Politics and Literary Theory

An Interview with Terry Eagleton

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Gail Faurschou

The following interview took place in December 1987 at Duke University in North Carolina, where Terry Eagleton was concluding a semester of teaching and lecturing (not to mention an anxious schedule of guest lecturing across the U.S.). As perhaps the foremost Marxist literary theorist in Britain, his scholarship exhibits both an eclectic breadth and dialectical rigor characteristic of the most sophisticated of contemporary cultural critics. Eagleton's work is situated in the interdisciplinary tradition of cultural studies forged in Britain by Raymond Williams, although Eagleton's criticism of Williams (to which he refers in the interview) has provided this tradition with some of its most interesting debates. Eagleton was a student of Williams at Cambridge in the 1960s and later a colleague until he moved to Oxford in 1989. Last year Eagleton accepted the position of Lecturer in Critical Theory at Lincoln College—a post Oxford finally created for him in (long overdue) recognition of his international importance.

One of the distinguishing characteristics of Eagleton as a writer that certainly bears mention is the eloquence and originality of his critical style. Like such literary theorists as Roland Barthes and Frédéric Jameson, Eagleton's concern (and obvious pleasure) in stylistic innovation designates much of his criticism as a form of literary prose in its own right. It should come as no surprise then that he has recently published a novel, Solis and Scholares, which has received critical attention in Britain, and especially Ireland which, given Eagleton's working class Irish roots and continuing interest in Irish nationalism, is no small source of pleasure for him.

Among Eagleton's most well-known books are Walter Benjamin: Towards a Revolutionary Criticism, Criticism and Ideology, and more recently his "bestseller" in critical theory, Literary Theory: An Introduction (which Eagleton refers to as his "shutter's guide" to the field). But Eagleton's potentially most significant scholarly venture is his forthcoming book on aesthetics and history which promises to constitute a major contribution to Marxist criticism and cultural theory.

Nevertheless, Eagleton is not simply a man of letters. His position as an "engaged" intellectual has a long history. While at Cambridge, Eagleton edited and contributed to a number of radical periodicals and pamphlets, among them the 1968 May Day Manifesto, a collective effort with Williams and other political intellectuals that was a direct attempt to effect the positions taken by the Labour Party. However, most of Eagleton's later political activism has taken place in the arena he knows best. Continually involved in the politics of the academy, he is one of the founders of the Oxford English Ltd. which publishes News from Nowhere, the group dedicated to a critique of the institution and structure of academic and literary teaching in England.

Less known is Eagleton's lighter side. His talent for song writing, especially satirical and political songs set to traditional Irish music, has earned him a temple of adoration unvisited by other British academics. Expanding upon these creative talents, Eagleton has written a musical which was produced a few years ago at "The Fringe" of the Edinburgh Festival.

The following interview focused on issues that arose out of discussions and debates that took place formally and informally during Eagleton's term at Duke. As such we included questions that ranged from Eagleton's perception of current politics in Britain to the latest theoretical turn he has taken in his own work.
Border/Lines: Thatcher’s prolonged attack on the funding of the university system in Britain raises at least two immediate questions. The first: To what extent has the university administrator been a crucial figure in the development of intellectual resistance to Thatcherism? Secondly, does the increase of British intellectual talent in America represent any significant shift with respect to their institutional position in either Britain or America?

Eagleton: Well, I think quite a few intellectuals in Britain who were not previously considered radical have been politicized to some extent by being in those administrative hot spots, that is to say, by having to administer or cushion the cuts imposed on them by the British educational system. Those who have moved to America are less, I think, the traditional bright aspiring young scientists from Britain going to seek their fortune in the New World, than people about my age who have become finally weary of being the lackeys of Thatcher. It’s very hard now for people in those administrative positions. The argument has been made in Britain that the correct political line would be to refuse to implement whatever the budget cuts in your own university. Each university asked to decide how those cuts will be implemented would then just refuse to do it. The argument against this is that then the government would simply take over the university itself and enforce its own cuts on it. It’s a very good example of the problem of how far one plays along with this system. Do you try to save jobs and save student places and a minimum amount of autonomy, or do you take a chance and take a more radical stand? All I can say is that my university, which has not been notable for taking a stand on anything in the past seven centuries, except on God and on the state, did actually take a stand against Thatcher by refusing her an honorary degree. That, however, is as far as it went. In the eyes of Thatcher, Thatcherism is just a jumped-up, petty bourgeois, the daughter of a shopkeeper.

