

Key Contemporary Thinkers

terry

EAGLETON

james smith



**Terry Eagleton**



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## **A Critical Introduction**

**James Smith**

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## *Abbreviations*

- AG     *Against the Grain* (London: Verso, 1986)
- AT     *After Theory* (London: Allen Lane, 2003)
- BL     *The Body as Language* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1970)
- CI     *Criticism and Ideology* (London: New Left Books, 1976)
- CJ     *Crazy John and the Bishop* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998)
- EE     *Exiles and Émigrés* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1970)
- EN     *The English Novel* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005)
- FC     *The Function of Criticism* (London: Verso, 1984)
- FD     *Figures of Dissent* (London: Verso, 2003)
- G     *The Gatekeeper* (London: Allen Lane, 2001)
- HGH   *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger* (London: Verso, 1995)
- HRP   *How to Read a Poem* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007)
- HT     *Holy Terror* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005)
- I     *Ideology: An Introduction* (London: Verso, 1991)
- IA     *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990)
- IC     *The Idea of Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000)
- IP     *The Illusions of the Postmodernism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996)

- LT     *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983)
- MP     *Myths of Power* (London: Macmillan, 1975)
- ML     *The Meaning of Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007)
- MLC   *Marxism and Literary Criticism* (London: Methuen, 1976)
- NLC   *The New Left Church* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1966)
- RC     *The Rape of Clarissa* (Oxford: Blackwell 1982)
- SO     *Saint Oscar and Other Plays* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997)
- SR     *Scholars and Rebels in Nineteenth-Century Ireland* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999)
- SS     *Shakespeare and Society* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1967)
- SSch   *Saints and Scholars* (London: Verso, 1987)
- SW     *Sweet Violence* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003)
- WB     *Walter Benjamin* (London: Verso, 1981)
- WS     *William Shakespeare* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986)



## *Introduction*

Terry Eagleton is arguably the most influential contemporary British literary critic and theorist. He is the author of over thirty books and hundreds of articles and essays. For a generation of readers, Eagleton's work has provided both a guide and a provocation in the fields of literary studies, critical theory, and cultural history. His *Literary Theory: An Introduction* served as one of the foundation texts as 'theory' rose to prominence in the higher education curriculum, becoming a staple on reading lists and an academic best-seller, while his writing has influenced and challenged numerous aspects of literary and cultural studies, whether in investigating the possibilities of a Marxist 'science of a text', the history of the aesthetic in modern thought, or the position of tragedy in Western literature, ensuring that Eagleton is one of the most frequently cited and debated figures across the span of literary fields. Equally, Eagleton's influence has extended well beyond the reading lists of literature departments, and he has sought to maintain what he would call a 'public-sphere' of readership and debate. Across a period of time in which the rise of theory has been accused of rendering literary criticism an increasingly specialized and professionalized pursuit, Eagleton's prolific book reviews and articles have regularly appeared in periodicals and newspapers such as the *London Review of Books*, *New Statesman*, the *Guardian*, and even *The Times*, positioning Eagleton as a latter-day man of letters, a public intellectual who is as likely to be explaining the significance of an obscure aspect of literary theory as to be commenting on the discourse of terrorism in contemporary society.

At the same time, Eagleton has achieved this prominence while remaining a political radical. Over an era in which many on the intellectual Left would now more readily identify with strains of post-Marxist thought, Eagleton has been for most of his career a committed Marxist, and his writing has been characterized by critical polemic and political conviction, balanced by his flair for parody and humour. As a result, Eagleton has been a figure who has provoked both admiration and controversy, attracting recognition ranging from being voted, in 2004, one of *Prospect* magazine's 'Top 100' British intellectuals (among whom he was the only literary theorist), to the great Canadian critic Northrop Frye once dubbing him 'that Marxist goof from Linacre College', and Prince Charles (as Eagleton proudly recounts) remarking to Oxford students about 'that dreadful Terry Eagleton'.

