

# *The Significance of Theory*



Terry Eagleton

*The  
Significance  
of Theory*

江苏工业学院图书馆

Terry Eagleton

藏书章

Basil Blackwell

Copyright © Terry Eagleton 1990

Introductory and editorial matter copyright © Michael Payne and M.  
A. R. Habib 1990

First published 1990

Basil Blackwell Ltd

108 Cowley Road, Oxford, OX4 1JF, UK

Basil Blackwell, Inc.

3 Cambridge Center

Cambridge, Massachusetts 02142, USA

All rights reserved. Except for the quotation of short passages for the purposes of criticism and review, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher.

Except in the United States of America, this book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

*British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data*

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

*Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data*

Eagleton, Terry, 1943—

The significance of theory/Terry Eagleton.

p. cm. — (The Bucknell lectures in literary theory)

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 0-631-17269-6 — ISBN 0-631-17271-8 (pbk.)

1. Criticism—History—20th century. 2. Literature—History and criticism—Theory, etc. 3. Politics and literature. I. Title.

II. Series.

PN94.E23 1989

89-38730

801'.95—dc20

CIP

Typeset in 11 on 13 pt Plantin

by Photographics, Honiton, Devon

Printed in Great Britain by Billing & Sons Ltd, Worcester

## Preface

---

Fundamental and far-reaching changes in literary studies, often compared to paradigmatic shifts in the sciences, have been taking place during the last thirty years. These changes have included enlarging the literary canon not only to include novels, poems and plays by writers whose race, gender or nationality had marginalized their work, but also to include texts by philosophers, psychoanalysts, historians, anthropologists, social and religious thinkers, who previously were studied by critics merely as 'background'. The stance of the critic and student of literature is also now more in question than ever before. In 1951 it was possible for Cleanth Brooks to declare with confidence that the critic's job was to describe and evaluate literary objects, implying the relevance for criticism of the model of scientific objectivity while leaving unasked questions concerning significant issues in scientific theory, such as complementarity, indeterminacy and the use of metaphor. Now the possibility of value-free scepticism is itself in doubt as many feminist, Marxist and psychoanalytic theorists have stressed the inescapability of ideology and the consequent obligation of teachers and students of literature to declare their political, axiological and aesthetic positions in order to make those positions conscious and available for examination. Such expansion and deepening of literary studies has, for many critics, revitalized their field.

Those for whom the theoretical revolution has been regenerative would readily echo, and apply to criticism, Lacan's call to revitalize psychoanalysis: 'I consider it to be an urgent task to disengage from concepts that are being deadened by routine use the meaning that they regain both from a re-examination of their history and from a reflexion on their subjective foundations. That, no doubt, is the teacher's prime function.'

Many practising writers and teachers of literature, however, see recent developments in literary theory as dangerous and anti-humanistic. They would insist that displacement of the centrality of the word, claims for the 'death of the author', emphasis upon gaps and incapacities in language, and indiscriminate opening of the canon threaten to marginalize literature itself. In this view the advance of theory is possible only because of literature's retreat in the face of aggressive moves by Marxism, feminism, deconstruction and psychoanalysis. Furthermore, at a time of militant conservatism and the dominance of corporate values in America and Western Europe, literary theory threatens to diminish further the declining audience for literature and criticism. Theoretical books are difficult to read; they usually assume that their readers possess knowledge that few have who have received a traditional literary education; they often require massive reassessments of language, meaning and the world; they seem to draw their life from suspect branches of other disciplines: professional philosophers usually avoid Derrida; psychoanalysts dismiss Freud as unscientific; Lacan was excommunicated even by the International Psycho-Analytical Association.

The volumes in this series record part of the attempt at Bucknell University to sustain conversation about changes in literary studies, the impact of those changes on literary art and the significance of literary theory for the humanities and human sciences. A generous grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation has made possible a five-year

series of visiting lectureships by internationally known participants in the reshaping of literary studies. Each volume includes a comprehensive introduction to the published work of the lecturer, the two Bucknell Lectures, an interview and a comprehensive bibliography.