To follow up on the second question: to be a certain kind of academic in Britain now is to walk a political fine line whether you like it or not. Therefore, yes, intellectuals actually do have something very much of a bureaucratic role in missing those state attacks and in defending higher education. But it’s understandable, I think, that people who have been courageously fighting over the whole period should get fed up, tired, and be attracted away to the U.S. Here I think I differ from some American left wing academics, or at least from their actual practice. I don’t think it can be right for left intellectuals to accept so easily the academic community as one’s primary patch of political activity. In Britain a lot of people, simply by staying where they are now in academic institutions, are caught in this political battle and are now fighting to defend whole departments. But there are also other political strategies open to the far left. If you move to the U.S.A., you are going to a society where politics is not, on the whole, of that kind. One chooses that then that’s those who leave is whether to opt to be an academic as their major political commitment, or to engage politically, as I try in a modest way to do myself, in the broader culture.

Border/Lines: In the last decade, in England as elsewhere, there are relatively few new academic jobs opening up, creating a large ghetto of part-time lecturers who, in spite of their research and teaching, are virtually shut out of the institution. In this situation would a migration of intellectuals from Britain necessarily be a negative thing?

Eagleton: The migration I was referring to was a middle rank one. Certainly the job situation in Britain is dire. It has been for many years and shows no signs of getting better. There is now as estranged new sub-class, a kind of hapless intellectual, who are hanging on by their teeth and who are not getting jobs partly because the jobs aren’t there but also because they are too clever by half. They are relegated to some degree as potentially disruptive by those who put their jobs 20 years ago, who haven’t kept up with anything, and therefore who are worried about the effects of new ideas. In this constructed situation the jobs, even more than usual, tend to go to safe and rather dull people. One’s ideological position is consequently more foregrounded and significant.

Border/Lines: What is interesting about this then is that there comes a moment when cultural studies in attempting to establish itself at the institutional level.

Eagleton: Yes, it’s a diagnostic example of the disjunction between theory and practice. Isn’t it?—a disjunction we can theoretically understand—because the historical irony of the situation in Britain at least, is that there has been an explosion of radical ideas in the society exactly at the time when it doesn’t seem easily applicable in the academy. There is something inevitably ironic about floating new, long-term, radical schemes to transform the substance of intellectual life, in a situation where what you are actually doing most of the time in the context of Thatcherism is defending people’s jobs. So you might say there is an embarrassing discrepancy between theory and practice; but it is only by holding open that long-term perspective that the energies for short-term resistance will be secured. You have to know what you want politically, you have to have a desire and a goal to work towards, to act as a critique of the present. But certainly it’s a kind of embarrassment for the left that there seems to be a very little connection between what we might be forced to do just to defend the institutions, and the kinds of more radical ideals that we have, at all costs, to develop.

Border/Lines: In England, besides the universities, the local councils, particularly the Greater London Council have also fallen victim to Thatcher’s policies. Public agencies that once served, however indifferently, to promote new and more participatory forms of popular culture have now been disbanded. This has meant that theatre groups, for instance, as you have mentioned in other contexts, are now going underground.

Eagleton: Yes, there has been a rolling back of the radical theatre movement. But their changed situation has, I think, less to do with financial restraint—although that has an effect since their funding has always been precarious—than it has to do with the shift in the political climate generally. That is to say, they are not so sure any longer who they are fighting for, who audiences they are addressing. It’s a changed situation from the 70s. A lot, however, has been done in terms of community arts. Devolving the highly centralized metropolitan-based arts, the Labour party has shown it would be possible in a coalition government to put together a rather more radical cultural program, in the drafting of which I have been marginally involved. For one thing, it doesn’t cost that much. This is a part of what one might call the public space which intellectuals can get involved with. Since Thatcherism and since the restrictions on local government spending, the arts have been, of course, the first thing to go, and so a lot of these projects have been closed down. However, as I said, a more positive sign is that the Labour party is in the process of large scale official arts seriously in the last few years and have been at work on somewhat more radical proposals.

