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Acts of Literature: An Interview with Terry Eagleton

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Terence Francis Eagleton (born 1943) is an English literary theorist, critic, and public intellectual. He is currently Distinguished Professor of English Literature at Lancaster University.

Eagleton has published over forty books and he remains best known for *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (1983), which elucidated the emerging literary theory of the period. He has also been a prominent critic of postmodernism, publishing works such as *The Illusions of Postmodernism* (1996) and *After Theory* (2003).

Formerly the Thomas Warton Professor of English Literature at the University of Oxford (1992–2001) and John Edward Taylor Professor of Cultural Theory at the University of Manchester (2001–2008), Eagleton has held visiting appointments at universities around the world including Cornell, Duke, Iowa, Melbourne, Trinity College in Dublin, and Yale.

Eagleton delivered Yale University's 2008 Terry Lectures and the University of Edinburgh's 2010 Gifford Lecture titled The God Debate. He gave the 2010 Richard Price Memorial Lecture at Newington Green Unitarian Church, speaking on "The New Atheism and the War on Terror".

This interview was carried out on a telephone call on June 9th, 2021.

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Luiz Fernando Ferreira Sá e Miriam Piedade Mansur Andrade: *In* Literary Theory: An Introduction *(1983), you state: "Any belief that the study of literature is the study of a stable, well-definable entity, as entomology is the study of insects, can be abandoned as a chimera." You have also published a number of books, which present readings of literary texts (by Shakespeare [1967], by Joseph Conrad, Evelyn Waugh, George Orwell, Graham Greene, T. S. Eliot, W. H. Auden, D. H. Lawrence [1970], by the Brontës [1975] and by Samuel Richardson [1982]). Yet a large part of your work has been concerned with writing that would be more likely to be called theoretical. Could you expand upon that statement concerning the study of literature and literature itself, and say something about its relation to your extensive work on theoretical texts?*

Terry Eagleton: I think the answer to that is that I have obviously written both theoretically and critically in my career. I have written on specific writers and I have also written theoretically. I started off before theory really happened. So at that point in the 1970s, I was really writing critical studies. Then came theory itself. With time I moved more into that area, but I have always tried to combine the two modes. I like close critical study. I also am interested in general areas and I think the ideal act of criticism is to try to bring them together. I might also point out that my work in recent years has extended well beyond either literary theory or literature itself into sociology or theology, anthropology and so on. So, my interests at the moment have tended to move rather away from literature and literary theory.

L.F.F.S e M.P.M.A: *Is not literature a strange institution (in the words of Jacques Derrida) and a chimera? In other words, do you not think that the question "what is literature?" has to be replaced by "how does literature work?"*

T.E.: Yes. Literature as a strange institution, as Jacques Derrida said. Freud also remarked that literature is a very strange thing. I am not entirely sure that the question "what is literature" should be replaced by a more functional question. Pragmatism of that kind has its uses but I do think that there has also been a very interesting discussion of the nature of literature. In one of my books, *The Event of Literature*, I actually tried to lay out rather audaciously what I see as the five constituent elements of what people call a literary work, but these elements do not have to be present in everything to which

the name is given. I have pursued that question to my own satisfaction and really moved on since then to other forms of work.

L.F.F.S e M.P.M.A: *Following your ideas in your published works, one may say without a doubt that literature is, in terms of its production and its reception, political, and works politically. In regard to* The Gatekeeper: A Memoir *(2002), could you elaborate on the extent to which politics is, in general terms, literary?*

