

MATERIALISM AND FINITUDE: TERRY EAGLETON'S MARXISM

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Abstract: This essay focuses on the change of emphasis—already announced in *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (1997) and evident in *Sweet Violence* (2003)—that took place in Eagleton's writing at the turn of the century: from showing a historicist scepticism about universals to advocating acknowledgement of human creatureliness (frailty, suffering, death) without which any political project would fail. This change coincided with an approach to a Thomist version of the Christian religion that reflected the influence on Eagleton of his friend the Dominican Herbert McCabe and with a profound interest in Jacques Lacan. The article argues that this change did not affect Eagleton's Marxist faith or imply shunning political action. Rather, the turn concerned the materialist basis of Eagleton's proposal of a just life. The appeal to existential forces entailed, on the one hand, a critique of left historicism and of the postmodern cult of culture and relativism and, on the other, an attempt to reinforce a Marxist critique of capitalism and the resistance against fundamentalism, Nihilism, and consumerism. To propose his idea of the

just life Eagleton appropriates both the notion of Christian charity—the idea of self-realization through love and solidarity—together with the Thomist conception of morality rooted on the body, and Lacan's imperative “do not give up on desire”.

Keywords: Eagleton; Materialism; Finitude; Marxism; Herbert McCabe; Lacan.

Resumen: Este ensayo se centra en el cambio de énfasis —ya anunciado en *La estética como ideología* (1997) y evidente en *Dulce violencia* (2003)— que se produjo en la escritura de Eagleton en el cambio de siglo: de mostrar un escepticismo historicista acerca de los universales a abogar por el reconocimiento de la criatura humana (la fragilidad, el sufrimiento, la muerte) sin la cual cualquier proyecto político fracasaría. Este cambio coincidió con un acercamiento a una versión tomista de la religión cristiana que reflejaba la influencia en Eagleton de su amigo el dominico Herbert McCabe y con un profundo interés por Jacques Lacan. El artículo argumenta que este cambio no afectó a la fe marxista de Eagleton ni implicó rehuir la acción política. Más bien, el giro afectó a la base materialista de la propuesta de Eagleton de una vida justa. La apelación a las fuerzas existenciales supuso, por un lado, una crítica a la una crítica al historicismo de izquierdas y al culto posmoderno de la cultura y el relativismo y, por otro, un intento de reforzar la crítica marxista al capitalismo y la resistencia contra el fundamentalismo, el nihilismo y el consumismo. Para proponer su idea de la vida justa, Eagleton se apropia tanto de la noción de caridad cristiana —la idea de autorrealización a través del amor y la solidaridad—, junto con la concepción tomista de la moral arraigada en el cuerpo, y el imperativo de Lacan de “no renunciar al deseo”.

Palabras clave: Eagleton; Materialismo; Finitud; Marxismo; Herbert McCabe; Lacan.

Terry Eagleton is a Marxist. Any slight doubt about this would have been banished when he responded to the Global Financial Crisis by explaining with tremendous wit and panache *Why Marx Was Right*. This is no small thing at a time when the radical academy tends to identify itself as Post-Marxist (Callinicos, Kouvelakis and Pradella). It also is the basis of the connection between us. We first met in the early 1970s at Terry's famous seminar on Marxism and Literary Criticism in his rooms at Wadham College Oxford. We both joined the International Socialists, despite our comrades' suspicions of our heretical interest in Althusser. I still have somewhere the postcard in which Terry kindly praised my first book, *Althusser's Marxism*. I was happy to repay the debt more recently by reading and commenting on *Why Marx Was Right* in draft.

We also have the common bond of a Catholic heritage—though I'm afraid mine stems from the recusant gentry, very different from the Irish working-class Catholicism Terry evokes so well in *The Gatekeeper*. But the Dominican house Blackfriars in Oxford—where Terry's great friend Herbert McCabe was based and where my father's funeral took place—matters to both of us. So it's appropriate that both Marx and God figure prominently in what follows (though I'm more enthusiastic about one than the other).

