

Politics and Literary Theory

An Interview with Terry Eagleton

Richard Dienst &
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 onerous 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 rigour 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 1969. Last year Eagleton accepted the position of Lecturer in Critical Theory at Lineacre 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 Fredric 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, *Saints and Scholars*, 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: Toward a Revolutionary Criticism*, *Criticism and Ideology*, and more recently his "bestseller" in critical theory, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (which Eagleton refers to as his "bluffer's guide" to the field). But Eagleton's potentially most significant scholarly endeavour 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 affect 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 is dedicated to a critique of the institution and structure of academic and literary teaching in England.

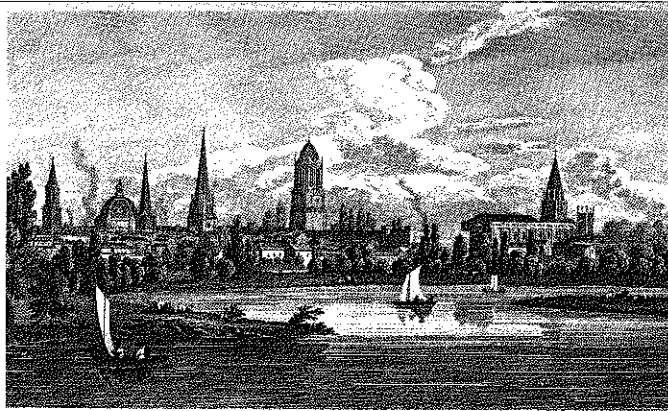
Less known is Eagleton's lighter side. His talent for song writing, especially satirical and political songs set to traditional Irish music, have earned him a tuneful notoriety unrivalled by other British academics. Expanding upon these creative talents, Eagleton has written a musical which was produced 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 turns he has taken in his own work.

Border/Lines: That the funding of the u raises at least two im To what extent has been a crucial figure lectual resistance to the increase of Brit America represent a spect to their institut tain or America?

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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 Thatcher? Secondly, does the increase of British intellectuals teaching 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 seats, that is to say, by having to administer or cushion the cutbacks 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 whatsoever the budget cuts in your own university. Each university asked to decide how those cuts will be implemented would then just to 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 the system. Do you try and 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 Oxford, Thatcher is just a jumped-up petty bourgeoisie, 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 now of a historic role in resisting those state attacks and in defending higher education. But it's understandable, I think, that people who have been courageously fighting over this 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 radical academics 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 choice that then faces 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 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 an estranged new sub-class, a kind of lumpen intelligentsia, 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 regarded to some degree as potentially disruptive by those who got 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 constricted 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 is attempting to establish itself at the institutional level.

Eagleton: Yes, it's a dramatic 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 very little connection between what we might be forced to do just to defend the institution, and the kinds of more utopian 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 indirectly, 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, what 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 committed to carrying out, a fairly radical cultural program, in the drafting of which I have been marginally involved. For one thing it doesn't cost that much. This is one part of what one might call the public sphere which intellectuals can get involved with. Since Thatcher 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 say, a more positive sign is that the Labour party has taken the 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' 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-

mas. I have said, like many others, that his theory is too rationalistic as it stands, but I am interested in those aspects of it which could be redeemed and could figure alongside or with a politics of need, expressivity, and the life-world. When I say that I am now working on the aesthetic, I suppose that it's a term for the body, because what I

feminist project is more paramount in Europe than in the United State—the society in the world most virulently hostile to socialism. And that hostility in my view limited some American feminist theory.

Border/Lines: Do you still see value in a phenomenological approach to the body such as, for example, in the work of Merleau Ponty?

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 in have fallen foul of various modes of idealization and stylization. One must think that project through again, but this time from a more corporeal standpoint. What that means is not at all simple. It's a project fraught with risk, partly because the body has become now such a fashionable theme, and partly because it's not easy to know how to avoid various forms of reductionism, naturalism, or the supposed self-evidence of body experience. How would you handle the corporeal or how is one to think the body, not in a Nietzschean lineage that is simply the ruin of a rational politics, but in a different style? I understand radical politics to be about needs, as a start; 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 trying to think through the cultural project again from that somatic standpoint. Obviously I suppose those are things that connect with present feminist theory and certainly my own interest wouldn't have developed at all without that vital context. But the proper attention of feminism to gender or sexuality is asking only one crucial side of the question. There are also related questions, as I have said, about the productive body, the speaking body, which involve but aren't reducible to a theory of gender. I would hope therefore that the work I'm doing would strike a lot of resonance with the feminist project, if there is one such project. Perhaps I should say that the socialist

