experience, the notion that literature can communicate anything truthful or important about certain distinctive modes of human experience, came to be regarded as a kind of theoretical naïvety, something to be theorised away in post-structuralist terms, along with the very notion of the subject as a locus of will, agency, choice, memory, and creativity. Here again, Terry never went so far as to endorse this full-scale programme of theoretical anti-humanism. Well, there was a period during the mid-to-late '70s—which I shall come back to in a moment—when he did appear to go along with it. But, generally speaking, he has not been one to endorse this kind of fiercely dismissive theoreticist attitude toward the notion of experience.

Of course the most decisive early influence was that of Raymond Williams. Terry has talked about that already and has written about it on various occasions; Steven Regan referred to it yesterday, and it popped up again in discussion this afternoon, so I will not labour the point here, except to say very briefly that one of the things he learned from Williams, and he is very happy to acknowledge the fact, is this respect for experience, for historical memory, for the idea of literature as, among other things, an imaginative record of what would otherwise be lost to living memory. This kind of appeal, which came to strike post-structuralists as downright naïve, has always been something very important in his work. Another, less obvious influence which often comes through—to my ears, at least—is that of William Empson. In fact, you may recall, Empson's name cropped up this morning during Terry's address at the degree ceremony. I think there are passages in Terry's work, some of the most memorable, where Empson's tone quite distinctly comes across, especially passages that put one in mind of his book *Some Versions of Pastoral*; not his best-known work, *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, but Empson's second book, published in 1935, which is, among other things, a work of political criticism, but of a very elusive kind. Here Empson reflects on "pastoral" in the broadest sense of that term, not only on texts that we think of as classics of the *genre*, but on pastoral as a mode of feeling, a worldview, a complex of social and political attitudes; among other things, a mode of engagement with literary texts that involves what Empson calls "putting the complex into the simple". This is the idea—in brief—that human relations, like literary texts, are complex and difficult things but also that sometimes the best way to say the most complicated thing is to say it in simple terms. Hence the strangely intimate connection, as Terry suggested in his talk this morning, between the simplest things and the most complex things. There is a Freudian dimension to this, of course:

the relationship between what we think of as the lowest, most basic, most fundamental (even shameful) aspects of human life, and the highest, the most intellectual, spiritual aspects.

This Empsonian idea is I think something that plays a really important role in Terry Eagleton's thinking. It is there also in his style: the way in which he will switch sometimes in mid-paragraph, even in mid-sentence, from a passage of dense and arcane theoretical reflection to a style of down-to-earth, common-sense talk. If I had more time I'd like to read you a few passages that provide some good examples of that. Sometimes it takes a jocular, deflationary form, as a means of talking people down—himself (one suspects) very often included—from the rarefied heights of theoretical abstraction to a level of straightforward plain speaking. Thus when Eagleton is attacking postmodernism, for instance, he will typically spend a few sentences, perhaps a few paragraphs, going into theoretical detail about just what is wrong with postmodern notions of “the end of ideology”, the “end of history”, and so forth, but he will then bring you back down to earth with a couple of homely metaphors to emphasise the point. This is partly, no doubt, a matter of intellectual temperament, of impatience with high-toned abstract discourses that always run the risk of getting out of touch with certain basic truths of human experience. It is a risk that Eagleton has run himself and which thus gives his use of such devices a tone of good-humoured, self-implicating irony, rather than one of offensive jocularly at others' expense. In fact Empson (again) comes closest to describing it when he includes, among his multiform versions of pastoral, the device of “ironic self-parody to disarm criticism”. But it also has to do with Brecht's idea of *plumpes Denken*, or “rough and ready thinking”, that is to say, the idea that sometimes the best thing to do, the best sort of approach to take, is a direct approach which cuts through complexities, ironies, sophistications, theoretical refinements and so forth, and goes straight to the point. Which is not, of course, to say that those other, more complex kinds of thinking are mere evasions of the point, or Hamlet-like excuses for failures of moral or political nerve. One reason for Eagleton's fascination with Walter Benjamin is that he, more than anyone, embodied this conflict between the claims of intensely abstract theoretical reflection and the Brechtian demand for straightforward, unambiguous political commitment.