“We die anyway”: the materialism of human frailty

But what kind of Marxist is Eagleton? In his early work there are some key reference points—Althusser and Macherey, Trotsky and Benjamin. There has, however, been a distinctively different tone in his more recent writings (by which I mean those of the past 20 years). I want to bring this out by considering the discussion in Eagleton's most Althusserian book, *Criticism and Ideology* (1976), of Trotsky's “Class and Art”, a speech he gave in the early 1920s. Eagleton homes in on Trotsky's defence (against the class-reductionist approach of the Proletkult movement, which counterposed “proletarian” and “bourgeois” art) of the universal value of Dante's *Divine Comedy*:

How is it thinkable that there should be not a historical but a directly aesthetic relationship between us and a mediaeval Italian book? This is explained by the fact that in class society, in spite of all its changeability, there are certain common features. Works of art developed in a mediaeval Italian city can, we find, affect us too. What does this require? A small thing: it requires that these feelings and moods shall have received such broad, intense, powerful expression as to have raised them above the limitations of the life of those days. Dante was, of course, the product of a certain social milieu. But Dante was a genius. He raised the experience of his epoch to a tremendous artistic height. And if we, while today approaching other works of mediaeval literature merely as objects of study, approach *The Divine Comedy* as a source of artistic perception, this happens not because Dante was a Florentine petty bourgeois of the thirteenth century but, to a considerable extent, in spite of that circumstance.

Let us take, for instance, such an elementary psychological feeling as fear of death. This feeling is characteristic not only of man but also of animals. In man it first found simple articulate expression, and later also artistic perception. In different ages, in different social milieus, this expression has changed, that is to say, men have feared death in different ways. And nevertheless what was said on this score not only by Shakespeare, Byron, Goethe, but also the Psalmist, can move us (Trotsky 67-68).

In *Criticism and Ideology* Eagleton sympathizes with Trotsky's posing of the problem of aesthetic value but criticizes his solution. Commenting on the above passage, he writes:

The final part of the statement partly retracts what the first part has offered: historical transcendence is seen first as an intensive universalizing of historically specific experience, then as almost wholly independent of such experience . . . Uncertain of its notion of the “historically universal”, the argument then shifts to the biological universal of death (173)¹.

Compare the “Introduction” to *Sweet Violence*:

Tragedy deals in the cut-and-thrust of historical conjunctures, but since there are aspects of suffering which are also rooted in our species-being, it also has an eye to these more natural material facts of human nature. As the Italian philosopher Sebastiano Timpanaro points out, phenomena such as love, ageing, disease, fear of one’s own death and sorrow for the death of others, the brevity and frailty of human existence, the contrast between the weakness of humanity and the apparent infinity of the cosmos: these are recurrent features of human cultures, however variously they may be represented. However left historicism may suspect that universals are governing-class conspiracies, the fact is that we die anyway. It is, to be sure, a consoling thought for pluralists that we meet our end in such a richly diverse series of ways, that our modes of exiting from existence are so splendidly heterogeneous, that there is no drearily essentialist “death” but a diffuse range of cultural styles of expiring. Indeed, perhaps we should speak of death as a way of being “challenged”, a mode of being which is neither inferior nor superior to breathing or love-making, simply different. Perhaps the dead are not really dead, just differently capacitated. But we die anyway (xiii)².

So, where the younger Eagleton criticized Trotsky for tying aesthetic value to “the biological universal of death”, now he joins Trotsky in making just this move. No doubt there are various sources of this shift. One of these seems to reflect his doubts about what is often described as Marx’s Promethean conception of human beings in the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* as inventive social producers who realize themselves through their labour. These seem first to have been expressed in *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (1990), but are very succinctly stated in his first book on Marx. Here he says (entirely accurately from an interpretive point of view):

As a historicist thinker, Marx is out to rescue human institutions from the false eternity with which metaphysical thought has endowed them; what was historically created can always be historically changed. But he is also, somewhat paradoxically, a sort of Aristotelian essentialist, who holds that there is a human nature or essence, and that the just society would be one in which this nature was allowed to come into its own (*Marx and Freedom* 17).

