



Literary Theory: An Introduction

by Terry Eagleton

(Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1983)

Over the last fifteen years Terry Eagleton has been consolidating his reputation as one of the most playful, versatile and multifaceted English Marxist literary thinkers both as a theorist and as a practical critic. A Cambridge graduate working as an English don at Oxford, Eagleton is a vocal speculator, a productive sharpshooter constantly on the move who, by the very nature of his views, often becomes a target of criticism both within and outside the traditional academic establishment. Challenging and difficult at times as in his seminal **Criticism and Ideology** (London, NLB, 1976) and **Walter Benjamin or Towards a Revolutionary Criticism** (London, NLB, 1981), he has also proved a skillful and clear popularizer, readily didactic and accessible, judging by the success of his **Marxism and Literary Criticism** (London, Methuen, 1976) and by the book under review, also a digested derivative of his most ambitious critical works and an effective bestseller as such.

Literary Theory: An Introduction, Eagleton points out in the preface, "sets out to provide a reasonably comprehensive account of modern literary theory for those with little or no previous knowledge of the topic." Apparently in line with other recent introductory works on literary theory such as Catherine Belsey's **Critical Practice** (London, Methuen, 1980), Eagleton's book, while satisfying a craving for a generic albeit superficial knowledge of a subject, also proves distinctly more subversive from a didactic perspective. Like those ubiquitously independent

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Marxist politicians who endeavour to unite the multilayered left, Eagleton's strategy is to be committed only from a critical distance to the literary theories he brings into perspective. Through his mastery of a technique akin to the military strategy known as the domino effect, the text progresses from literary theory to literary theory, posing problems which first illuminate and then end up by exhausting and debunking his subject matter, only to move on to the next theory.

In the substantive section of this book, Eagleton discusses phenomenology, hermeneutics, reception theory, structuralism and semiotics, post-structuralism and psycho-analysis, guiding us through difficult material with exceptional ease and clarity. In the best British tradition he demonstrates his talent in concocting down to earth and often humorous examples from everyday life. He reenacts the dialogue around the nature of language and existence that has predominated in the 20th century, using this as the joining thread to tie together the Anglo, American, French and German literary theorists. His approach is interdisciplinary and also dialectical: he gives a fair ear to a school or movement, and then using its own "discourse" or logic, exposes its weak points and contradictions to us.

In the chapter on Husserl and phenomenology he quickly digests Heidegger, Sartre, and the reception theorists: Ingarden, Iser and Fish. Using the two poles of liberal humanism mapped out earlier in the personages of Leavis and T.S. Eliot - Romantic rebellion and conservative traditionalism - Eagleton situates European and American theorists between these edges of the humanist tradition. Despite Eagleton's general unhappiness with phenomenology, he does not deny its importance in showing us that theoretical knowledge always emerges from a context of practical and social interests.

After a rather heavy hand with critics such as Northrop Fry as part of his exposé of structuralism, Eagleton has some good things to say about semiotics and post-structuralism. In a competent depiction of Saussurean linguistics and European formalism, he credits these with the necessary reformation of twentieth century criticism, to address the sociological and historical antecedents of language. The strengths of this movement include theorizing the relations between text and society (with the Formalists' notion of "defamiliarization") and most recently, the development of the notion of "discourse" in the works of Genette and the newly rediscovered Bakhtin (replacing Saussure's monolithic "structure" with the heterogeneous and dialogic play of "discourse").

Eagleton's arguments are designed to shock, especially the reader who has fashioned his life around being a "lover of good literature". The introduction begins with the philosophical debate about what exactly the "object" of literary theory is, and Eagleton does his best to show that from a sociological point of view, this elusive object termed "literature" is no different from jokes, football chants and slogans, newspaper headlines, road-signs and ads. He rescues us from this quandary by distinguishing literature as "non-pragmatic" discourse: "unlike biology textbooks and notes to the milkman it serves no immediate practical purpose, but is to be taken as referring to a general state of affairs."