Marxist critics—Williams among them—have often expressed a strong sense of unease about the implied politics of Empsonian pastoral, or what they see as at best its quietist, and at worst its reactionary character. This has to do mainly with Empson's idea (most prominent in the chapter on Gray's “Elegy”) that the pastoral *genre* gains much of its expressive power—or its enduring appeal across large differences of cultural and socio-political outlook—from the capacity to evoke certain “permanent truths” about the

human condition. This is a highly unfashionable line of thought among critical theorists. That is, they are very apt to reject the idea that there might be any truths (least of all “permanent” truths) about the “human condition” in general, or human nature, or the gap between human hopes and aspirations and the stark reality of human lives not only under this or that political system but as a matter of shared (universal) experience. Still it is something that has always been very much present in Terry Eagleton’s writing, early and late. Empson (*via* Gray) puts the case more directly: that no conceivable social transformation could finally eradicate the sources of human dissatisfaction; that even a life maximally rich in fulfilment and intimacy still falls short of certain, intrinsically human needs and desires. Empson says that this goes deep into human experience, and that something like this is the central theme of tragedy. The emphasis falls differently in Eagleton’s work, as indeed one might expect, given his Marxist commitment to socio-economic and political change as at any rate a means of significantly bettering the conditions of human existence. Still it is theme that resonates strongly from *Exiles and Emigrés* to his latest writings on Irish literature and history, for instance, *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger*, and also in his latest book on tragedy. What it comes down to is a realist acceptance that no amount of political commitment, no degree of commitment to the radical transformation of prevailing socio-political structures can eradicate certain permanent truths about the human condition: death, suffering, sickness. So these are some of the contexts of his early work, contexts which help to explain the complexity of Eagleton’s thinking at this time. Nevertheless, they made up a highly original project which, at that time, represented a significant break with the conventions of British academic criticism.

After that he went through a phase of intense theoretical reflection during the early nineteen seventies. This was the time during which he organized those seminars in Oxford which were focal points of theoretical activity. Its beginning was marked by the publication of a little book called *Marxism and Literary Criticism*, which was very much a kind of theoretical primer or report of work in progress. It was a kind of interim thinking-through of the legacy of Marxist criticism, all the great contending theories and approaches, such as Lukács *versus* Brecht. It didn’t so much stake out a new position on these issues as pass them in critical review and clear the ground for something more original. The book that really laid out that new position, achieved through an intense effort of theoretical self-scrutiny, was *Criticism and Ideology*, published in 1976. This was a relatively short text, considering how much ground it covered. For many it represented a radical rethinking of Marxist criticism: the modes of literary production, the various levels of ideological interpellation, the relations between material (economic)

base and socio-cultural superstructure. It was a “difficult” book—for me and (I guess) for most readers at the time—in the sense that it was quite relentlessly theoretical. The jokes are scattered relatively thin, compared with most of Terry’s later books. It was very much influenced by Althusserian structuralist Marxism and even more so by Macherey’s *A Theory of Literary Production*. It is an attempt to explain what Terry calls the “literary mode of production” in relation to other, more directly material modes of production. And it does so in a very abstract, at times highly schematic, even (he might now want to say) rather reductive way. This is the one book of Terry’s in which there is a very high degree of abstraction from anything plainly recognizable as the experience of reading. Not that he dismisses such notions outright, but it is a book that argues its way at a very high level of conceptual abstraction, and to that extent I think it is unique in Terry’s *oeuvre*.

This is not to say that it steers clear of offering particular cases for detailed treatment. In fact, the first part of the book is devoted to a critical working-through of various other sources in the tradition of Marxist thinking from Christopher Caudwell to Raymond Williams. However he treats those sources in a mode of extreme clinical detachment and analytic rigour. He says some pretty harsh things about Caudwell who represents, for Eagleton, a kind of abortive, premature start for English Marxist criticism, a cruelly empiricist, commonsensical, insufficiently theorized, grossly reductionist mode of base-superstructure thinking. Thus Caudwell stands as a cautionary instance of how Marxist criticism can go wrong when it fails to achieve an adequate theoretical grasp of its own conceptual premises. He is also extremely critical of Williams, and this was, I suppose, the period of greatest distance between Eagleton’s and Williams’s thinking. Still it is an immensely impressive piece of work, quite extraordinary in its way; there is nothing else quite like it in the history of Marxist criticism.