1 It is perhaps worth stressing that this scepticism about human universals would be common both to many versions of Marxism and to the deconstructionism with which Eagleton coquetted for a while, most notably in his hugely influential *Literary Theory: An Introduction*. He now stresses Marx’s own commitment to a theory of human nature: notably in *Why Marx Was Right* (chapter 4).

2 See also Sebastiano Timpanaro, *On Materialism*.

Eagleton goes on to express doubts about what he calls Marx's "Romantic notion of a nature whose self-development is an end in itself" (17):

One might find a rather too relentless activism about the doctrine, which undervalues what Wordsworth called "wise passiveness" or Keats "negative capability". Are we to realize *all* of our powers and capacities? What about those which seem morbid or destructive? Perhaps Marx considers that our powers become destructive only by virtue of being constrained, in which case he is surely mistaken. And how are we to discriminate between our more positive and negative capacities, if we have no criteria beyond this historically relative process itself by which to do so? "All-round" development may seem to some inferior to the cultivation of a single creative talent, just as self-denial may appear to some more commendable than self-expression (25)³.

The specific form taken by Eagleton's rediscovery of the transhistorical is, it seems to me, partly intended as a corrective to Marx's "Romantic expressivism" (*The Ideology of the Aesthetic* 223). Thus, his recent writing stresses not the active conquest of nature but toil, passivity, suffering, death as human universals:

It is true that there is much about our species-being which is passive, constrained and inert. But this may be a source of radical politics, not an obstacle to it. Our passivity, for example, is closely bound up with our frailty and vulnerability, in which any authentic politics must be anchored. Tragedy can be among other things a symbolic coming to terms with our finitude and fragility, without which any political project is likely to founder. But this weakness is also a source of power, since it is where our needs take root. If these needs are rebuffed, then they have behind them a force rather more intractable than the purely cultural (*Sweet Violence* xv).

But Eagleton's concern here is not simply to correct Marx, but to reinforce a Marxist critique of capitalism. One of the main polemical targets of his recent writing is "left historicism", of which postmodernism is the most important example. The problem with left historicism is to that it develops a critique of essentialism and foundationalism that values the very qualities promoted by capitalism: "They do not seem to have noticed that difference, diversity and destabilization are the *dernier cri* of the transnational corporations" (*Sweet Violence* xvi). Or again:

Those who insist with suspicious stridency on the malleability of things, and for whom "dynamic" is as unequivocally positive a term as "static" is unambiguously negative, tend to forget that there are kinds of change which are deeply unpleasant and undesirable, just as there are forms of permanence and continuity which are to be affirmed and admired. Capitalism may be upbraided for many defects, but lack of dynamism is hardly one of them. One thinks of Walter Benjamin's wise dictum that revolution is not a runaway train but the application of an emergency brake. It is capitalism which is anarchic, extra-

3 See also Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* 217-26.

vagant, out of hand, and socialism which is temperate, earth-bound and realistic. This is at least one reason why an anarchic, extravagant poststructuralism has been rather wary of it (xi).⁴

As these passages make clear, and Eagleton develops at length in *After Theory*, this stress on human invariance and finitude are thus not a retreat into Heideggerian *Gelassenheit* but a means of grounding a more effective resistance to capitalism. They constitute not an abandonment of politics for the contemplation of Being but a means of practising politics more effectively.

