


## **FOREWORD: “THAT DREADFUL TERRY EAGLETON”\*: POLITICS, ETHICS, AND LITERARY PRAXIS**

**PRÓLOGO: “ESE HORRIBLE TERRY EAGLETON”: POLÍTICA, ÉTICA Y PRAXIS LITERARIA**

J. Manuel Barbeito Varela   
Universidade de Santiago de Compostela  
jmanuel.barbeito@usc.es

Christopher Norris   
Cardiff University  
norrisc@cardiff.ac.uk

<https://doi.org/10.30827/tn.v5i2>

Terry Eagleton's is one of the most relevant interventions in the debates on the most burning issues of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. A formidable polemicist, he has questioned hegemonic discourses on relativism, truth, and universals. He has tackled the central issues in the humanities: social and moral order, law and desire, time and history, the mind-body problem, the subject, experience, freedom, violence, and love. He has succeeded in bringing into dialectical relationship Marxism, Psychoanalysis, Existentialism, and Christian thought. He has done more than anyone to renew materialism and propose an ethics inseparable from politics. He has revised key notions of critical discourse such as ideology, aesthetics, and culture. Eagleton has written on the main novelists of the English tradition – but his writings are full of insightful commentaries on European writers (from Sophocles to Calderon, Dostoevsky, Thomas Mann, Proust, or Lorca) – on major philosophers, especially modern and contemporary (but

---

\*Comment by Prince Charles quoted by Terry Eagleton in his memoir *The Gatekeeper*.

also on Aristotle and Aquinas), and on the main schools of literary theory and criticism, from Leavisism to Deconstruction. Profound and funny, erudite and clear, he has both applied highly perceptive analysis to the concepts of ideology, aesthetics and culture, and provided an accessible introduction to the English novel and guides to the critical analysis of poetry and the novel. As if all this were not enough, Eagleton has also written and signed several plays, a screenplay, and a novel.

Eagleton's project is a sustained reflection on and exploration of the possibilities of emancipation and of living a good life in the context of late capitalism. Empowered by a deep understanding of theory, his readings reveal the relation of literary texts to the context of their production and present them not as mere ideological tools but as ideological battlefields and spaces for reflection on moral issues. His critical discourse incorporates highly abstract and difficult concepts, but for him the struggle against elitism must be part of any Marxist project; hence his effort to cross the walls of the academy and reach a wider public sphere both through his books and by participating in tv and radio programs. On the jacket of Eagleton's *Trouble with Strangers*, Slavoj Žižek comments: "this book may achieve the unthinkable; bridging the gap between academic High Thought and popular philosophy manuals." Eagleton took a step further and supplemented *Trouble* with *The Meaning of Life*, a book dedicated to his young son "Oliver who found the whole idea deeply embarrassing".

His vocation of crossing boundaries led Eagleton to traverse the troubled waters of the Channel. For a Marxist, the German tradition is a must, but French structuralist and post-structuralist theory made the Paris tour indispensable. The traditional distance between European abstraction and the English empirical mindset was a challenge. One main point of disagreement with the Parisian school is precisely the division between high theory and common sense, a problem that Eagleton relates to the division between the extraordinary and the ordinary.

Crossing boundaries is also reflected in his interest in religion, an interest that he shares with Slavoj Žižek and Alain Badiou. In contrast to the University, the religious institutions have traditionally been able to reach common people, which is one of the reasons for which Eagleton admires religion. But such interest – a very early one, reflected in his collaboration with *Slant* – can be *petra scandali* for the left. In the 'Preface' to *Trouble* Eagleton amusingly acknowledges that "[s]ome of my friends and readers will be dismayed to see me wasting my time yet again on theology" (vi) and defends himself by seriously stating that "radical theology... represents one of the few surviving enclaves of materialist thought in these politically patchy times" (*Trouble* vi), a point that he repeats in the "Preface" to *Holy Terror* (vi).