All the same it is a book which I think Terry himself came to feel was deeply problematic for various reasons. I am going to provide a bit of background here for those who didn’t (like myself) grow up intellectually and politically during that time. This was the period of emergence for various influential thinkers who grouped around the journal *New Left Review*, edited at the time by Perry Anderson, when various left intellectuals, Eagleton among them, felt an urgent necessity to rethink the nature of cultural criticism, of literary criticism, of sociology, of political theory. You will find a number of very influential articles written and published at that time, including a famous essay by Perry Anderson called “Components of the National Culture”. This is, again, a fiercely theoretical article in which Anderson laments the absence in Britain, in British intellectual culture, of any really worked out, solid, rigorous tradition of theoretical reflection, especially within sociology. He asks: where is the British Max Weber?, where is the British Emile Dur-

kheim?, and he says we just do not have such thinkers, and we don't for various specific reasons, historical and socio-cultural reasons. What we have in their place is a kind of down-to-earth, homespun, untheoretical, un-self-critical common-sense outlook. And this has deeper historical roots; it goes back to Hume, to the tradition of eighteenth-century British empiricism, but it goes back especially to the French Revolution when it takes on a kind of sharpened polemical and socio-political edge. The idea gains ground among British conservative ideologues like Burke at the time of the French Revolution that it is all very well for the French to have these abstract ideas about Justice, Liberty, Truth, and so forth, but the British don't need anything like that. We get by perfectly well without a written constitution, without principles or precepts of that sort; we get by on a tried and tested mixture of tradition, common-sense, and due regard for the decencies of communal life.

This tended to produce a strong mistrust of abstraction in any form, that is to say, the idea that abstract theorizing leads to all sorts of unpleasant things like the French Revolution and post-revolutionary terrors. It thus gave rise to a deeply entrenched ideological antipathy toward the very notion of theory, or toward any large-scale theoretical project that claimed to challenge the plain self-evidence of common-sense, empirical wisdom. Anderson's diagnosis, shared by Eagleton, was that this helped to explain why a certain type of literary criticism, specifically Leavis's type, had become so widely influential at the time; such thinking took the place of any developed, systematic, adequately theorised form of sociological enquiry. Hence Leavis's contemptuous rejection of "theory" or "philosophy" as having not the least relevance to literary criticism. This went back to his early exchange with René Wellek and emerged at full force in his later writings, as with the title of a posthumously edited volume of essays: *The Critic as Anti-Philosopher*. Hence also Leavis's rhetoric of sturdily common-sense empiricism and his appeal to a range of jointly epistemic and moral values (of "sensuous enactment", "particularity", "maturity", "vivid realisation", and so forth) that should somehow be self-evident to anyone suitably equipped to perceive them, whether by native intelligence or through the right kind of literary education.

Thus the Anderson diagnosis, or the New Left diagnosis, was that literary criticism in Britain had become so theoretically impoverished precisely because it came out in fixed opposition to the very idea of theory, theory (that is) as a means of reflecting systematically on the conditions under which certain notions of experience—as likewise of "tradition", historical memory, and cultural value—were subject to certain determinate modes of ideological or socio-historical formation. So this was the phase of high theoreticist endeavour on the British left during the early-to-mid 1970s. It is very marked in

Terry's work at that time and his book *Criticism and Ideology* is in many ways its most representative product. So, basically, his approach is one that derives its chief theoretical bearings from the structural Marxism of Louis Althusser and Althusser's close colleague and "literary" adjutant, Pierre Macherey. It took the form of reading texts, mostly fictional texts but also works of criticism, with an eye to their symptomatic absences and blind spots. So it is crucially what the text is unable to say, what is repressed or sublimated, what you have to read between the lines, its textual fissures and crevices and contradictions that are taken as symptomatic evidence of the text's ideological complicity. But these also indicate the way that historical and material reality breaks through the text, thus revealing its insistent counter-pressure despite and against such ideologically motivated efforts of concealment.