The same balance is struck in Eagleton's references to religion. He takes "the political left" to task for its "silence about religion" and insists that, for all the crimes of organized religion, "there are theological ideas which can be politically illuminating" (*Sweet Violence* xvii, 39-40). *Sweet Violence* is dedicated to his friend, the great left Thomist Herbert McCabe OP, whose influence, Eagleton says in *After Theory*, "is so pervasive on my argument that it is impossible to localize" (ix). If one were going to try, however, I think one would see McCabe's influence most clearly at work in the two chapters where Eagleton seeks to rescue the virtues and morality for the left, which resonate very strongly with McCabe's vindication of a version of Catholic orthodoxy that dismantles such dualisms as fact and value, subjective and objective, or linguistic and biological.

It seems to me, as they say, no accident that there are more references to Aristotle than to Marx or Derrida in *After Theory*, for at the centre of Eagleton's vindication of morality against, not just postmodernism, but another great Marxist critic, Frederic Jameson⁵, is a restatement of Aristotle's morality of well-being that seeks to "universalize the idea of self-realization", in particular through incorporating the Judaeo-Christian notion of love, where "we become the occasion for each other's self-realization. It is only through being the means of your self-fulfilment that I can attain my own, and vice versa" (*After Theory* 122)⁶.

But there is nothing ethereal or other-worldly about this appropriation of Christian charity. Typically Eagleton makes the New Testament his source for the claim that "morality is basically a biological affair"—i.e., "like everything else about us, it is rooted ultimately in the body . . . It is the mortal, fragile, suffering, ecstatic, needy, dependent, desirous, compassionate body which furnishes the basis of all moral thought. Moral

4 Compare Luc Boltanski's and Eve Chiapello's fascinating study (*The New Spirit of Capitalism*) of how contemporary "network capitalism" has appropriated the "aesthetic critique" of capitalism for denying individual creativity that was central to the movements of 1968.

5 For example in "Jameson and Form".

6 See also, on love, Eagleton, *Sweet Violence* 165-168.

thought puts the body back into our discourse” (*After Theory* 155). The ellipsis in this passage is a quotation from another contemporary Thomist, the ex-Marxist Alasdair MacIntyre, whose *Dependent Rational Animals* also explores the moral and political implications of our bodily and animal nature.

More recently, Eagleton himself recruits Aquinas to the materialist camp:

Thomas Aquinas rejects the Platonic prejudice that the less our actions involve the body, the more admirable they are. In his view, our bodies are constitutive of all our activities, however “spiritual” or high-minded they may be. For Aquinas, we are animals all the way through, not just from the neck down. We are, to be sure, social, rational and historical beings as well, but the materialist point is that we are these things in a peculiarly animal way. They are not alternatives to our animality, or accessories to it. History, culture and society are specific modes of creatureliness, not ways of transcending it. Animal bodies are inherently self-transcendent (*Materialism* 44-45).

Theology and revolution

No wonder that what Eagleton calls “the metaphysical or theological turn (or full circle) which my work seems to have taken in recent years” has called some spluttering in liberal-left quarters (*Holy Terror* vi)⁷. Reviewing Eagleton’s powerful critique of the “new atheism” of Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens (re-baptized as the two-headed beast “Ditchkins”), *Reason, Faith, and Revolution* (2009), James Wood sarcastically comments:

His Catholicism used to be obscured by his Marxism, but, as he has aged, his religiousness, like a limp, has become more pronounced. Some might say that to be committed to not one but two questionable orthodoxies is to be symmetrically hobbled, but Eagleton’s Marxism is vividly cogent, while his Christianity is militantly opaque (“God in the Quad”).

One can imagine what fine work Eagleton could make of Wood’s offensive reduction of religious faith to what used to be called a handicap. But Wood has a point. Eagleton seeks to demolish Ditchkins while bracketing the question of whether or not God exists. He has two arguments for this strategy. The first is that Ditchkins wrongly treat belief in God as if it were a rival scientific hypothesis to, say, the theory of evolution by natural selection and God himself as if he were an entity in the world. The reasons Eagleton gives for why this is wrong are developed at more length by McCabe, who writes: “for St Thomas, when we speak of God we do not know what we are talking about” (*God Still Matters* 27). And again:

⁷ For example, see the splenetic reaction in the letters pages of the *London Review of Books* to Eagleton’s demolition of Richard Dawkins’s *The God Delusion*, “Lunging, Flailing, Mispunching”.