Eagleton's career as a literary critic began in the late sixties when English Studies dominated English literary criticism and post structuralism was spreading its wings in France. This was a time of exceptionally productive mutual influence between philosophy and literature. Despite the British tendency to ignore continental theoretical developments, there was a group of strongly left-wing post-war British thinkers well versed in Marxism that included Richard Hoggart, Stuart Hall, Christopher Hill, Eric Hobsbawm, and Raymond Williams. Eagleton was the disciple of one of these major figures, Raymond Williams. Different as this group was from Leavisism, the two tendencies shared a respect for experience that Eagleton inherited. Members of this group founded *The New Left Review* in 1960 and the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies of the University of Birmingham in 1964; both institutions would be instrumental in the introduction of Continental ideas.

Together with others such as Perry Anderson, who became the editor of *New Left Review* in 1962, Eagleton was decisive in the introduction of the new French ideas in Britain in the late sixties and the early seventies. This was the time of the emergence of the new Left whose members were still optimistic, unaware of the imminent turn to the right (the ensuing disenchantment about the viability of a revolution would lead many to abandon the socialist project, but Eagleton found new seas to go on sailing on the left). This younger generation revisited some of the main tenets of Marxist criticism, rethought the nature and function of criticism, and were active in the transformation of the Humanities in Britain.

Eagleton's style of thought is partly determined by his allergy to absolutist “-isms”, i.e., purisms that block the dialectical practice, to fashionable relativist or antirealist ideas, and to any kind of uncritical attachment to schools whether Leavisism, Existentialism, Structuralism, Post-structuralism, Post-modernism, or Marxism. He is particularly prone to destabilizing rigid poses and bringing the high low. But his dialectical frame of mind forbids flat rejections. Eagleton transforms his own discourse by redirecting rather than excluding what others have to say. He has criticised Leavisist middle class ethics and empiricism but shares with Leavisism the interest in moral issues, the importance attributed to experience, and the belief that there are permanent truths about the human condition. He has criticised Heidegger and Lacan, but his interpretation of their notions of death and desire allowed him to veer his project towards an existential analysis without abandoning Marxism; while he attacks Heidegger's existentialism and Lacanian Realist ethics, Eagleton appropriates them to explain Christian charity and propose an idea of the good life. He has decried high culture and its institutions, but he acknowledges their value as spaces for research and enlightened debate. He has launched devastating attacks on the Church, but he has adopted its basic Christian principles.

This collection of essays deals with Eagleton's most important concerns and the most characteristic qualities of his style: ideology, culture and religion, time and history, Marxism, materialism, literary theory and criticism, psychoanalysis, humour, and the good life.

Eagleton's essay "Homage to William Hazlitt" is representative of Eagleton's search for emancipatory possibilities in those spaces belonging to the dominant classes where ideological conflicts emerge; it is not just a question of detecting contradictory ideas but of revealing contradictory political positions that undermine the stable unity of the hegemonic block. His *The Function of Criticism* and *The Rape of Clarissa* are good examples of this part of Eagleton's project. He found in the eighteenth century an influential public sphere formed by the circulation of ideas in newspapers and debates in coffee houses. In the nineteenth century, when a novel by Dickens might provoke a change in legislation, the public sphere was still strong and in the first quarter of the century especially tumultuous.

Hazlitt was a figure unjustly forgotten for a century and Eagleton's essay contributes to its retrieval. Hazlitt is an inspiration for Eagleton. He was man of letters – a figure that Eagleton presents as a kind of moral and political guide – fully involved in the ideological battles of the time. Eagleton defines him "as one of the supreme craftsmen of the English language" at a time when style was inseparable from politics. A romantic, and in contrast to Wordsworth and Coleridge faithful to his radical ideas all his life, Romanticism for Hazlitt, rather than a movement opposed to Enlightenment, was the way to achieve its aims; he defended both the autonomy of reason and the autonomy of art, disinterested reason and imagination against economic interest. He was thus engaged in the politics of the aesthetic to which Eagleton has dedicated so much critical attention.