Now this was a relatively brief though immensely productive and stimulating phase in the development of British Marxist literary theory. I suppose its peak was around 1976-1980, partly because of Terry's book, and during that time it pretty much captured the high theoretical ground, at least among those who sought some viable Marxist alternative to other (less politicised) modes of structuralist or nascent post-structuralist theorizing. But what then happened—and Terry's books and articles at the time register this development—was that the Althusserian position came to seem increasingly problematic. Althusser, who was himself by training a philosopher, tried to construct a Marxist theoretical apparatus that would not fall into the errors or naiveties (Hegelian, empiricist, 'vulgar'-Marxist, etc.) of hitherto prevalent approaches. He wanted to place Marxist theory on a "scientific" basis, one that would allow its elaboration in rigorously theorised terms while at the same time enabling us to read Marxist texts in a more adequate (critical-symptomatic) way than the ways they had been read before. But in the process of doing that Althusser constructed a system, a theoretical system, that was in many ways decidedly idealist, even though constantly insisting on its own materialist credentials. He drew, for instance, a very rigorous distinction between what he called the "real object" and the "object in thought". He maintained, on fairly familiar (e.g., Kantian) philosophical grounds, that we do not—cannot—have unmediated access to the world, the noumenal thing-in-itself, to ultimate material reality; we only have access via concepts and categories, modes of perception, cognitive processes, and so forth. Therefore, we have to rigorously theorise this distinction between the object-in-thought and the object itself. His insistence on that struck many of his critics, both Marxist and non-Marxist, as leaning over pretty far in an idealist (Kantian or even Berkeleian) direction. And what happened in the course of Marxist debate over the next half-decade or so was that this issue emerged as one of the central problems in Marxist theory. Agonised debates

broke out at various conferences and seminars toward the end of the 1970s and during the early 1980s. Some of the most heated took place at a series of "Sociology of Literature" conferences at the University of Essex where people were trying to find some way of rescuing Althusserian Marxism, some kind of viable materialist theory of the literary text that wouldn't fall back into naïve empiricism. At the same time—on a different though related front—they were striving to head off other challenges, e.g., from disciples of Foucault who dismissed Marxism as an antiquated nineteenth-century mode of thought and who wanted to reduce everything to the play of various discourses, paradigms, power/knowledge differentials, and so forth. What happened ultimately was that those battles were lost, at least in the rather rarefied atmosphere of post-Althusserian theoretical debate. Or again: what happened, to put it very briefly, was that post-structuralism came in.

Post-structuralism, even left post-structuralism, even the more *soi-disant* "radical" kinds of post-structuralism were quite happy to abandon any notion of the real, except in an arcane (Lacanian) sense of the "real". That is to say, they were more than willing to concede that ultimately Althusser was right, but in that case one had to accept the logic of Althusser's position, i.e., that "reality" was a linguistic, discursive, or narrative construct. There is no way that we can get beyond the "arbitrary" relationship between signifier and signified to the referent, to the thing-in-itself, to the real object as distinct from the object-in-thought. So post-structuralism tended to regard that particular battle as fought and won, with the victory going (naturally enough) to its own side in an unequal debate where the opponents had started out by yielding crucial philosophic ground. This also marked the beginning of a new phase in Terry Eagleton's work, a phase which saw him re-thinking his whole approach to Marxist literary theory, but at the same time engaging in a series of polemical encounters with various representatives of post-structuralism, deconstruction, and latterly postmodernism. At the time he clearly thought it important to resist these particular movements or currents of thought whose effect, he believed, was to "textualize" reality, to deprive criticism of any political force, and to go along complacently with various kinds of then-fashionable "post-Marxist" or "end-of-ideology" persuasion.

Thus he published a couple of short books during the early 1980s which were sharply polemical in tone even though they raised significant theoretical issues. The most combative and prickly was *The Rape of Clarissa*, which appeared in 1982. It is partly a book about Samuel Richardson's epistolary novel *Clarissa*, but is also an engagement with various critics who had written about that novel, or others whose theoretical positions allow him to surmise what they *would* most likely have said about it, given half