If God is whatever answers our question, how come everything? then evidently he is not included amongst everything. God cannot be a thing, an existent among others. It is not possible that God and the universe should make up two. Again, if we are to speak of God as causing the existence of everything, it is clear that we must not mean he makes the universe out of anything (6)⁸.

This negative theology allows Eagleton (here again following McCabe) to argue that there is no conflict between religious faith and scientific research, and this is fair enough. But I don't see that this gets rid of the question of the existence of God. Saying that "God is the reason why there is something rather than nothing", not "any sort of entity himself" isn't a sufficient answer (Eagleton, *Reason, Faith, and Revolution* 7). If existence isn't a predicate, as Kant and Frege argue, but the instantiation of a concept, then the nature of existence will in each case depend on the nature of the concept instantiated. So how God exists will be different from how a star or a table or a person exists, but it doesn't follow that his existence is a null question. It surely makes some kind of difference to how the world is whether or not God really is "the reason why there is something rather than nothing", even though this is a metaphysical and not a scientific question.

Secondly, Eagleton argues, Ditchkins fail to understand that faith or love—a commitment irreducible to propositional truth—gives us access to truths more effectively than can the liberal rationalist pretending to adopt the view from nowhere. Now I agree that adopting a partial perspective can be a precondition of attaining objectivity: this is, after all, what Georg Lukács argues in *History and Class Consciousness*, developing an intuition of Marx's. Althusser argued something similar in the 1970s with respect to Marx himself:

it is no surprise that the adoption of a proletarian philosophical position (even "in germ") is essential to the foundation of a science of History, that is, to an analysis of the mechanisms of class exploitation and domination. In every class society these mechanisms are covered-up-masked-mystified by an enormous coating of ideological representations, of which the philosophies of History, etc., are the theoretical form. For the mechanisms to become visible, it is necessary to leave these ideologies, that is, to "settle accounts" with the philosophical consciousness which is the basic theoretical expression of these ideologies. It is therefore necessary to abandon the theoretical position of the ruling classes, and take up a position from which these mechanisms can become visible: the proletarian standpoint. It is not enough to adopt a proletarian political position. This political position must be worked out into a theoretical (philosophical) position so that the causes and mechanisms of what is visible from the proletarian standpoint may be grasped and understood. Without this displacement, the science of History is unthinkable and impossible (*Essays* 160-161).

⁸ Compare Eagleton, *Reason, Faith, and Revolution* 6-9, which repeats the formula "God and the universe do not make two".

But how far this dialectic of the particular and the universal can be prudently generalized is another matter. Eagleton appeals to Alain Badiou's notion of truth-events in his support, but he seems to realize he's skating on thin ice here (*Reason, Faith, and Revolution* 116-119)⁹. However perspectival knowledge may be, it can't be the case that any old faith or love gives us access to the truth—unless we give up on the common or garden realist conception of truth according to which sentences are true or false in virtue of how the world is. In the passage just cited from Althusser the point is clear: the construction of “the science of History” presupposes “a proletarian political position” but must be “worked out”, developed into an articulated theory answerable to whatever protocols govern scientific practice.

I have great sympathy with what Eagleton is doing in his critique of Ditchkins. I agree that it's a rationalistic error of major proportions to reduce the question of religious faith to the truth or falsehood of what it affirms. Indeed, I take this to be Marxist ABC, starting from Marx's 1843 Introduction to *A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, where he moves beyond the Enlightenment critique of religion reaffirmed by the Young Hegelians to treat religious faith as a symptom of a world out of joint: “Religious distress is at the same time the expression of real distress and also the protest against real distress. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, just as it is the spirit of spiritless conditions” (175). It is important to reaffirm this approach in the present era of Islamophobia.