J. Manuel Barbeito's essay "The Process and the Moment. A Note on Terry Eagleton and Alain Badiou's Notions of Time and History, and their Idea of the Good Life" compares Eagleton and Badiou's notions of the good life and the possibilities that they, in a moment of disenchantment of the left and despite their grim description of the contemporary situation, find for enjoying a full life in the communist faith. This requires the redemption of time from quantitative calculation and of history from the chronological continuum. As Marxist materialists, the good life for Badiou and Eagleton is to be lived in this world and its conditions of possibility must be found here; but, as the event of communism is not at hand, this must take place in another dimension, in another time or world within this world. For such dimension to appear, the ordinary ways of seeing, thinking, living, and being must be interrupted, which results in a strong tension between the good life and ordinary life. The essay examines this interruption in the context of the

complex relation between the ecstatic moment and the ordinary life process in Western culture. Eagleton's and Badiou's solution to the problem and their notion of the good life coincide in their dialectics of transcendence in immanence but diverge on their basis: ontological in Badiou, existential in Eagleton.

Alex Callinicos's "Materialism and Finitude: Terry Eagleton's Marxism" also deals with Eagleton's concern with an ethics and politics of the good life. Eagleton's defence of universal values on a materialist basis opposes protestant dualism, idealist leftism, and postmodernist relativism. The essay highlights the importance of Lacan's notion of the Real for Eagleton – Eagleton invites us to obey Lacan's imperative "do not give up on your desire!" and warns against looking for the satisfaction of our wishes in the market – but focuses on the existential aspect of Eagleton's thought and on his defence of the radical possibilities of Christian values.

Callinicos points out the turn in Eagleton's writings from the 70's faith in class struggle as the motor of history – present in *Criticism and Ideology* (1976) – to the defence of knowledge and the acknowledgement of our creatureliness (e.g., finitude, frailty, and dependence) as the common ground of humanity; announced in *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (1990) the change was confirmed in *Sweet Violence* (2003). In contrast to the fashionable ethical turn, Eagleton's ethics, Callinicos argues, are inseparable from politics. In Eagleton's writings, Marxist faith combined with Christian charity is both the source of strength to resist bourgeois individualism and the basis for the proposal of a new social order based on reciprocity.

Brian Coates' "'I'll go on' – Terry Eagleton, Writer" analyses the themes, the language, and the technique of Eagleton's fiction. Coates sees the link between this and the main body of Eagleton's production as a manifestation of Eagleton's vocation to cross barriers and of his aspiration to create "an inclusive model of expression". Criticism for Eagleton demands as much creative effort as writing fiction because he is not the kind of detached analyst bent on just producing an impartial study of his subject; on the contrary, in all his writings he is passionately engaged in an emancipatory project inseparable from extreme scholar rigour.

The concern with Irish history and politics appears throughout Eagleton's career. In his plays he exposes the violence of colonial institutions at the same time that he deals with moral and political issues, and questions of personal and national identity in the context of colonization. Coates examines the plays' politics of language and humour together with Eagleton's treatment of those questions and issues: the oppression of the British rule and the moral degradation of the agents who mechanically perform the

role that the institutions impose on them is exposed in the tragic end of Oscar Wilde (*Saint Oscar*) and of James Connolly (*The White, the Gold and the Gangrene*), and in the Irish famine (*God's Locusts*). Also in the context of colonization, *Disappearances* deals with the writer's attitude as regards his artistic and political duties. Finally, Coates shows *Saints and Scholars* and the film script *Wittgenstein* as parts of Eagleton's political agenda. The novel suggests a relation between Wittgenstein's interests and Marxist aesthetics, while the script presents the great philosopher as a divided and insecure personality resulting from the clash between the various cultural and personal components that constitute it.

Stephen Connor's "Terry Eagleton's Divine Comedy" focuses on a key aspect of Eagleton's style, humour, a rare quality in serious academic writing. Humour, Connor argues, is not an ornament, but essential to Eagleton's project because it is his way of relating traditionally separated poles, such as Marxism and religion, and mind and body. "Comedy," Connor argues, "has something to do with [the] reparative labour of the negative" and thus momentarily realizes the promise of Marxism and religion. Although laughter does not propel historical progress, it offers a foretaste of utopia, a pill to prevent disenchantment; rather than a means to advance, laughter contributes to enjoy the present moment and the expenditure of time regardless of its quantifiable productive value.