T.E.: I am always a little suspicious of excessively broad uses of the word *political*. One may say that literature is political, but we must ask what exactly we mean by the political and how we differentiate it that from, say, the social or the cultural. In my view, the political is primary a matter of power. So what distinguishes the political realm is its concern with relations, forces and institutions of power, and literature has an indirect relation to that. But there is a danger of over-politicizing literary works, or works of art in general, by trying to reduce them to their immediate political effects or their immediate political circumstances. The word *political* has become so broad that it is hard to find a precise meaning for it. I mean, some people say everything is political, but do not seem to realize that they are really emptying the term of meaning. Any term means only by its distinction from other terms; "everything-is" statements tend to stretch the term so far that it effectively disappears. As for *The Gatekeeper*, I am not quite sure you mean by asking to what extent politics is literary. I think that there is a missing concept here, which is the concept of *culture*. Culture is the place where politics beds itself down in everyday language, habit, experience, perception and so on. Power in itself is too abstract. It needs to flesh itself out in men and women's everyday experience, and this is the role of culture in the broad sense of the term. One of the most useful meanings of the word *culture* is all of those habits, institutions, relations, modes of perception, modes of communication and so on in which power is able to imprint itself. But if it is to be successful it must do so largely invisibly, and it is where power becomes visible that it is at its most vulnerable. I should add that I am using the word *power* here to mean dominant power. I think the Left sometimes is mistaken in the way it uses the word *power* because it tends to use it to mean dominant power. And one of the consequences of that is that power becomes a negative term. Whereas it is important for us to cling

on to the fact that power can be extremely positive, it all depends on who is using it, where, for what purposes.

L.F.F.S e M.P.M.A: *There is a popular saying that goes like this: "Knowledge is: knowing an apple is good for you. Wisdom is: eating the apple". How does a literary critic or professor translate knowledge into wisdom in the 21st century?*

T.E.: I think there is a distinction between knowledge and wisdom. A person certainly can have knowledge without being wise. Whether you can have wisdom without knowledge, I am not so sure. I think that *wisdom* is a term I would hesitate to use about most literary or cultural theorists. There are cultural theorists who are like, say, Fredric Jameson and Slavoj Žižek who are intellectually brilliant, but I am not quite sure that *wisdom* is a word I would use about them. Wisdom is very rare. It is, in a sense, distilled knowledge, knowledge which has slowly sedimented. It is not just knowledge off the top of one's head. It is not just technical or scientific or even literary knowledge; it is a form of knowledge which has somehow transmuted itself into a general vision of life. I would much rather be called wise than knowledgeable.

L.F.F.S e M.P.M.A: *One of the traditional claims of literary criticism is that it heightens the singularity of the text upon which it purports to analyze, comment, and/or interpret. Is Marxist criticism capable of achieving this aim? To what extent is the heightening of the singularity of literature a part of your aim in writing on literary texts?*

T.E.: Yes. One of the popular misconceptions about literary theory is that it does not attend to the singularity of a literary text. But in my view most of major literary theorists are all very close and tenacious readers of literary works. Conservative critics tend to argue that theory stands too far back. It does not account for the specificity of what is being read or written. I think that is factually false. If you look at Hartman, Bloom, Hillis Miller, Jameson, Kristeva and so on, I think that you always find a very close attentiveness to the singularity of the text. Certainly there has been what one might call some vulgar Marxist criticism, which simply reduces the text to economics or politics or whatever. But there is a more sophisticated version of Marxist criticism which does not do that. If one thinks of the title of Fredric Jameson's

first major work, *Marxism and Form*, that is a strange combination, isn't it? People do not associate Marxism or Marxist criticism with an attention to form, but Jameson and others are very attentive to form, and I certainly try to respond to the actual shape, texture, rhythm and resonance of the words on the page. As Jameson once said, any criticism that is to be worthwhile has to come to terms with the shape of the sentences. I like that phrase.

L.F.F.S e M.P.M.A: *In* Reason, Faith, and Revolution: Reflections on the God Debate *(2009), you declare: "The Kantian imperative to have the courage to think for oneself has involved a contemptuous disregard for the resources of tradition and an infantile view of authority as inherently oppressive." Do you think this condition derives from activism or extremism? How do literary critics and/or professors read/write a way out of the said contempt and infantilization?*

T,E,: I think that there is a tendency for the Left to use the word *tradition* in a purely negative way. One can think of tradition as that which has to be broken with, seeing history as simply a burden which we have to shake off to create something absolutely new. This is the vision of the revolutionary *avant gardes* of the early 20th century. But of course there is never something absolute new. Whatever we create is created out of whatever we receive from history. There is no wiping of the slate clean. There is no starting from an absolute beginning, something has already happened before a particular political act or act of creation. The Left itself has traditions. For Walter Benjamin, the word *tradition* really means that tradition of the oppressed, not of the rulers. The same goes for the concept of *authority*, which, again, the Left tends to regard as largely negative and oppressive. But one can speak of the authority of those who are experienced in political struggle, and they should be listened to because they have a particular kind of authority.