But Marx can bracket the question of truth because he takes for granted the falsehood of belief in God. The same text begins: “For Germany the criticism of religion is in the main complete, and criticism of religion is the premise of all criticism” (175). Marx starts from the Enlightenment critique but thinks it's inadequate for explaining why people believe. What connects the issue of truth with that of social explanation is what Max Weber argues is common to all religions, i.e. the problem of theodicy: why is there suffering and injustice in the world? Here I must apologize for being simple-minded, but there just seems to me to be a stark inconsistency between (i) ‘God is the reason why there is something rather than nothing’, who created the world (literally) gratuitously; (ii) God is love and this love is particularly directed towards the suffering and the outcast; and (iii) there is suffering and injustice in the world. (i) and (ii) are McCabe's and Eagleton's version of the orthodox Christian conception of God as the omniscient, omnipotent, and benevolent creator (however figuratively, McCabe argues, we may have to understand

9 See Badiou, *Being and the Event* and my critique of this book in *The Resources of Critique*, §3.2.

this description). These propositions just don't square with one another. That there is suffering and injustice in the world may be critical to understanding why people believe in God, but it at the same time refutes this belief. I take it that Eagleton would disagree but it would be better if he owned up to his faith (as it seems he now does) rather than duck and dive in the way he does in *Reason, Faith, and Revolution*.

But despite Eagleton's debt to McCabe, their positions are not identical. This is indicated by what they say about death. For McCabe death and resurrection represent the point at which Marxism and Christianity part company:

If the marxist is right and there is no God who raised Jesus from the dead then the christian preoccupation with death as the ultimate revolutionary act is a diversion from the real demands of history; if the christian is right then the marxist is dealing with revolution only at a relatively superficial level, he has not touched the ultimate alienation involved in death itself, and for this reason his revolution will betray itself; the liberation will erect a new idol. Not that the christian church is not in any position to cast the first stone at people who betray their own revolutionary purpose (*Law, Love* 135-136).

Consequently, the stance the Christian must take towards political revolution is almost literally that of the fellow-traveller:

It seems to me that the first thing a christian will want to say about his moral position is that he belongs with this revolution. I say "belongs with it" rather than "belongs to it" because the christian revolution goes in and through this kind of revolution into something deeper, to the ultimate alienation of man which is sin and the ultimate transformation which is death and resurrection (166-167).

Or again,

the community whose mission it is to transform the world is the community of *faith* which implies a dispossession of oneself which goes beyond even poverty and means, in the end, an acceptance of death. This means that the christian's relation to the revolution can never be a simple one, he needs to be constantly critical of the political revolution lest it should become a substitute for the final transformation of the world (168).

Now Eagleton too advocates "an acceptance of death", as the ultimate in the lesson in human finitude that is at the heart of his materialism. Thus: "Death shows us the ultimate unmasterability of our lives, and therefore something of the bogusness of trying to master the lives of others" (*After Theory* 213). Similarly, he interprets Lacan's slogan "Do not give up on your desire!" as a "tragic imperative, exhorting the subject to an affirmation which can arise only from embracing its own finitude": for, "[s]ince desire for psychoanalytic thought is always bound up with death, a death which the lack at the heart of desire prefigures, not to give up on one's desire means to maintain, Heidegger-like, a

constant relation to death, confronting the lack of being that one is" (*Sweet Violence* 233).

Nihilism, fundamentalism, and consumerism all represent ways of evading this truth. But recognition of our finitude serves to direct our attention back to the transformation of this world. Thus, at the end of *Sweet Violence*, Eagleton returns to Lacan's injunction. He first reminds us:

The astonishing fact about global capitalism is that it is the *majority* who are dispossessed... In this context, Lacan's "Do not give up on your desire!" becomes a political injunction. It means "Be steadfast for death": don't be fooled by "life" as we have it, refuse to make do with the bogus and second-best, don't settle for that set of shabby fantasies known as reality, but cling to your faith that the deathly emptiness of the dispossessed is the only source from which a more jubilant, self-delighting existence can ultimately spring (296).