Eagleton: Yes, very much so, I was very excited by Merleau Ponty early on and he would be an interesting example, wouldn't he, of someone who takes over a highly rationalistic 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 Husserl 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 rationalistic schemes that clearly don't connect with lived subjectivity. At the same time I don't think we want to fall back to a philosophy of the subject of consciousness. We can't do that after Freud, and if we are therefore to develop an adequate position it has to be one that takes its standpoint not in the cogito, not in the ego, but in that ambivalent 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 experiential 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 any more, a world which goes so far beyond its own limits. Technology is an extension 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, connect, or totalize this and 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 speculative one, in the manner of transcendental idealism. It seems to me that in the postmodernist, postmarxist age, we are continuing to offer, on the one hand, either clearly discredited idealist notions of the totality, or on the other hand, a readiness to settle for a kind of more localized and limited brand of micropolitics, often so small as to be invisible. Whatever the difficulties with the idea of totality — and they are real — such micropolitics sometimes almost wilfully ignores the fact that in one fair 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 micropolitical 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 the Marx of the *Eighteenth Brumaire* the true sublime is that infinite, inexhaustible, heterogeneity of use-value—of sensuous, non-functional delight in concrete particularity which will follow from the dismantling of abstract rational exchange-value. Could you comment on this reading of use-value particularly in the context of Baudrillard, among others, who criticize what they call Marx's productivist bias?

Eagleton: I think my promulgation as it stands doesn't sufficiently take the pressure off the critique of productivism which Habermas and others launch, and I think I have to reframe that formulation in terms of a Marxism 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 Marxian sense of productivity is vulnerable to the charge that it is still part of the old philosophy of the subject, that is to say, the old metasubject 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

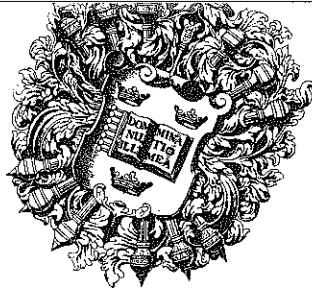
intersubjective discourse. I think it would be romantic or libertarian, such that some value is in itself a problem would be expressed, held back. old romantic expression though it's indeed **Border/Lines:** Would the reception of your *Scholars*?

Eagleton: The reception very gratifying particularly well in Ireland there, which please I hope without too much of my Irish heritage. English in certain ways political issues back it has had such a good every publisher tell realism sells.

The other interest that it has been qu critics, reviewers a think it would just hardline. They have novel than they have work. I think if the heavy and ideological done so with alacrity haven't quite managed of them would like

Border/Lines: Regarding working class realist techniques rejected. Is this a ve today or does it refer issue of style, or between theory and f

Eagleton: I feel the theoretical work h literary realism to occasionally I've b his novels, which s of 20th century *M* I think that the inf liams' theory and gravely underestim He was putting tog on modernism just that he had a life-lo novels he had begun fiction, to move be novel he was engag of a Welsh commu major *theoretical* interesting conver



intersubjective discourse which is Habermas's point. I think it would be a mistake to take only a romantic or libertarian interpretation of Marxism, such that something called concrete use-value is in itself valorized, and then the only problem would be the fact that it is being suppressed, held back. Marxism must not fall for the old romantic expression/repression model, though it's indeed deeply influenced by it.

Border/Lines: Would you care to comment on the reception of your recent novel, *Saints and Scholars*?

Eagleton: The reception of the novel is so far very gratifying partly because it has been received well in Ireland, it is indeed a best seller there, which pleases me a lot because I'm proud, I hope without too much of the usual sentimentalism, 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 turgid, they would have done so with alacrity. And the fact that they haven't quite managed to say that, much as some of them would like to, I must confess pleases me.

Border/Lines: Raymond Williams' novels of working class families are written with sober realist techniques which you seem to have rejected. 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 between 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 occasionally I've been rather harsh about that in his novels, which sometimes tend toward a kind of 20th century *Middlemarch*. At the same time I think that the influence of modernism in Williams' 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 life-long 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 enterprise.

Border/Lines: Returning for a moment to the question of style; your own has been characterized as pointed, witty, polemical, sometimes conversational, particularly in reference to *Saints and Scholars*. In your essay on Jameson you spoke of style as something like an excess in analytic discourse and of the pleasure of style itself as a lateral gesture that figures almost as a utopian 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 dimension here? Does Roland Barthes still figure prominently 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 popularizing 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 suiting different situations, and I think too many contemporary theorists adopt an invariable style. Obviously style is such a deeply unconscious process that there are consistent trade-marks, however one might try to variegate. But a concern for style would seem to me to be part of the business of trying to deconstruct 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,

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 darling novelist 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 respect to Jameson's work, that style in writing resists commodification, in a world where it is part of the effect of the commodity to desensualize; but it can of course become commodified in its turn. I think we have to find a way to resist that form of commodification 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 consciousness. I dislike the anaemic, colourless writing of which the left has alas been so prodigal. If you look at a certain tradition of philosophy from Nietzsche and Kierkegaard to Adorno and Wittgenstein, they have all been marked by 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 satirical political song than a good essay any day.

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 concern with style and display, with humour, wit, rhetoric and subversion, as against a leaden, puritanical 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 politics 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

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