L.F.F.S e M.P.M.A: *On the one hand, in* Why Marx Was Right *(2011), you affirm, "You can tell that the capitalist system is in trouble when people start talking about capitalism." On the other hand, in* How to Read Literature *(2013), you point out that "The most common mistake students of literature make is to go straight for what the poem or novel says, setting aside the way that it says it. To read like this is to set aside the 'literariness' of the work – the fact that it is a poem or play or novel, rather than an account*

of the incidence of soil erosion in Nebraska." Would you say that the above-mentioned mistake is the result of extreme, and sometimes infantile, politicization of the study of literature? In other words, does it come from the ad nauseam *iteration of political slogans and/or political party watchwords against capitalism and in detriment of what it represents?*

T.E.: Yes, the mistake that I am talking about is a matter of going for content and setting aside form, rather than seeing that in a literary text everything that happens in terms of content also happens in terms of form. It may be a result, as you suggest, of a politicization or over-politicization of literature, going straight for a gender or ethnic or class stereotype and ignoring or repressing the literariness, the artistry of the work. It can also just be the fact that students in my experience have not been sufficiently trained in the study of form. I do not mean by form as simply matters of meter and rhyme and so on, but everything that comes under the heading of how a literary work does something rather than what it says. I try, for example, to teach my students the importance of tone. I think tone is extremely important, but it is not something that you can teach in a schematic kind of way. Picking up the tone, the style, the pace, the rhythm of a line of literature is not a skill that can be easily formulated, but it can be nurtured and it can be transmitted. And I think the present teaching of literature rather lacks that interest.

L.F.F.S e M.P.M.A: *In* The Meaning of Life *(2007), you asseverate the need for faith coming from postmodernism: "In the pragmatist, streetwise climate of advanced postmodern capitalism, with its skepticism of big pictures and grand narratives, its hard-nosed disenchantment with the metaphysical, 'life' is one among a whole series of discredited totalities. We are invited to think small rather than big – ironically, at just the point when some of those out to destroy Western civilization are doing exactly the opposite. In the conflict between Western capitalism and radical Islam, a paucity of belief squares up to an excess of it. The West finds itself faced with a full-blooded metaphysical onslaught at just the historical point that it has been, so to speak, philosophically disarmed. As far as belief goes, postmodernism prefers to travel light: it has beliefs, to be sure, but it does not have faith." Could you be more precise about the need that, so to speak, is excavated in the above passage? In addition, could you list the things that would make postmodernism, so to speak, travel with the right amount of luggage?*

T.E.: I suppose what I am really advocating is the need to think big. Not all grand narratives are oppressive, if one thinks, for example, of the grand narrative of the revolution against colonialism which dominated the politics of the mid-twentieth century. It depends on the kind of grand narrative one is talking about. Marx himself could often be quite scathing about certain sorts of sweeping generalizations, historically, even though, of course, he produced some himself. I think that postmodernism is travelling too light. And I think that will become more and more evident as history moves on. It does not have the kind of resources to address the crises we are in, either politically or ecologically. Neither does it really have the moral resources. Postmodernism is very nervous of ethics. It does not quite know what to do with it. And it seems to me that this is a major defect of postmodern theory. It cannot really come to terms with questions of ethical value, partly because it is nervous of universals. But postmodernism is as strong as it is because it is rooted in actual cultural practices. Something like structuralism is a theory, but postmodernism is not the same. It is a theory, indeed a collection of theories, but it is rooted in actual late capitalist cultural practices. On the other hand, I think the theory of postmodernism, the opposition to grand narratives, and the tenacity of relativism and so on, those are increasingly being challenged by the major political crises of our times. I do not think you can afford that kind of rather laid-back position when you are facing, let us say, a climate catastrophe.