Like Slavoj Žižek, then, Eagleton counterposes to "that set of shabby fantasies known as reality" the Real—the Lacanian order where the death drive reigns as the limit and ruin of the coherence of the Symbolic, "the terrifyingly inhuman installed at the core of the other and oneself, for which one name is the death drive" (165). But, where for Žižek the Real functions both as ontological principle and as tool of *Ideologiekritik*, revealing the antagonism at work in contemporary social and cultural forms, for Eagleton it serves rather as the ethical invitation to find ways of living that acknowledge our liability to death and suffering and our need for reciprocity. Thus he talks about "a new social order, one based this time on the Real, on a mutual confession of finitude and frailty, rather than on [left historicist] fantasies of self-fashioning and endless pliability" (287-288)¹⁰.

In a very recent, and explicitly Christian text, Eagleton maintains this emphasis on transformative agency when asking; "When Will Christ Come Again?" God might indeed intervene in history to fend off catastrophe, but this can't be counterposed to human efforts to free themselves:

The Second Coming is most intelligible not as an arbitrary arrest of history but as an act of mercy in circumstances which cry out for it . . . It is reasonable, then, to believe that only when we are in truly desperate straits will God stretch out his arm for a final time.

Yet since God respects our freedom, being the source of it himself, he will presumably give us every opportunity to build as much of the New Jerusalem as possible with our own hands. Only when it is clear that this project lies utterly in ruins is he likely to act. And whether we have failed or not is to be judged not simply by the state at which we finally arrive, but also by every historical struggle for justice and friendship weighed

¹⁰ See my discussion of Žižek in *The Resources of Critique*, §3.3.

against every squalid betrayal of it. In this sense, then, the coming of Christ has not been deferred . . . But that return involves free human agency, not simply the faith that history is even now washed up had we but eyes to see it (320-21).

Conclusion

There is much in this that is very original. It is not that no other Marxist has drawn attention to the nature-imposed limits to human achievement, to the mortality and finitude arising from our physical and dependent nature. Apart from the example of Timpanaro cited by Eagleton himself, one can think of Engels predicting the death of the universe in *Dialectics of Nature* and Adorno in *Negative Dialectics* seeking to rein in the megalomaniac ambitions of German idealism, and thereby to open a space in which intimations of a reconciled nature could make themselves felt. Indeed, recent Marxist scholarship has greatly qualified Eagleton's critique of Marx's alleged Prometheanism by documenting the latter's preoccupation with humans' dependence on and interaction with a nature that capitalism is relentlessly destroying¹¹.

But it is not unfair to say that these earlier exercises have often tended to remind us of the limits to what any form of political action can achieve. In Eagleton's case, however, invoking the Real as an invitation to a social order based on the reciprocity needed by the finite, dependent animals that we are pushes us towards rather than away from political action. Thus he says that "the true paradigm of objectivity is not epistemological but ethical. The model of objectivity is a self-less attention to another's needs" (*Sweet Violence* 289). But ethics, thus understood in a way that recalls Lévinas and Derrida as openness to the other, leads us back to politics:

Objectivity, the self-for-others, is only a basis for freedom and well-being if it happens all round. If it is not reciprocal then is simply the dismal condition we have now, in which some squander their lives in the name of pampering others. Only by a mutual recognition of finitude, frailty and material needs can such objectivity become the basis of an emancipated world . . . To transform the subject involves not wishing objectivity away, but pressing its implications all the way through. It is in this sense that there is an internal bond between virtue and materialism (*Sweet Violence* 289).