## Contents

---

Preface	vi
Introduction	
Michael Payne and M. A. R. Habib	1
The Significance of Theory	24
Art after Auschwitz: <i>Adorno's Political Aesthetics</i>	39
Criticism, Ideology and Fiction: <i>An Interview with Terry Eagleton</i>	71
Terry Eagleton: <i>A Selected Bibliography, 1966–1987</i>	90
Index	101

## Introduction

---

At whatever level it is undertaken, the practice of literary criticism inevitably leads to questions of theory. In the midst of a class discussion students will ask earnestly, 'But could the author possibly have intended all we say he meant?' And in the midst of preparing a lecture or writing an article – possibly after having torn themselves away from a family event or news of the latest world crisis – critics will ask themselves with equal intensity, 'What is the point of this work I do? Does it relate intrinsically to anything that is genuinely important in my life or in the world at large?' Until fairly recently such questions only rarely got the attention they deserved, and then usually by philosophers rather than by critics or teachers of literature. Indeed, the avoidance of such questions has been actively encouraged by practitioners of American New Criticism. In his essay 'The Idealism of American Criticism', Terry Eagleton describes the New Criticism's strategic avoidance of theory in this way:

Offspring of the failed agrarian politics of the 1930s, and aided by the collapse of a Stalinized Marxist criticism, New Criticism yoked the 'practical critical' techniques of I. A. Richards and F. R. Leavis to the re-invention of the 'aesthetic life' of the old South in the delicate textures of



the poem. . . . But since a mere Romanticism was no longer ideologically plausible, New Criticism couched its nostalgic anti-scientism in toughly 'objectivist' terms: the poem had the gemlike hardness of an 'urn' or 'icon', a structure of complex tensions cut loose from the flux of history and authorial intention, autotelic and unparaphrasable. . . . In response to the reification of society, New Criticism triumphantly reified the poem. (AG, p. 49)

Despite its powerful advantage of being immanently teachable, the New Criticism has proven to be intellectually and politically sterile to those who think that literature is not separable from life but participates instead in an unbreakable whole of what we know and do, as well as what we write. In the view of such critics as Eagleton, the student is right to want to be able to see a connection between what Milton wrote and how he lived; and critics are likewise right in wanting their own work to engage the complete range of their intellectual and political commitments.

Although his first book, *Shakespeare and Society* (1967), already showed an inclination toward criticism that engages not only literary texts but also the social movements that shape what the poet and the critic write, Eagleton's work since the mid-1970s has become more sharply focused in its politics. As he suggests in the preface to his recent collection of essays, *Against the Grain* (1986), his work can be roughly divided into two phases. The first phase reaches its climax in 1976 with *Criticism and Ideology* and *Marxism and Literary Criticism* and is powerfully influenced by the vitality of Marxist cultural theory in Britain and the rest of Europe that was inspired in turn by the now mythical 1960s: Vietnam, civil rights movements, student protests and university reform, development of the women's movement, events in Northern Ireland, and achievements of the labour movement – all generating the hope that

fundamental social change was about to occur. The work of Louis Althusser was a particularly important influence on Eagleton during this period. The key to understanding Althusser's impact, Eagleton argues (*LT*, pp. 171–3) is the essay 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses' in Althusser's *Lenin and Philosophy* (1971). In that essay Althusser proposes to explain how, even when the ruling class is working against their self-interests, people submit themselves to their society's ruling ideologies. Taking his cue from the psychoanalytic theory of Lacan, Althusser would account for the hold of ideology by such reflections as these: I can think of myself as a free, self-determined individual. I operate under the illusion of this freedom because of the impact of an ideology that all the while has me in its grip. In fact I am a mere function of a social structure that would operate perfectly well without me. I do not usually feel this way about my relationship to society, rather quite the opposite. 'I come to feel', Eagleton explains, 'not exactly as though the world exists for me alone, but as though it is significantly "centered" on me, and I in turn am significantly "centered" on it' (*LT*, p. 172). My combined sense of personal freedom and social purpose derive from the signs and social practices that bind me to the social structure, though in fact I am not in the least indispensable to it. I dress in a certain way; I listen to classical music and read the *New York Review*; I teach, write articles, go to committee meetings; I attend conferences and deliver papers. All of these activities bind me to the social orders that I am serving – the community in which I live, my university, America – by supplying me with a reasonably satisfying and unified image of myself: a middle-aged professor who may not be as well paid as he would like but who has the freedom to say what he thinks and to teach the books he loves to young people who are usually pleasant enough to be around and who attend classes on a campus that combines the comforts of

