

## CRITICA / REVIEW

Terry Eagleton, *After Theory* (New York: Basic Books, 2003). 231 pp.

### **Eagleton's Epilogue, or Why Theory Should Have (But Didn't) Make Us Better Persons**

**NEIL LARSEN**

**University of California—Davis**

Terry Eagleton's best-known work, *Literary Theory: an Introduction*, which first appeared in 1983, is one of the best-selling works on "theory" ever written in English. This success it owes partly to its adoption as an introductory textbook in university courses in critical and literary theory, but in larger measure to the fact that it has remained (and here I speak from long experience in the classroom) far and away the best of all such introductions, out of a field of numerous competitors. It made Eagleton's name into a household word in academic circles all over the world, winning him the kind of public interest and recognition about which most Marxist literary critics—aside from his academic co-star, Fredric Jameson—can only fantasize. *Literary Theory* effectively won for Eagleton the standing of a public intellectual, a standing that he has neither cheapened nor squandered over the years and that has made his wonderful lucidity, wit and his uncompromisingly socialist views a familiar and welcome presence in a diversity of genres including mass-circulation review-essays, fiction, pamphlets, drama, a memoir...and, of course, more literary theory.

*After Theory*, appearing twenty years after *Literary Theory*, reads inevitably as the latest postscript to the earlier book (there have been others over the years) but also, and for better or worse, like a work whose commercial and intellectual success has been safely calculated in advance. It wears—deservedly, on the whole—the same set of laurels won twenty years ago as if it were not really worth the trouble any longer to take them off. That, as we shall see in a moment, subtracts nothing at all from the vital importance and the occasionally arresting originality of what it has to say. But it gives to *After Theory* a strange, unwelcome rhetorical feel of being too predictably wise, despite there being more fools being born (and “re-born”) every minute, especially in the US, than all the circuses in the world could ever accommodate.

Part of this is no doubt the result of tone. Although Eagleton's trademark humor, mischievous and mordant by turns, is still on full display in *After Theory*, the book descends upon its readers from a rhetorical height impossible to dissociate from the image of an Oxbridge lectern—or pulpit?—and with an air of erudite common sense that, true to its venerable, Anglo-philosophical origins, no commoner could ever be trusted to have devised on her own. Once the *enfant terrible* of high-brow British Trotskyites, at least for those of the Althusserian persuasion, and despite a critically (re)adopted Irish identity, Eagleton now often sounds for all the world like an F.R. Leavis or a Gilbert Ryle. In fact, neither Leavisite humanism nor Oxbridge ordinary language philosophy was ever this intelligent, dialectical or truly democratic in its sympathies, and one senses that *After Theory* has astutely calculated the political and cultural efficacy even of its national-institutional accents. But the rhetoric and style of Anglophone empiricism, given as these are to the eternally qualifying gestures of casual analogy and balancing

disclaimers (Eagleton seems to preface every other sentence with phrases like “it is rather as if...” or “this is not to say that...”) seem at a certain point to become tantamount to the book’s own cognitive limits. Eagleton of course knows perfectly well that the urgent need for reanimating and re-politicizing cultural theory—for making it more “ambitious” as he puts it—cannot be met by a process of tallying up examples and counter-examples. But this still does not project *After Theory* beyond a “common-sense” and vaguely school-masterly style and flavor of argument that seems, paradoxically, to convey a distrust of the *form*, if not the rational content, of the theoretical renewal to which Eagleton aspires.

That paradox aside for the moment, however, this is an aspiration in which, as I see it, one must unreservedly share. *In nuce*, Eagleton lays it out as follows: theory, in its flowering (1965-80)—i.e. before the exhaustion of the revolutionary energies of radical left and anti-colonial national-liberationist politics converted it from a critical process of reflection *within* and debate *with* Marxism *about* culture into a culturally-reductionist and politically adaptive “postmodern” obsession with identity and anti-normativity—was conditioned in its turn by what is now, under present conditions, missing: “memories of effective, and collective political action” (7). That absence—a “historical vortex at the center of our thought which drags it out of true”(7)—cannot be restored by intellectual fiat, nor can we expect a postmodernized cultural theory which has ceased to be aware of it *even as such an absence* to do much more than become what is itself a kind of culture of adaptation to a norm-cannibalizing, neo-fundamentalist late-capitalism embarked on an a plainly exterminist course.