After describing various devices of Eagleton's humour, Connor highlights his extraordinary capacity for synthesis that he often uses to strip high theory of its solemn robes by causing a comical imbalance between the flashlight produced by a few words and the difficult intricate expositions of a theory. But Connor goes further and, against traditional theories of humour that have focused on what makes people laugh, argues that there is a comic impulse in search for occasions to laugh, the very capacity of laughing being one of these. This is characteristic of the earthly temporal human creature capable of enjoying its condition because, tragic though its predicament is, the historical animal has, according to Eagleton, the capacity to go beyond itself; despite our masochistic pleasure in suffering, we enjoy our capacity to suffer and keep going. We laugh, Connor states, "for the pleasure of getting above ourselves", the same reason for which we pray.

José M<sup>a</sup> Díaz Lage and Jorge Sacido Romero's essay "Some Aspects of Terry Eagleton's Use of Freudian Psychoanalysis" deals with Eagleton's handling of psychoanalysis to supplement the historical materialist account of the political subject with a materialist account of the moral subject. Díaz and Sacido highlight the points of compatibility between Marxism and Freudian Psychoanalysis relevant for Eagleton. Like Mar-

xism, Psychoanalysis is concerned with those impersonal forces that subdue human beings; both Marxism and Psychoanalysis reveal the structures that underlie individual experience; both explore gaps and contradictions where the psychic or the political unconscious emerge; both concur in the necessity of creating a new relation between law and freedom and of redeeming time from exploitation for the human subject to be free. But Díaz and Sacido also detect tensions in Eagleton's appreciation of psychoanalysis concerning the central themes of work, love, and reason; and they also contrast the faith in the insistent, although soft, voice of reason that Freud declares in *The Future of an Illusion* and Eagleton's appeal to the Christian myth.

Norris's essay "On the Occasion of Terry Eagleton's Honorary Doctorate" explains the intellectual background of the third part of the twentieth century – the age of theory, poststructuralism and postmodernism – when a profound questioning of the project of the Enlightenment and the change in the British academy from English to Cultural Studies took place. Norris presents the main topics of the debate in which Eagleton took an active part: the traditional problems of the Marxist tradition, such as the relation between base and superstructure, ideology, and agency, and other more general philosophical issues, such as the relation between thought and reality, truth, and the universals that were questioned by postmodernism.

Crucial at this time was the introduction of French thought in which Eagleton actively participated. Norris explains that Eagleton is never carried away by fashions, but always maintains a critical distance. Nor does he out of hand reject adversaries or ideas that have gone out of fashion but rethinks and recreates them.

The last chapter of the volume, "A Debate with Eagleton", contains the interview between a group of postgraduates and Terry Eagleton celebrated on occasion of his honoris doctorate by the University of Santiago de Compostela in 1999. The questions cover the most important of Eagleton's concerns to date as reflected in his theory, literary criticism, and plays. The range of issues goes from the subject of the emancipatory project, materialism and subjectivity, Marxism and psychoanalysis, ethics and politics, the Marxist contemporary practice, Marxism and Feminism, ideology, the possibility of critique and the role of criticism, the function of literature, Postmodernism cultural identity, and Eagleton's relation to Ireland, particularly in his plays.

## Works cited

Eagleton, Terry. *Criticism and Ideology*. London, NLB, 1976.

\_\_\_\_\_. *The rape of Clarissa: Writing, sexuality, and Class Struggle in Samuel Richardson*. Oxford, Blackwell, 1982.

\_\_\_\_\_. *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*. Oxford, Blackwell, 1990.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Saints and Scholars*. London, Futura, 1990.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Saint Oscar and Other Plays*. Oxford, Blackwell, 1997.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Sweet Violence*. Oxford, Blackwell, 2003.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Holy Terror*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2005.

\_\_\_\_\_. *The Function of Criticism*. London, Verso, 2006.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Trouble with Strangers. A Study of Ethics*. Oxford, Wiley-Blackwell, 2008.

\_\_\_\_\_. *The Meaning of Life. A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2008.

Freud, Sigmund. "The Future of an Illusion". 1927. *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psycho- logical Works of Sigmund Freud, Vol XXI (1927-1931)*, James Strachey (ed. and trans.). London, The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1961, pp. 1-56.

Jarman, Derek, and Terry Eagleton. *Wittgenstein. The Terry Eagleton Script. The Derek Jarman Film*. Preface by Colin MacCabe. London, British Film Institute, 1993.