modern life with the imaginary setting of the pastoral world. In fact, this ideology in which I participate, Eagleton argues via Althusser via Lacan, requires 'mis-recognition' of me; it requires me to believe in the idealized image it offers me of my autonomous self. All of my social actions, all that I read and all that I write constitute the inescapable web of this ideology, which is in truth the Other but which I come to believe is myself. Despite its many flaws, Althusserian Marxism serves, Eagleton trenchantly observes, to confirm 'intellectuals in their professional status, while setting them violently – and so sometimes consolingly – at odds with the governing humanistic ideologies of their institutions' (AG, p. 2). It provides a way to live with one's own bad faith.

The second phase of Eagleton's work, which includes his study of Walter Benjamin, *The Rape of Clarissa, Literary Theory: An Introduction* and *The Function of Criticism*, confronts some of the limitations of Althusserianism, especially its similarity to nihilistic modes of existentialism in seeming to justify complete political inactivity in the face of the conservatism of the late 1970s and 1980s. Just as Althusser was an inspiring presence during the first phase, Benjamin's spirit presides over the more recent phase of Eagleton's work. In Benjamin's life and thought Eagleton discovers the encounter between Marxism and deconstruction (WB, p. 131). Eagleton sees both Marxism and deconstruction as acknowledging the ubiquity of ideology but as offering fundamentally different ways of dealing with it. That difference may be initially understood in terms of the deadlock between decisions to work inside or outside the capitalist system. Eagleton describes how this inside–outside distinction is very much alive in political practice, however suspect it may be in political theory:

Social democracy believes in working on the 'inside' of the capitalist system: persuaded of its omnipotent, all-pervasive, as it were 'metaphysical' presence, it seeks nonetheless in

humble fashion to locate and prise open those symptomatic points of 'hesitancy', negativity and incompleteness within the system into which the thin end of a slim-looking reformist wedge may be inserted. The forms of political theory and practice known to Marxism as 'ultra-leftism', by contrast, will have no truck with this feeble complicity. Equally convinced of the monolithic substance of the system as a whole, they dream, like the anarchist professor of Conrad's *The Secret Agent*, of some unutterable radical enterprise which would blow a black hole in the whole set-up and forcibly induce its self transcendence into some condition beyond all current discourse. (WB, p. 132)

The liberal social-democrat would press for more freedom of speech in Eastern Europe, while the radical ultra-leftist would attempt to achieve a workers' revolution.

This binary opposition between inside and outside is but an initial move in coming to terms with the meeting of Marxism and deconstruction. Indeed, the principal contribution of Althusserian ideology was the collapsing of that distinction: my sense of self is not *mine* but the ideal image of myself that ideology (language and social gesture) has manoeuvred me to accept as myself. The inside-outside opposition had already broken down in traditional Marxist thought once the working class was seen as the agent of historical revolution. Located within the capitalist mode of production by capitalism itself, the working class was both the sustaining force of capitalism and the means of its destruction. As Eagleton dramatically puts it: 'Capitalism gives birth to its own gravedigger, nurturing the acolyte who will one day stab the high priest in the back' (WB, p. 133). But like other millennialist visions, this one has not been realized in historical time and, by the failure of its realization, has created the several Marxisms and deconstructions of contemporary theory. This situation in which history holds its breath has parallels

in the delayed messianic age in Judaism, as described by Benjamin's friend Gershom Scholem and in the false expectation of a new sense of historical time following the French Revolution, as described by George Steiner.