What theory can do, however, is find new ways to connect with a still older, partly unconscious well of emancipatory memory and collectivity, even if in a decidedly more tragic, personalized and non-political form. That well is, in a word, *morality*, whether in secular-humanist or religious guise. And morality, unlike the merely normative and hetero-normative, cannot, for all its multiple cultural forms, be construed as itself a mere culture. Morality is embodied, and is, indeed, inseparable from the body. But this is not the body that emerges in “performance” or that is constructed by disembodied cultural codes. It is the body that undergoes direct, biological pleasure and pain, the body that is born, loves, kills and dies. As the attribute of such a universal body, morality has no less universal others: evil and death. Absent a viable political movement able to raise abstract moral judgments to the level of concrete social praxis, to speak of morality must become, without hesitation, to invoke it—and, true to its own meta-theory, this is precisely what *After Theory* itself seeks to enact, citing Aristotle and Saint Paul as among its “theorists.”

Further: if we discount the pseudo-morality of an ascendant, bipolar fundamentalism, which can only instrumentalize the human nature it professes to uphold as an end-in-itself, we are left with two choices, liberal or socialist morality:

Socialism is an answer to the question of what happens when, unlike Aristotle, we universalize the idea of self-realization, crossing it with the Judaeo-Christian or democratic-Enlightenment creed that everyone must be in on the action. If this is so, and if human beings naturally live in political society, we can either try to arrange political life so that they all realize their unique capacities without getting in each other's way, a doctrine

known as liberalism; or we can try to organize political institutions so that their self-realization is as far as possible reciprocal, a theory known as socialism. One reason for judging socialism to be superior to liberalism is the belief that human beings are political animals not only in the sense that they have to take account of each other's need for fulfilment, but that in fact they achieve their deepest fulfilment only in terms of each other. (122)

Some of us—and not only those who still suffer the Althusserian, Derridean or Foucauldian “anti-humanist” knee-jerk when words like “man” or “freedom” escape someone's lips—may reflexively flinch at the abstract moralizing register of such sentences and feel that we are being preached to. But Eagleton is right: such reflexive habits now have about as much critical or emancipatory content as switching off the TV, assuming they ever had any. Moreover, whatever real contributions the avatars of high cultural theory may have made in the past are not waved aside but have been carefully, historically and *theoretically* factored in here. This is, despite the way it might sound, not a case of critical theory falling back onto the language—“self-realization,” “fulfillment”—of self-help manuals. It is the language—cautious, precise and beautifully composed—of an urgent *social* form of “self-help” attempting to raise itself into a new theoretical register.

The question remains, however: who are the subjects “interpellated,” by such a theoretically-fashioned morality? Eagleton refers to them—his intended audience—in a prefatory note as “students and general readers who are interested in the current state of the cultural theory,” without excluding the odd “specialist in the field” (ix). But what particular reason would “students and general readers” have to read Eagleton's post-

“theory” or neo-theoretical explanation-cum-allocation of what is moral over the standard, non- or pre-theoretical versions? Eagleton’s call for open discussion of universals and absolute truth is well and good, but has the readerly interest in theory, or perhaps just the aspiration to theory, really reached the point of seeking direct moral explanations and injunctions in despair of the possibility that—to paraphrase Marx’s famous eleventh thesis on Feuerbach—understanding and changing the world might still push each other towards a dialectical synthesis? A socialist-humanist morality—or at any rate, the willingness to talk about one without postmodernism’s “semantic slurring”—certainly seems more urgent these days than, say, “micro-politics,” much less “strategic essentialism.” But the “ought” itself remains dangerously abstract—*vide* Hegel’s rebuke to Kant’s moral theory—unless and until it can be consciously grasped as a negative “is” within a mediated, social whole. The cultural theory, both “high” and postmodern low, that Eagleton rightly consigns to the heroic past or denounces for its complicity with the unheroic present, certainly never had nor has anything intelligent to say about this—unless, that is, we push Eagleton’s periodizing back a little farther so as to include, say, *History and Class Consciousness* or *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*. *After Theory* itself remains effectively mute on this score, making one wonder in the end whether simply working, immanently, through the *concepts* of critical, dialectical theory, as opposed to historicizing or mourning the pre-postmodern “Theory” of 1965-80 in the name of a utopian moral abstraction, might have led to a different, and more compelling end point altogether.

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