Border/Lines: In Against the Grain, you describe the political and theoretical contexts that led to your engagement and disengagement with Althusserianism. At the end of The Function of Criticism, you reject the overly rationalist character of Habermas’s socialist future in favour of a politics of the body which here and previously in Literary Theory you argue is one of the most vital contributions of feminist theory. What is the status of this new emphasis on the body in your present work, particularly as it figures in your recent lectures on aesthetics? Is there a political and theoretical context that has spurred this direction in your work?

Eagleton: First of all just a point about Haber-
I understand radical politics to be about needs. Needs are rooted in the body, but the body overreaches itself, becomes non-identical with itself. It doesn't stay equipped with a given set of needs; it transforms those needs into that continual going-beyond we call history.

am trying to show in the work I am doing now is that this is what the aesthetic in the 18th century is originally all about. Aesthetic thought runs back to an anxiety about the absence of the body in certain rational discourses, though the various attempts to put the body back have fallen foul of various modes of idealization and stylization. One must think that project through again, but this time from another more corporal standpoint. What the notion is not at all simple. It's a project fraught with risk, partly because the body has now become such a fashionable theme, and partly because it's not easy to avoid certain disaster, from reification, naturalism, or the supposed self-evidence of body experience. How would you handle the corporal or how is one to think the body, not in a Nietzschean lineage that is simply the ratio of a rational politics, but in a different style? I understand radical politics to be about needs, as a sort: needs are rooted in the body, but the body overreaches itself, becomes non-identical with itself. It doesn't stay equipped with a given set of needs; it transforms those needs into that continual going beyond we call history. I want to find a new way to do this, looking at Marx and Freud as both present feminist theory and certainly my own interest would have developed as a body to that which is not entirely beyond the Vienna circle, also. Okay. I suppose those are things that connect with both present feminist theory and certainly my own interest would have developed as a body to that which is not entirely beyond the Vienna circle, also. Okay. I suppose those are things that connect with both present feminist theory and certainly my own interest would have developed as a body to that which is not entirely beyond the Vienna circle, also.

Eagleton: Yes, very much so. I was very excited by Marley Poison early on and would be an interesting, it would be in some way, of someone who takes over a highly critical line of discourse and then tries to rethink it in terms of the body. Now some people would argue that this is not possible, and it's what Rosier, once called the tension between a rationalist universalism and a greater sensitivity to the Lebenswelt. On the one hand I think we have inherited a lot of rationalist schemes that clearly don't connect with lived subjectivity. At the same time I think we are still linked to the philosophical subjectivity of consciousness. We can't do that after Freud, and if we are to develop a different position it has to be one that takes its standpoint not in the not, but in the that ambiguous subject-object, the body. In that respect Freud's ego is very much a body ego, as he himself insisted.

Border/Lines: In light of this, how would you characterize Fredric Jameson's aesthetic/political project of cognitive mapping which calls for, as he says, almost an unfathomable attempt to think the universality, the totality of late capitalism that structurally can no longer be grasped in phenomenological terms, the experimental terms of an embodied subject?"}