Just as Marxism now includes a spectrum of political practice ranging from democratic socialism to ultra-leftism, so deconstruction has its modest and radical extremes. As Eagleton puts it:

Deconstruction is in one sense an extraordinarily modest proposal: a sort of patient, probing reformism of the text, which is not, so to speak, to be confronted over the barricades but cunningly waylaid in the corridors and suavely chivvied into revealing its ideological hand. Stoically convinced of the unbreakable grip of the metaphysical closure, the deconstructionist, like any responsible trade union bureaucrat confronting management, must settle for that and negotiate what he or she can within the left-overs and stray contingencies casually unabsorbed by the textual power system. But to say no more than this is to do deconstruction a severe injustice. For it ignores that other face of deconstruction which is its hair-raising *radicalism* – the nerve and daring with which it knocks the stuffing out of every smug concept and leaves the well-groomed text shamefully dishevelled. It ignores, in short, the *madness* and violence of deconstruction, its scandalous urge to think the unthinkable, the flamboyance with which it poses itself on the very brink of meaning and dances there, pounding away at the crumbling cliff-edge beneath its feet and prepared to fall with it into the sea of unlimited semiosis or schizophrenia. (*WB*, p. 134).

In its modest form deconstruction seeks out breaks, slippages, contradictions, vertiginous moments within the ideological discourses by which we are constituted; in its more radical form it promotes the dissolution of meaning in order to bring down the power structure of texts. The

various modes of contemporary Marxism and deconstruction are for Eagleton more than strategies to deal with the failed or delayed hope of revolution. Deconstruction is the restless consciousness that refuses to be stilled by ideology, and Marxism is the active resistance to alienation and futility that spring from the class structures sustained by ideology.

Several features of Eagleton's work have helped to make him the most read theorist in Britain today. Not only does he write extremely well, he has also forged for himself a style that is neither mannered and arcane, nor detached and uncommitted. When he acts as a medium for some of the more elusive spirits of modern theory – as he does in *Marxism and Literary Criticism*, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* and his book on Benjamin – Eagleton is a model teacher. Clear and challenging, serious and witty, he invites us, as Benjamin did also, to confront the social and theoretical challenges of modern life without abandoning tradition. More than any other contemporary theorist since Northrop Frye and Frank Kermode, Eagleton moves easily among the major writers of the past – Shakespeare, Milton, Richardson, Johnson, the Brontës, Brecht – prodding his reader to reconsider their works and to question what he says about them. Because it subjects itself to the same dialectic by which it examines historical processes, Marxist cultural theory has, in Eagleton's view, a comic shape:

For Marxism, history moves under the very sign of irony: there is something darkly comic about the fact that the bourgeoisie are their own grave-diggers, just as there is an incongruous humour about the fact that the wretched of the earth should come to power. The only reason for being a Marxist is to get to the point where you can stop being one. It is in that glib, feeble piece of wit that much of the Marxist project is surely summarized. Marxism has the

humour of dialectics because it reckons itself into the historical equations it writes. (*WB*, p. 161)

Eagleton's criticism, too, has that same inviting shape of comedy. In what is perhaps his most accessible book, *The Function of Criticism*, Eagleton's critical mythos is clearest. The argument of that book is that modern criticism has lost its social function and has thus betrayed its heritage. 'Born of a struggle against the absolutist state' in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, criticism became for the European bourgeoisie a discursive space between state and civil society in which 'rational judgement and enlightened critique' broke free of authoritarian politics (*FC*, p. 9). In that bourgeois public sphere of clubs, journals and coffee-houses the rules of discourse were, as Dryden describes them, 'founded upon good sense, and sound reason, rather than on authority'. By narrowing the focus of literature to an exclusive preoccupation with canonical texts, criticism has undermined itself. 'It is arguable', Eagleton writes, 'that criticism was only ever significant when it engaged with more than literary issues – when, for whatever historical reason, the "literary" was suddenly foregrounded as the medium of vital concerns deeply rooted in the general intellectual, cultural and political life of an epoch' (*FC*, p. 107). Eagleton's project is to recover criticism's traditional social role.