Despite this undoubted prominence and prolific critical and fictional output, it is a difficult task to pin a concise critical tag or position on to Eagleton's body of work. To describe Eagleton simply as a 'Marxist literary theorist' would seem too neat a label, and risks effacing the sheer variety and span of Eagleton's critical writing. Similarly, while many critics would speak of the influence that Eagleton's writing has had upon their field, it would be difficult to identify any distinctly 'Eagletonian' critical practice or theory that can be distilled down to a clear methodology, or point to any schools or disciples who would cite Eagleton as their founder, unlike many of the other names who rose to a similar prominence in the wave of literary and cultural theory which swept the academy in the 1970s and 1980s. Instead, Eagleton has occupied a more difficult terrain, with his position constantly adapting, reacting, and evolving throughout his career, his publications frequently situating themselves as polemical interventions in existing debates, displaying an uncanny ability for gauging and anticipating intellectual movements and currents, as well as for fastening upon and opening up areas of acute sensitivity and importance. As one critic assessed, Eagleton's writing can be characterized as being 'lucidly summarial rather than awkwardly pioneering, critically collatory rather than vulnerably visionary',<sup>1</sup> and he has been, as a recent profile in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* suggested, 'a quintessential wanderer', a figure who like 'Zelig or Forrest Gump . . . seems to have been there at all the crucial moments'.<sup>2</sup> To study the span of Eagleton's career is at once to be struck by the sheer variety of seemingly antagonistic positions

taken by Eagleton's critical work: the committed socialist who became the first Marxist to hold a professorial chair at Oxford; a literary theorist who rose to prominence as a leading Althusserian 'theoretical anti-humanist', now releasing works unashamedly on *The Meaning of Life*; the political radical whose views on religion and God were recently plagiarized by an Archbishop; the literary critic who enthusiastically announced the death of literature in the 1980s and who subsequently published work entitled *The English Novel* and *How to Read a Poem*. Yet through this seemingly diffuse range of positions runs a constant thread, concerning how criticism can be pushed into new social and intellectual engagements, and the responsibility of the critic towards fulfilling a political function within society.

It is towards tracing a route through Eagleton's career that this present study is conducted, in an attempt to analyse and understand the span of the remarkable career, as well as to seek out the continuities and breaks that have marked Eagleton's own critical trajectory. Consequently, while dealing with the major and prominent examples of Eagleton's work in critical theory, such as *Criticism and Ideology* (1976), *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (1990), and *Sweet Violence* (2003), I have also sought to address some of the lesser-known areas of his work. One of the areas that this book hopes to detail and clarify is Eagleton's involvement in radical Catholic politics in the 1960s, and the range of publications that he made in this field. This is an area of Eagleton's output of which the details are almost unknown among his wider cultural-theory readership, but provides an important element to understand the formation of his critical perspectives, and as a precursor to the recent 'metaphysical turn' that his writing has taken. I have also dedicated considerable space to analysis of Eagleton's literary output, such as his unpublished play, *Brecht and Company* (1979), his novel, *Saints and Scholars* (1987), and his major published plays, *Saint Oscar* (1989) and *The White, the Gold and the Gangrene* (1993), with the purpose of understanding them as literary works in their own right, as well as works that intersect with and illuminate key areas of Eagleton's broader cultural-theoretical concerns. In such a way, I hope that this study manages to cover the breadth of Eagleton's career, while doing justice to the style and variety of his critical engagements, and by doing so also reflect upon a wider series of debates that have occurred within the fields of literary and cultural theory over the past several decades.