Eagleton: It is true that we are in a world where the body as we know it simply can't find its way around anymore, a world which goes so far beyond its own limits. Technology is an enormous area of the body which then returns to plague it. Wittgenstein once said that philosophy is an answer to the question: I've lost my way, I can't find my way around, so what you do, obviously, is get yourself a map. But you might well say, on the other hand, that the point is not to cognitively map the world but to change it. If, as in the Jamesonian project, cognitive mapping might relate to change, fair enough, but it's not always clear how it does. I think we have to beware of simply being thrown back to a contemplative stance where one would summarize, correct, or totalize this and think that, which isn't in itself an advance on idealism. But then again I'm not convinced the totality has to be purely contemplative, because actually it's part of classical Marxism to claim that the totality is always grasped and constructed from a specific, practical, tendentious standpoint, rather than from a specialized one, in the manner of transcendental idealism. It seems to me that in the postmodern, poststructural age, we are continuing to offer, on the one hand, rather clearly discredited idealist notions of the totality, or on the other, a readiness to settle for a kind of more localized and limited brand of subcultural, often so small as to be invisible. Whatever the difficulties with the idea of totality — and they are real — such manipulations are almost withal ignorant of the fact that in one fact and obvious sense, we are already in a total system. It may not be total in the way the totality has been grasped by idealist thought, but ironically, the epoch of the epistemological is exactly the period in which in a certain sense, the system's totalized interconnections have become more painfully obvious than ever. Border/Lines: In the conclusion of a recent paper on aesthetics you state that for Marx of the Meditations, the true sublime is that infinite, inexhaustible, heterogeneity of use-value of sensuous, non-functional delight in contemplation in terms of a Marxian less productively based. (Which is to say, in part, male-based). However I think that my formulation is a legitimate extrapolation from Marx, in the sense that I think Marxian use-value is all about the sensuous, self-delighting body. I think, however, that the wider Marxist sense of productivity is vulnerable to the charge that it still part of the old philosophy of the subject, that is to say, the old metaobject whose essence is to express, produce, realize itself. There is a lot in that, but it tends to leave in suspension questions such as what we should produce, which powers and capacities we should realize. Therefore, all this talk of production has to go on in some context of intersubjective dialectical point. I think it was the romantic or liberating, such that sensuous value is in itself the problem would be pressed, held back. Old romantic expects though it's indeed a problem. Border/Lines: Where is the reception of your book in Britain? Gebel: The reception is very gratifying particularly well in the United States, which pleased. I hope without too much of my Irish to English in certain political issues back it has such a good every publisher tell realism sells.

The other thing that he has been quoted as critics as think it would just be hard. They see in the them, the work. I think if the heavy and ideally, they haven't quite many of them would like Border/Lines: It is working class far to realist techniques jected. Is this a very today or is it depends issue of style, or is a trend theory and I think Gebel: I feel the theoretical work has literary roles to occasionally, I've been his novels, which was of '70s generation. I think that the idea of the question I'm talking about, that he had a life to novel he had begun. For the interesting converg
The interobjective discourse which is Habermas's point. I think it would be a mistake to take only a
romantic or libertarian interpretation of Marx-
ism, much that something called concrete use-
value is in itself valorized, and then the only
problem would be the fact that it is being sup-
pressed, held back. Marxism must not fall for the
old romantic expressionism/repression model,
though it is indeed deeply influenced by it.

borderLines: Would you care to comment on the
reception of your recent novel, Sainy and Scholar?

Eagleton: The reception of the novel is so far
very gratifying partly because it has been re-
ceived well in Ireland, is in its a best seller
there, which please me a lot because I'm proud.
I hope without too much of the usual sentimental-
ism, of my Irish heritage: I feel more Irish than
English in certain ways, and I'm involved in Irish
political issues back home. I'm also pleased that
it has had such a good reception in an age where
every publisher tells you that only documentary
realism sells.

The other interesting aspect of its reception is
that it has been quite well received by literary
critics, reviewers and commentators who might
think it would just be cerebral, humourless and
hardline. They have been a lot less severe on the
novel than they have on some of my theoretical
work. I think if they had been able to say it was
heavy and ideologically tuned, they would have
done so with alarm. So I think I've managed to not
haven't quite managed to say that, much as some
of them would like to, I must confess pleases me.

borderLines: Raymond Williams' novels of working-
class families are written with sober
realist techniques which you seem to have re-
jected. Is this a verdict on the status of realism
today or does it reflect a deeper concern with the
issue of style, or perhaps with the tension be-
 tween theory and fiction?