Like the final scene of a Shakespearean comedy, his vision of criticism's reformation encompasses the diverse occupations that now somewhat uneasily coexist under the umbrella of English literature: 'semiotics, psychoanalysis, film studies, cultural theory, the representation of gender, popular writing, and of course the conventionally valued writings of the past' (*FC*, p. 124). These various pursuits are unified, as he sees them, only by 'a concern with the symbolic processes of social life, and the social production of forms of subjectivity' (*FC*, p. 124). Now more than

ever, Eagleton insists, we need in America and Europe 'a more profound understanding of such symbolic processes, through which political power is deployed, reinforced, resisted, at times subverted' (*FC*, p. 124) in order to be able to end power-struggles that threaten survival itself. Although he begins *The Future of Criticism* by confessing his intention 'flexibly and opportunistically, to shed light on a particular history' (*FC*, p. 8), Eagleton's flexibility is an ecumenical openness to the diversity of literary study today and his opportunism amounts to a concerned focus of attention on the contemporary occasion for criticism's recovery of its traditional role.

**Michael Payne**

Terry Eagleton's contribution to Marxist cultural theory is striking in its range. While his earlier writing examined in some depth certain Marxist categories of literary-cultural analysis, his later, more popularising, work has argued persuasively the need for theory. Eagleton has re-evaluated the English literary critical tradition, redefined the critic's function and reappraised specific authors from his historical materialistic perspective. These are substantive aspects of the general task of a Marxist critic. But what stands out more saliently in Eagleton's recent texts is his resolute critical engagement with and historical contextualization of, other modern critical trends. This aspect of Eagleton's work yields the vexed question that will be addressed here, namely what exactly is the relationship of Eagleton's Marxism to recent non-Marxist critical theory?

Eagleton has been criticized for being uncritically dismissive of post-structuralism; and, on the other side, for 'compromising' his Marxism. As Eagleton phrases it in the interview reproduced here, 'if one sits on a fence,



that's when one draws fire from both sides'. But fences, particularly in Oxford, can be too sharp to sit on. And Eagleton's position, it will be argued here, entails not compromise but a strategism which is quite compatible with his Marxism.

From one point of view, virtually all modern literary theories, each with its own inflections and motives, can be regarded as an implicit if not direct reaction against the New Critical claims as to the autonomy, independence and objectivity of a literary text. Eagleton, as we shall see, has an ambivalent stance towards what he calls the 'radical anti-objectivism' of recent theory (*FC*, p. 93). What this reaction against objectivity entails, at a deeper level, is an assault on the notion of identity. It is perhaps at this level that one can see most clearly the nature of overlap and divergence between Eagleton's Marxism and non-Marxist theory.

In traditional logic, as deriving from its comprehensive formulation by Aristotle, the law of identity serves among other things as a basis of categorization and exclusive definition: an entity is what it is precisely because it is not anything else. Its identity is thus born in the process of dirempting its relations with other similarly 'identified' things in the world, a process which thereby denies ontical status to those relations, treating them as somehow external to the entities related. This suppression of relations and relegation of them to a contingent status, a procedure closely tied to Aristotle's various definitions of 'substance' and 'essence', can serve a political and ideological function. For example, the identity of an object (which could be simply a physical entity or something as complex as a system of law or religion) which is in fact historically specific could be passed off as an eternal or natural identity. As Eagleton remarks in his essay on Adorno in this volume, the notion of identity is 'coercive': it is the 'ideological element of pure thought' and was 'installed at the heart