L.F.F.S e M.P.M.A: *In* How to Read a Poem *(2007), you state that, "The imagination is also sometimes commended for offering us in vicarious form experiences which we are unable to enjoy at first hand. If you can't afford an air ticket to Kuala Lumpur, you can always read Conrad and imagine yourself in South-East Asia. If you have been monotonously married for forty years, you can always lay furtive hands on a copy of James Joyce's letters. Literature on this view is a kind of supplement to our unavoidably impoverished lives – a sort of spiritual prosthesis which extends our capabilities beyond their normal restricted range. It is true that everyone's experience is bound to be limited, and that art can valuably augment it. But why the lives of so many people should be imaginatively impoverished is then a question that can be easily passed over." Bearing the* Robinson Crusoe *experience in mind, is not literature less related to a travelogue and*

more associated with ideologies? Furthermore, how does the literary critic tackle the fact/fiction that the lives of so many people are impoverished?

T. E.: I think that literary criticism in itself cannot tackle the fact that people live impoverished lives, materially or spiritually. That is the question of politics. And I think one of the benefits of radical literary theory is that it is aware that you cannot achieve what you want by culture alone. Cultural theory deals with culture, of course, but it deals with it in a certain skeptical light. One has to be skeptical of literary idealist views of culture, of literature, or the illusion that values can themselves be major agencies of change. I think here one has to be a straight materialist: what is a state, its power, its authority, its material infrastructures, all of those things. The literary critic has nothing much to say *as* literary critic about those things. I think he or she should indeed be involved in those questions, but literary criticism is not going to save the world. It should be ironically aware of its own limitations.

L.F.F.S e M.P.M.A: *In* How to Read Literature *(2013), you announce, "Literary works are pieces of rhetoric as well as reports. They demand a peculiarly vigilant kind of reading, one which is alert to tone, mood, pace, genre, syntax, grammar, texture, rhythm, narrative structure, punctuation, ambiguity – in fact to everything that comes under the heading of 'form'." Are those the primary tasks of the literary critic or is there something else? What are the tasks of the intellectual in general terms?*

T. E.: Yes. I think these tasks are specific to literary criticism. Although I should add that they are not particularly specific to literature. I mean, the literary critic can and sometimes should bring that kind of formal attention to bear on other sorts of texts, political, sociological, political rhetoric, political oratory. So I think that this is what literary criticism can do best. That is what distinguishes, let us say, from being a historian, being a sociologist, being a critical theorist. On the other hand, there is a clear distinction between that and the public intellectual, I mean, a lot of public intellectuals in our time, from Susan Sontag to Said, actually came out of the area of literature, as I did myself. And that is an interesting question, why has literature provided the basis for so many public intellectuals? I think it is partly due to the fact that literature is an open-ended field, it engages so many questions, moral, social, political, historical, and the public intellectual is somebody who moves among different areas. That is what I think differentiates the

public intellectual from the academic. The academic is content to work in a particular area; the public intellectual is forced by his or her very function to move between different areas of knowledge. The second distinguishing feature of the public intellectual, I think, is that he or she tries to bring ideas to bear on political society as a whole. That is not particularly the job of the academic. Academics are specialized figures.

L.F.F.S e M.P.M.A: *In* After Theory *(2003), you express your view that "The golden age of cultural theory is long past. The pioneering works of Jacques Lacan, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Louis Althusser, Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault are several decades behind us [...] Some of them have since been struck down. Fate pushed Roland Barthes under a Parisian laundry van, and afflicted Michel Foucault with Aids. It dispatched Lacan, Williams and Bourdieu, and banished Louis Althusser to a psychiatric hospital for the murder of his wife. It seemed that God was not a structuralist." Do you mean to say that those theorists were rather blind to God's ways or that literary theory itself has not led us to "greener pastures"? Could you say anything – this is a massive topic that we can only broach here – about the time that comes after theory or about the time when we overcome theory? What comes after theory, more time or just practice?*