## Background

Eagleton published a widely praised memoir, *The Gatekeeper*, in 2001. It was a work which combined a range of witty anecdotes concerning characters Eagleton had encountered in his career, as well as musings on politics, cultural theory, and religion, while at the same time offering a knowing scarcity of direct facts about his life (indeed, at one point Eagleton slyly remarks in an aside about the art of writing 'anti-autobiography', so as to 'outwit the prurience and immodesty of the genre by frustrating your own desire for self-display and the reader's desire to enter your inner life'). Before moving onwards in this study, I will therefore first offer a brief biographical sketch, to fill out some of these data missing from the memoir, and to establish a framework for subsequent chapters.<sup>3</sup>

Terence Francis Eagleton was born in 1943 to a working-class family, of Irish decent, in Salford in North-West England, an industrial city that suffered from major economic decline during the second half of the twentieth century. Eagleton was educated at the Catholic De La Salle College, before gaining admission to read English at Trinity College, Cambridge, the largest and grandest of the University of Cambridge's constituent colleges, in 1961. Eagleton, while writing at some length about his experiences as an undergraduate at Cambridge, paints a largely negative view of how his career was shaped by this experience, going so far as to state that 'My education was a waste of time' (G 136). Nonetheless, Cambridge English, with its emphasis on study in tragedy and practical criticism, remained a formative influence upon Eagleton's critical preoccupations across his career. In terms of general influence, Eagleton's time as an undergraduate at Cambridge coincided with the peak of the institutional sway of the great 'practical critic', and founder of the influential journal *Scrutiny*, F. R. Leavis (with Leavis having been appointed to the English Faculty Board in 1954 and finally to a University Readership in 1959, and being before his break with Cambridge in 1964). While Eagleton never was, in any substantial way, a 'Leavisite' critic, much of his work nonetheless bears the indelible influence of Leavis and engages, either explicitly or implicitly, with the *Scrutiny* group's critical paradigm, ranging from his polemical attacks in works such as *Criticism and Ideology* (1976) and *Literary Theory* (1983), to the more recent preface to the collection of his essays *Figures of Dissent*, where he explained the 'combative tone' in his writing as possibly being an 'heirloom



of the Cambridge English school' in which he was trained. As Eagleton went on to explain, 'I studied English at Cambridge in the last days of F. R. Leavis, so trenchancy seems to come naturally to me' (FD ix), and this will be a thread of influence which will be examined in many of the subsequent chapters of this work.

If Leavis formed one of the general influences over Cambridge English at this time, there were also other, more personal, interactions shaping Eagleton's intellectual perspectives. *The Gatekeeper* describes at some length Eagleton's recollections of his college teacher, a 'Dr Leo Greenway', whom Eagleton not only derided as having had 'no more ideas in his head than a hamster' (G 128), but also described him as his major and formative exposure to the liberal and patrician mindset – the 'first truly civilized man I had ever encountered' (G 127). The 'Greenway' of *The Gatekeeper* was a thinly disguised caricature of Theodore Redpath, Trinity College's first fellow in English, and a figure whose life was indeed as varied as Eagleton's depiction. Redpath, besides his academic career as editor of Shakespeare and Donne, and sometime student of Wittgenstein, had also, through his life, variously served as an intelligence officer, been called to the bar as a barrister, and set up a business as a wine-merchant; and maintained a reputation as a rigid upholder of antiquated college traditions (such as refusing to shake a student's hand unless it was vacation) – representing, in many ways, the archetypal version of the donnish, politically conservative critic that Eagleton's project would come to contest. The experience of studying under Redpath shaped Eagleton's perspective to the extent that much of Eagleton's later writing appears to continue a latent dialogue with the views he encountered in Redpath's office. Perhaps the most indicative instance of this can be found in the fact that almost forty years later, in explaining his motivation for writing his study of tragedy, *Sweet Violence*, Eagleton described it in terms of settling a debate started with Redpath – as he stated in an interview, 'He used to wipe the floor with me then . . . but now I think I've got him.'<sup>4</sup>

A third, and probably the most pervasive, influence from Cambridge came in the figure of Raymond Williams, the socialist critic and leading figure in the British New Left who, through studies such as *Culture and Society* (1958) and *The Long Revolution* (1961), was at this time one of the most prominent and important voices in British cultural criticism. As an undergraduate, Eagleton was described as being 'utterly bound up with Raymond',<sup>5</sup> and Eagleton has told of how he would 'go round the same Williams lectures time

and time again'.<sup>6</sup> The concerns that Eagleton here encountered as an undergraduate would shape the critical direction of his later career, whether in works that explicitly draw upon Williams's paradigm or in developments that react against it, and they will become among the most constant engagements examined throughout this study.