a chance! In particular Terry goes after one hapless critic, an American deconstructionist, William Beatty Warner, who wrote a book entitled *Reading Clarissa*. The heroine, let us recall, is a victim of kidnapping and seduction and rape, and eventually commits suicide. According to Warner any sympathies or sense of moral outrage that we feel on her behalf are wholly misplaced—just a product of conventional prejudice—since really she is depicted in the novel as boring, prudish, narrow-minded, manipulative, hypocritical, and (in short) thoroughly odious. Her kidnapper and rapist, Lovelace, he casts as a kind of witty and resourceful proto-deconstructionist who is in the business of showing us that in fact all those fabled virtues such truth, sincerity, trust, good faith, moral integrity, etc., are just so many naïve “logocentric” illusions. In which case whole generations of readers who took Clarissa’s side, and who regarded Lovelace as a dreadful villain, had themselves fallen prey to that deep-laid “metaphysics of presence” that equates truth with authentic inwardness, or the *rapport-à-soi* of the solitary mind in a state of pure, self-communing, virginal presence. Such—Terry argues—is the upshot of deconstruction when it becomes just a handy, all-purpose technique for inverting moral values and (in this case) persuading us to adopt a particularly nasty, sexist, downright misogynist line toward damsels in distress. So what he is doing here is taking an example of the use—or abuse—of deconstruction by some (mostly US) literary critics and deploying it strategically as a point of entry to certain topical but none the less important debates within literary theory.

I think this was a phase in Terry’s work when he was working through some of the problems raised by *Criticism and Ideology* and in the meantime also trying to combat various emergent and—to his mind—morally or politically delinquent critical trends. So *The Rape of Clarissa* has various pointed and perceptive things to say about feminist criticism and other developments in literary theory at the time. However it is also typical of Terry’s work (then and since) in so far as it argues its case through a mixture of intense theoretical engagement and witty, irreverent, sometimes even knockabout humour which places those developments in a different, altogether more sane and balanced perspective. Hence the passages of Juvenalian or Swiftean satire that continue to yield great pleasure when re-reading these books—even now that their targets have mostly disappeared from view—and which probably (though this is sheer conjecture) owe something to Terry’s reading of Bakhtin at around that time. Still, as I have said, there were signs of an alternative “position” emerging through the smoke and heat of polemical exchange. That position is defined more sharply in his next short book *The Function of Criticism* (1984), which examines not only the historical formation of certain canons of literary taste, but also the formation of a “public sphere”, to use the Habermasian

expression. This development occurred during the eighteenth century and involved the emergence of certain kinds of dialogue, public debate, the exchange of opinion, shared values, the forging of an alliance between the lower aristocracy and the higher middle classes, a kind of *sensus communis*, if you like, which found expression through the coffee-shops and other recently-established channels of communication. This is very much the kind of thing you find in Hume's "Essay on Taste": an ethos of open, democratic, participant exchange which purports to represent a kind of classless appeal to universal human values but which in fact takes in only a certain (quite restricted) range of class-specific "tastes" and opinions.

In fact Eagleton's title is a piece of deft irony. It was Matthew Arnold, in his essay "The Function of Criticism", who spoke up most eloquently for that notion of "disinterested" literary culture whose claims Eagleton here sets out to challenge. From the eighteenth century to the present, criticism has always been engaged in a struggle to legitimize its own authority and, along with that, the social order from which it springs. Criticism was born, Eagleton argues, at the moment when a rising bourgeoisie felt the need to establish a public sphere—a community of shared discourse—against an old order whose powers were based on aristocratic privilege. This ethos discovered its natural milieu in the clubs, coffee-houses, and literary periodicals of eighteenth-century England and Scotland. A "polite, informed public opinion" sets itself up as the acme of civilized taste, a realm in which conflicting social interests are apparently reconciled, since everyone (or everyone qualified to speak) has an equal share in the "consensus of universal reason". Addison's essays in *The Spectator* are taken as the single most sustained and representative example of this new kind of discourse. Gentry and aristocracy, landed and mercantile interests, "backwoods Tories" and Whig *arrivistes* all had a voice in this emergent public sphere. Of course there were those uncultured individuals—actually a vast number of them—whose interests were politely ignored in achieving this dominant consensus. But conditions were such that a writer like Addison could feel himself to be addressing a broad-based readership whose differences of social status were transcended in the common cultural enterprise.