Eagleton conducts a discussion of literature as "ideology" in terms of "those modes of feeling, valuing, perceiving and believing which have some kind of relation to the maintenance and reproduction of social power", and selects as a test case the rise of English as an academic subject in Britain's educational institutions. This is a subject dear to him, and one that has already been discussed at large and in harsher terms, from the Romantic period to Matthew Arnold, the Leavises and Raymond Williams, particularly in **Criticism and Ideology**.

Eagleton accredits the rise of literature in the modern period to the fact that it provides an enclave for the increasingly emasculated intellectual from where fantasies about the "organic society" will pose no threat; and the failure of religion is offered as an explanation for literature's other function: to hold together the seams of class society. Thus literature, according to a model which owes to Durkheim and also to Foucault, operates as a secular mythology at every level of society, it claims to be an absolute and hence is impervious to rational demonstration, and it holds up an example of passive contemplation for the individual to model himself after during his leisure hours.

The chapter dealing with post-structuralism is probably the most contentious, as it brings literary theory into a political debate: deconstruction and feminism are on trial. At this point Eagleton admits he himself is leaning towards a practical materialist criticism that thinks language as something we "do" which has a real effect on the way we live. Thus he confesses he feels ambivalent towards post-structuralist theories - for all their radical deconstruction of other schools of criticism they themselves are perhaps the latest symptom rather than the solution to the social and linguistic crisis in the aftermath of Modernism. Suspicious of all theory and political engagement as "terrorism", they leave intellectuals with "writing" as the only uncensored enclave - and from this position, intellectuals rewrite history in their own image, reducing it to yet more "undecidable" text. Eagleton sees feminism as a viable alternative, arguing that it is the ideology most likely to bring some real sense and meaning out of the infighting amongst the left, and develop out of it something constructive with liberating practical consequences. This is a courageous stand by an author whose work has been criticized by some feminists for not deviating from male discourse in spite of its Marxism.

The longest chapter in the book is dedicated to psychoanalysis and offers an exegesis of Freud's opus and a reading of Lacan through Freud. As in **The Rape of Clarissa: Writing, Sexuality and Class Struggle in Samuel Richardson** (Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1982), Eagleton appears keen to exploit with a dazzling touch practical applications of literary theories. An example worth noting in this chapter is his discussion of D.H. Lawrence's novel **Sons and Lovers**. Eagleton reconciles a psychoanalytical reading of this work with a social interpretation of it as a means of accounting for a broader critical design: "by attending to what may seem like evasions, ambivalences and points of intensity in the narrative - words which do not get spoken, words which are spoken with unusual frequency, doublings and slidings of language - it can begin to prove through the layers of secondary revision and expose something of the 'sub-text' which, like an unconscious wish, the work both conceals and reveals. It can attend, in other words, not only to what the text says, but to how it works."

In the conclusion Eagleton attempts to broaden his discussion of political criticism. He admits in the process that: "literary theory is less an object of an intellectual enquiry in its own right than a particular perspective in which to view the history of our times." Alarming as these remarks may sound to some reverers of literary theory, they are however far from dismissive, and, in fact, are an attempt to account for the particular use Eagleton gives to the subjects he discusses in the previous chapters within his own bizarre and elusive literary practice. Purporting to embrace a radical yet traditionalist position, Eagleton explains his stand: "Rhetoric, or discourse theory, shares with Formalism, structuralism and semiotics an interest in the formal devices of language, but like reception theory is also concerned with how these devices are actually effective at the point of 'consumption'; its preoccupation with discourse as a form of power and desire can learn much from deconstruction and psychoanalytical theory, and its belief that discourse can be a humanly transformative affair shares a good deal with liberal humanism." Eagleton confidently rounds off his argument by stating: "The fact that 'literary theory' is an illusion does not mean that we cannot retrieve from it many valuable concepts for a different kind of discursive practice altogether." As controversial as Eagleton's commitment may seem, the overall effect of the book is to tempt even the general reader to take up the critical tools Eagleton has succeeded in putting at our disposal and jump into the arena of debate.

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