It is hard to get critical distance from a position when one agrees with it as much as I do with the substantive content of Eagleton's Marxism. Let me conclude with one suggestion and three observations on the significance of his strategy. The suggestion is that taking seriously the injunction to "universalize the idea of self-realization" requires us to

¹¹ See Foster, *Marx's Ecology*; Foster, *The Return of Nature*; Burkett, *Marx and Nature*; and Saito, *Karl Marx's Ecosocialism*.

go beyond Aristotelian *eudaimonia* and Christian *caritas* and engage with liberal political philosophy—not just with the egalitarian liberalism of Rawls and the like but also even with something as unpalatable as utilitarianism. Such an approach isn't inconsistent with anything Eagleton says—indeed, he has often stressed the complex relationship between Marxism and liberalism—but it goes beyond anything he has written¹².

The three observations I want to make are these. First, the attraction of Eagleton's strategy is that it offers a way of going beyond postmodernism that doesn't relapse back into any notion of constitutive subjectivity. The interest of his demarche is that he invites us to attend to the nature-imposed limits to our subjectivity not as brute inert matter, but as active and morally commanding, as the source of the demands that we would make on each other were we to fight our way through capitalism to a just society. To repeat, for Eagleton, “[i]t is the mortal, fragile, suffering, ecstatic, needy, dependent, desirous, compassionate body which furnishes the basis of all moral thought”, and also of radical politics. Or again: “The aim of socialism, in contrast [to the terrorist], is not to destroy the flesh but to recall us to our creatureliness” (*Holy Terror* 105).

Secondly, there is the question of what is it about the world that has prompted the reorientation indicated by my opening contrast between *Criticism and Ideology* and *Sweet Violence*. Maybe it has something to do with the fact that the dynamic force that has driven history onward in the past few decades has proved to be liberal capitalism, and not the proletariat, contrary to the hopes that Terry and I shared when we leafleted the car factories of Oxford in the mid-1970s. This is not, to repeat, to imply that the perennial and the transhistorical have become a refuge from history for Eagleton, but rather to suggest that, when every corner of life is penetrated by rampant neoliberalism, then it might make sense to quarry the deep continuities of human existence for sources of resistance.

Thirdly, it should be clear that what we find taking shape in Eagleton's recent writing is an ontology. This is interesting both because ontology is a form of philosophizing much frowned on by Althusserian Marxism and Derridean deconstruction alike and because the most ambitious contemporary radical thinkers—Badiou, Negri, and Žižek—are all cheerful ontologizers. Eagleton is close to Badiou and Žižek in the importance that he attaches to the Lacanian conception of the Real, though, as I have tried to show, he gives it a somewhat different content. This reflects the fact that the deep sources of his thought lie elsewhere, in the diverse traditions of Marxism, and also in certain persistent

¹² See Callinicos, *Equality; The Resources of Critique*, chapter 7; and “Two Cheers for Enlightenment Universalism”.

presences that predate his embrace of Marxism—Aristotle, Aquinas, and Wittgenstein¹³. The four thinkers Eagleton highlights in *Materialism—Marx*, Aquinas, Nietzsche (perhaps in tribute to his more deconstructionist days), and Wittgenstein—are emblematic. But, of course, no interesting thinker is the sum of the influences on them. Terry Eagleton has taken inspiration from many, but what he has made of them is wholly his own.

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13 Two major discussions of Wittgenstein (about whom Eagleton also wrote a screenplay)—"Wittgenstein's Friends", and *Materialism*, chapter. 5—illustrate the continuities and shifts in Eagleton's thought. In both he stresses the value of Wittgenstein's later understanding of language as constituted by socially and naturally shaped "forms of life", defending him from the accusations of unreflecting conservatism made against him notably by Perry Anderson (see especially "Components of the National Culture" 21-25), but the preoccupation with comparing Wittgenstein and Derrida that pervades the earlier (very rich) text is entirely absent from the later one.

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