T. E.: When I said that God was not a structuralist, that was of course a joke. I do not think that they were struck down because of their blindness to God's ways. After literary theory, well, it is an interesting question. Theory in the 1970s was extremely popular with students, even beyond academia. A lot of the most interesting inquiries about my own early work came from outside academia, from people who have never seen the inside of a university. That continued through the 1970s, and then in the 80's to some extent, but by the time we arrived in the 90's, we were really in a post-theoretical phase. I think it is important for theorists to historicize themselves and to ask about their own historical conditions. What are the historical conditions that tend to generate theory? I think one answer is that the emergence of literary cultural theory was very deeply bound up with what we now might describe as the last moment in which the Left was in the ascendancy. Around the end of the 60's and the first part of the 1970s, literary theory was complicatedly bound up with that whole upsurge of the Left. It happened more or less at the same time as the campaigns against the Vietnam War, the student insurrection, the

Civil Rights movement and so on, along with changes in the composition of university, of student bodies. One has to look at the material conditions that gave rise to literary theory and they included a real hope of political emancipation. As that was pushed back, in the late 1970s, the 80's, years of Thatcher, of Reagan and so on. Then came the moment when high theory begins to give way to postmodernism. So one has to chart the fortunes of theory in terms of the fortunes of the Left, and I think that it is interesting the way in which the two phenomena shadow each other so much.

L.F.F.S e M.P.M.A: *In* The Gospels: Terry Eagleton Presents Jesus Christ *(2016), you reveal: "There is little opiate delusion in Jesus's grim warning to his comrades that if they were true to his Gospel of love and justice, they would meet the same sticky end as him. The measure of your love in his view is whether they kill you or not." Should we stick to opiate delusions and read literature with hope, but no optimism (an obvious reference to your 2015 book), or should we discard delusions and realize that to read love and justice will inevitably end with a bang, in death? Alternatively, should the event of literature (your 2012 book) be approached with humour (your 2019 book), as a tragedy (your 2020 book) or as a radical sacrifice (your 2018 book)?*

T. E.: Yes, I do think we should discard delusions as far as we can, and that is the good news. The bad news is that Freud and others suggest that is a very, very difficult process; it involves no less than a radical self-transformation. For Freud, the ego's natural habitat is delusion, and to see reality, which most people think is an easy enough thing to do, is of course for late-modern thought an extremely difficult and precarious task. But that is not to say that we should not try as far as we can to do that. For me what is important is neither optimism nor pessimism, but realism. Sometimes realism will lead you to hope, to all kinds of political situations in which hope is extremely realistic and at other times it will not. The Gospels are very extremist and uncompromising. One should not forget that the Gospels' writers thought it was the end of time and that Jesus would come again pretty soon. Jesus himself seemed to have thought that. So, for them there was a strong alternative: love and friendship on the one hand, and catastrophe on the other. We will all die, and it is a measure of our realism how we should square up to that and make the fact of our death part of our lives, part of

the way we live. We know that in one sense power is really formidable. But we also know that power is pretty precarious, that you cannot fool all the people all the time. Unless there is something in it for people, unless being oppressed gives people at least something, some meagre satisfaction, they are likely to revolt against it. I come from Ireland and the Irish are famous for their black humour; that is the blackness of a nation which values humour a great deal but also has a very impoverished history. So the blackness and the humour somehow go together. And I think that both tragedy and sacrifice are about the emergence of new kinds of life, about cultural or radical self-dispossession. The bad news is that in order to have new life you really have to try to dismantle a great deal. The good news is that out of that dismantling or self-dismantling or political dismantling can emerge something new, something which has been tempered by that process of going under and therefore emerges actually stronger. Tragedy tries to look destruction in the eyes and not turn away from it, but it does so because it knows that if you can accept that dissolution, then it can become, with no guarantees, the prelude to a new life. There may be a new life or there may not be, but you are not going to get there without some radical self-dispossession. And that is both the tragedy and the hope of the political Left.

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