By Arnold's time (as Eagleton remarks) the pressures had intensified to a point of manifest crisis in the social institution of English letters. "Culture" became a means of warding off the conflicts and threats posed by a deeply class-divided society. Deprived of any access to a genuine public sphere of shared interests and values, the critic became increasingly a voice in the wilderness, obliged to invoke (or invent) his own beleaguered minority culture. Eagleton finds this dilemma still at work in Leavis and the *Scrutiny* critics, since their project was, paradoxically, "to create a public sphere in the

conviction that only a minority was capable of true discrimination". An incisive reading of Leavis on Johnson serves to emphasise the cultural and socio-political distance that we have now travelled from that still vaguely plausible eighteenth-century discourse of civilizing values. Then—in a chapter of quickfire polemics—Eagleton turns his attention to present-day literary theorists, especially the avatars of US deconstruction. Their work, he argues, is “the true locus of ‘high culture’ in late monopoly capitalism”, a last-ditch retreat from history and politics into a realm of purely rhetorical strategies where “society both encounters and exiles its own disabling absences”. On the positive side, he salutes Raymond Williams for his long-standing practice of a genuinely socialist cultural criticism, alive to those problems but resisting the beguilements of premature system and theory. I have to say (well, you’d expect me to say this) that in my view when Eagleton writes about deconstruction—at least in those books and essays of the early 1980s—he selects his targets with somewhat mischievous intent and doesn’t take adequate account of other, more philosophically as well politically informed kinds of work. In fact there is a steady revision in his estimate of Derrida, from the rather offhand, dismissive treatments to be found at that time to the more sustained (though still pretty combative) engagements of the past few years. On the other hand it is perhaps not surprising that Eagleton found little to admire in Derrida’s *Specters of Marx*, his long-awaited, in many ways brilliant, but politically elusive (not to say evasive) *rapprochement* with “a certain” Marxism. However it would take us too long and far afield to pursue this question in anything like an adequately detailed way.

Literary Theory: an introduction is the book that I guess most of you will have read. For one thing it is a veritable best-seller; it has broken all records for texts of that sort, even popularising texts. But it is not *just* an “introduction”, or a handy synoptic account of various post-1900 developments in literary criticism and theory, along with bits of philosophical background where needed. It is also a continued thinking-through of issues from Eagleton’s earlier work and a text that constantly engages readers in some pretty challenging lines of thought. Still the book that stands-up to now, at least—as Eagleton’s theoretical *summa* is his splendidly ambitious and vastly erudite *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, which came out in 1989. It received some very sniffy and mean-minded reviews from various people—philosophers and critical theorists among them—who seemed to resent it for just those reasons, for its covering such a range of topics and treading on specialist toes. Terry would probably disown comparisons with works in the grand European tradition such as Lukàcs’s *Aesthetics* or Adorno’s *Aesthetic Theory*. All the same it is a book that rivals theirs for scope of coverage and depth of philosophical as well as historical and socio-cultural analysis. It is partly an account of the emergence,

development, and changing (culturally variant) status of the notion of the aesthetic, and partly a running critique of those various aesthetic conceptions put forward by thinkers such as Baumgarten, Kant, Schopenhauer, Hegel, Nietzsche, right down to Adorno and Lyotard, always from a Marxist point of view. It is a philosophic work in so far as it engages with central philosophical problems; about the definition of the aesthetic, about the nature of aesthetic experience, about the relationship between aesthetic judgement and other modalities of judgement. Thus a part of Eagleton's agenda is one that derives quite directly from Kant: it addresses the relationship between knowledge and aesthetic judgement, between practical reason in Kant's sense, that is, ethical judgement, and aesthetics; it looks at the different ways in which the notion of aesthetics has figured in the discourse of post-Kantian philosophy. However it also ranges more widely than that. It is also very much a social and political history of the idea of the aesthetic.