Eagleton: I feel that Williams sometimes in his
theoretical work has pitched the importance of
literary realism too high, and I must say that
eventually I've been rather harsh about that in
his novels, which sometimes tend toward a kind
of 20th century Milldamarch. At the same time
I think that the influence of modernism in Wil-
liams' theory and practice has somehow been
gravely underestimated, by myself and others.
He was putting together a collection of his essays
on modernism just before he died. It is something
that he had a lifelong interest in. Even in his later
novels he had begun, by the use of, say, science-
fiction, to move beyond realism. The most recent
novel he was engaged in was an enormous history
of a Welsh community, which I think may be his
major theoretical work of this period—a very
interesting convergence between theory and fic-
tion. They have always been deeply implicated
with each other, and Williams has always seen
his fictional work as a part of his overall enter-
prise.

borderLines: Returning for a moment to the
question of style; your own has been character-
ized as pointed, witty, polemical, sometimes
conversational, particularly in reference to
Sainy and Scholar. In your essay on Jameson you
spoke of style as something like an exces in
analytic discourse and of the pleasure of style
itself as a textual gesture that figures almost as a
stupendous dimension of the work in its own right.
How important is the question of style in relation
to your own work, or more specifically is there a
"politics of style" that is taking on a new dimen-
sion here? Does Roland Barthes still figure
preeminent in this issue?

Eagleton: First of all, I like to think that my
actual style of writing can be rather clear, that is
to say, I like puritanism and think it a political
duty of a socialist intellectual. If I can make it
funny, all the better. Some of my other work is
more high-pitched and rhetorical. I'm a great
believer in style as adaptable, as different forms
of writing suit different situations, and I think
too many contemporary theorists adopt an invari-
able style. Obviously style is such a deeply
unconscious process that there are consistent
trade-markers, however one might try to variate.
But a concern for style would seem to me to be
part of the business of trying to reconstruct the
boundaries between fiction and theory. I like to
write theory in a metaphorical way, and to use
some devices commonly associated with fiction.
To pick up on the reference to Roland Barthes,

In the postmodernist, postmarxist age, we are continuing to offer either clearly
discredited idealist notions of the totality or the readiness to settle for a more
localized and limited brand of micropolitics, often so small as to be invisible.

one of my greatest favourites is Oscar Wilde, the
Irish Roland Barthes. There is in Wilde what I see
as an Irish concept with style and display, with
bunrare, wit, rhetoric and subversion, as against
a tradi possibly British tradition. Wilde is
very political, if not in an obvious way. There are
many interesting parallels between Barthes and
Wilde. Since my book on Walter Benjamin, I've
been interested in the relationships between poli-
tics and comedy, which my novel in a way tries
to deal with too. I find it saddening, however, that
Roland Barthes himself, from whom we all
learned so much, ends up putting style on one side
and ideology and politics on the other, which in
a way brings us back to the question of the local
instincts and practices of the body, on the one
hand, and a more ambitious politics on the other.
Barthes was very much a part of the drift at that
time away from the global to the local, in which
I see certain gains, but also a certain defeatism.

Martin Amis, the daring aesthete of British
youth, once said he would sacrifice all to a well-
turned phrase, and though I have turned the odd
phrase myself I find that aestheticism, on our
present blighted planet, objectionable. There is
a sense, as I have argued with regard to Jameson's
work, that style in writing resists commodifica-
tion, in a world where it is part of the effect of the
commodity to desensibilize it, but it can of course
become commodified in turn. I think we have
to find a way to resist that form of commodifica-
tion in the letter of the text, as Keats found a way
of resisting commodification by sensuousness,
by a kind of shameless overlaying of the language
which brought down on his head charges of
cockney vulgarity from the guardians of literary
consciences. I dislike the ascetic, colourless
writing of which the left has also been so prodi-
gal. If you look at a certain tradition of philoso-
phy from Nietzsche and Kierkegaard to Adorno
and Wittgenstein, they have all been engaged in
this attempt to break out of the straight-jacket of
orthodoxy in the very letter of their texts, by
developing new forms and styles of writing. I
don't have that sort of status, but perhaps in a
modest way I can follow suit. For one thing, I
write songs, and would rather write a good satiric
political song than a good essay any day.

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Lines.