This makes it quite a courageous book in the sense that at this time, in the late 1980s, many theorists on the left, at least in Britain, took a pretty dismissive or hostile view towards aesthetics. Indeed the very notion that aesthetics might be a worthwhile discipline or object of study was held up to ridicule in some quarters. For instance, there was an article by Tony Bennett which bore the title "Aesthetics: a completely useless kind of knowledge", and which epitomised this kind of thinking. It is the idea that aesthetics—or the branch of philosophy going under that name—was invented during a certain historical period and amounts to no more than a quasi—or pseudo—discipline, one whose only purpose was (and is) to prop up certain ideological or class-based cultural values. This idea found support in a certain current of sociological thinking, especially in arguments developed by the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu who wrote a book called *Distinction: a critique of taste*. Here again the title already tells you quite a lot about its anti-aesthetic—and especially anti-Kantian—line of approach. Thus Bourdieu comes out pretty much in agreement with Bennett: there really is no such thing as aesthetic "taste", it is a bourgeois invention, a marker of class privilege, a way that certain people have of feeling good (superior) about their cultivated modes of aesthetic judgement, perception, or appreciation. The kind of picture you hang on your wall will indicate what socio-cultural class you belong to, or perhaps something about your class aspirations. If you have a Matisse, a Picasso, or a Mondrian on the wall then you are probably middle-class, or aspiring middle-class. If you don't go in for that sort of arty stuff and prefer country scenes, seascapes, animal pictures, or whatever, then most likely you are working-class, perhaps with lower-middle aspirations. The same goes for music: the difference between listening to Stravinsky, Schoenberg, Messiaen or whoever on the one hand, and "pop" classics on the other. What Bourdieu won't accept—what

he sets out to demolish—is any idea of “taste” or aesthetic judgement as something that might transcend class-interests or involve distinctions of aesthetic value as opposed to distinctions of social rank.

I am rather glad to say that Terry doesn't take this line of downright reductionist sociological analysis. Nor, of course, does he take the opposite (Kantian) line that there are indeed certain universal, or at any rate intersubjectively valid aesthetic criteria that mark the possession of genuine good taste. What he says is that the aesthetic is an important category, not because it has any kind of ultimate trans-cultural validity, but rather because it has figured centrally and crucially in some of the most important, not only philosophically important, but socio-politically important debates of the last two centuries and more. Besides, there is something insulting—a kind of inverted snobbery—about Bourdieu's habit of telling people (from whatever class background) that they can only be self-deluded or in the grip of some unwitting class prejudice if they think that some kinds of aesthetic experience might actually be better than others. Also it is a fairly obvious piece of academic gamesmanship, a put-down of philosophers or anyone else who denies sociology the last word in such matters. So Eagleton's book is a critique, but by no means a debunking or dismissive critique, of what the aesthetic has meant, and what sorts of function it has served, in these various discourses on “good taste”, on the beautiful, the sublime, on aesthetic “disinterest”, and so forth. And it contains not only some acute philosophical commentary but also some passages that bring out the more comic aspects of what various philosophers have had to say on the topic of aesthetics in relation to other, more basic, or less elevated modes of human experience. Here again there is an echo of Empson on pastoral, that idea of “putting complex into the simple”, which can sometimes work out as a comic sense of how the highest, most “sophisticated” human pleasures have a close (though hard-to-acknowledge) link with various—forgive the term—fundamental bodily functions.

Of course this theme has been taken up by recent theorists who have had a lot to say about the Kantian sublime and its involvement with “sublimated” instincts, desires, somatic impulses, and so forth. Still if you want to get the hang of all this then you could do much worse than look up Terry's philosophically acute but also quite hilarious chapter on Schopenhauer which you will find reprinted in Stephen Regan's *Eagleton Reader*. Terry has something of a soft spot for Schopenhauer, despite Schopenhauer's extreme reactionary politics, his well-known pathological misogyny, the fact that (supposedly) he invited soldiers to shoot at the 1848 revolutionaries from his upstairs window, and so forth. What Terry finds so intriguing and fascinating about him is that he does tell one of those “permanent truths” about the human condition, the fact that we are subject

to bodily ills and miseries, that no matter how high-minded we wish to be, no matter how “philosophical” we try to be, something will eventually pull us back down to this shared bodily condition. It's a bit like Bergson's theory of the comic, his idea that what most regularly makes us laugh is the obtrusion of brute mechanism into our lives, or the spectacle of human dignity knocked for six by some absurd physical pratfall. Still I don't want to make too much of these analogies since they are liable to give a false impression. What is far more striking about Eagleton's work is its capacity to see all around the complexities of human motivation and—I keep going back to Empson, but I don't think Eagleton will mind—its sense of shared humanity despite and across large differences of cultural and socio-political perspective.

He once reviewed a book by Peter Brooks, the American narrative theorist, a book called *Body Work* whose basic theme was the way that human bodies had lately made something of a comeback in the otherwise rarefied discourse of literary criticism. Terry makes various points here but his opening sentence captures the tone well enough: “There will be soon more bodies in contemporary criticism than in the field of Waterloo”. What he goes on to talk about is the way that invocations of “the body” among various (mainly post-structuralist) literary theorists have acquired a kind of talismanic power that seems oddly detached from any sense of the physical body as a locus not only of extreme agony and ecstasy but also of “everyday” pleasure, pain, suffering, hunger, and other such theory-resistant kinds of experience. Roland Barthes' late writings—like *The Pleasure of the Text*—are one major source for this sort of thing, this rhetorical invocation of the body, the eroticized but curiously abstract “body” of Barthesian textual *jouissance*. What Terry went out to say in his review is that there is a whole missing chapter in the theorists' reception of recent French thought, namely Merleau Ponty's phenomenology of perception, which doesn't go in for such merely notional, elaborately theorised body-talk but really engages with the lived actualities of human bodily experience. I think this is something that perhaps goes even further back in Terry's work to those early books that he wrote from a left-Catholic, phenomenologically inspired, even (in some sense) incarnationist viewpoint. But these are deep waters where an atheist like me wouldn't wish to swim so I'd better leave off this particular line of speculation.

Anyway—back onto safer ground—it is very much a central theme in *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, where Eagleton is constantly recalling our attention to the sensuous, physical, somatic aspects of aesthetic experience, as against the usual tendency of theorists and philosophers to fix their sights on its “higher”, more spiritual or abstract dimensions. This is one reason why he goes back beyond Kant to Baumgarten's notion

of the aesthetic as involving, paradoxically enough, a “logic of the sensations”, an order of sensuous, bodily, affective experience that precedes all the concepts and categories that we (or philosophers like Kant) bring to it. Sometimes, as in the chapter on Schopenhauer, it breaks through as a kind of jubilant pleasure in the way that intellectual dignities are pricked by awkward reminders of our physical condition as creatures forever liable to various, far from dignified ills and afflictions. Elsewhere—and I am thinking particularly of his recent book *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger*—Eagleton offers another, more sombre reminder of the way that human suffering on a vast scale can easily be lost from view when historians, literary critics, and others discuss cataclysmic events from an armchair (whether “orthodox” or “revisionist”) perspective. But there is also—and this receives just as much emphasis—a liberatory, even utopian aspect to Eagleton’s thinking about the aesthetic. It is an aspect that often comes through at just those moments when he is talking about the body as a locus of physical needs, desires, somatic drives, mutual dependences, and so forth, which cannot be captured or held within bounds by any regulative system of concepts and categories. It is rather like those few, very striking passages in Adorno—in *Minima Moralia* especially—when Adorno lets up on his otherwise relentless drive to negate all false, ideologically conditioned or distorted sources of hope and allows himself a brief moment of utopian reverie.

There are, I should add, many more of those moments in Eagleton and he is certainly not given to anything like Adorno’s outlook of almost unremitting pessimism. Nor does he go along with the currently widespread, de Man-influenced idea that “aesthetic ideology”—beginning with Schiller’s disastrous misreading of Kant—has been among the chief sources of “national aestheticism”, that to say, the fascist drive to project such values onto the nation-state as a spectacle of power and expression of its leader’s sovereign will. To be sure, Eagleton is keenly aware of these arguments and never inclined to underestimate the power of the aesthetic as a means of ideological persuasion, even—as de Man would have it—one that exerts a coercive claim on “the shape and limits of our freedom”. Still he holds out against those hard-bitten cynical versions of the case that would find not the least redeeming merit in so basic a source of what Marx recognised as the natural human desire for satisfaction through various forms of creative activity. He is not just saying—although he does make the point—that if people on the left take to denouncing “aesthetic ideology” in this indiscriminate, blanket way then they will leave the door wide open for ideologues of the right (such as Roger Scruton) to monopolise the subject. Rather Eagleton is staking a claim—the strongest by any theorist in recent years—for aesthetic experience as a primary good, albeit one that shouldn’t distract us from those facts of the human condition (whether permanent or remediable) that art cannot assuage.

Anyway, that's more than enough from me, except to say that the University of Santiago de Compostela could not have chosen a better, more distinguished, intellectually creative, and altogether worthy recipient for the award of an honorary doctorate.

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