Eagleton graduated from his undergraduate years with a First in English, before moving to Jesus College, Cambridge, as a junior research fellow and doctoral student, where he was supervised by Raymond Williams. Here Eagleton took responsibility for the teaching of the college's undergraduates while working on his dissertation on the Victorian poet and writer Edward Carpenter. It was at this time also that Eagleton became heavily involved with movements within the Catholic Left, coming under the influence of radical Dominican theologians such as Laurence Bright and Herbert McCabe, and becoming a founding editor of the radical journal *Slant*, designed as a provocation and intervention into debates surrounding the direction of Catholicism in the 1960s. This period would see the first sequence of Eagleton's publications, with theological works such as *The New Left Church* (1966) and literary-critical studies such as *Shakespeare and Society* (1967), establishing his prolific rate of publication from the earliest stages of his career.

In 1969, after it became evident that he was unlikely to obtain a lectureship in the English Faculty at Cambridge, Eagleton moved, as a tutorial fellow, to Wadham College, Oxford, a college which had a reputation as being among the most progressive of those constituent in the University of Oxford, and which provided Eagleton with an academic base for a number of decades. Although politically and intellectually at odds with many of the prevalent practices of the English Faculty in the wider university, Eagleton developed a reputation as a popular and influential teacher, with his undergraduate lectures frequently full to capacity, and with his establishment of a weekly seminar providing a focal point for others interested in emerging currents of critical theory. Throughout this period, he also remained actively engaged in socialist political organizations, particularly with the Trotskyist 'Workers' Socialist League', led by Alan Thornett, a prominent trade-unionist based in the Cowley car works near Oxford.

The 1970s would see intense debates in the Anglo-American academy concerning emerging modes of critical theory, spurred by the translation of predominantly French structuralist and post-structuralist thought. This would be particularly felt among

members of the political New Left, grouped around the influential journal *New Left Review*, as interest and controversy surrounded the newly available work of the French philosopher Louis Althusser and his theories of a 'structuralist Marxism', which challenged the forms of socialist humanism previously predominant in British New Left thought. Eagleton would be among one of the new wave of figures influenced by such forms of emergent thought, with the publication of the Althusser-inspired *Criticism and Ideology* in 1976 establishing his international prominence as one of the leading figures in the field of Marxist critical theory. This reputation was consolidated by further work in the early 1980s such as *Walter Benjamin* (1981), before *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (1983) launched Eagleton to the forefront of the wider movement challenging the long dominance of what he would term as liberal-humanist critical modes.

Eagleton would occupy a series of positions at Oxford through his thirty-odd-year association with the institution. He moved to Linacre College as lecturer in critical theory in 1989, before being appointed to the senior position of Thomas Warton Professor of English in 1992 – after having been turned down previously for a personal chair in the faculty. At this time, he was also considering an offer made by a university in the USA. The appointment to the professorship quickly attracted attention as being more than a simple academic promotion: it was, rather, suggested in the national press that this was the first time a Marxist had held one of Oxford's professorial chairs, resulting in a remarkably hostile response from commentators in mainstream newspapers. One writer claimed that 'The man who spent years carving radical slogans into the woodwork of England's high table is now to be found seated at it, the napkin of conformity tucked firmly into his waistband, the goblet of gentility lustrous and brimming. After the Marxist meals come the bourgeois banquets, after the long knives come the fish knives';<sup>7</sup> while perhaps the most savage assessment came in the pages of the *Guardian*, where readers were titillated with details of Eagleton's class-traitor furniture (which readers were informed included 'a large and comfy sofa, part of a bourgeois three-piece suite'), quotes from safely anonymous 'former students' and 'Oxford dons', and the suggestion that no billet could be 'comfier' than the Professorship, which only involved '36 hours of teaching a year, and supervising a few postgraduates, for a salary of £31,000'.<sup>8</sup> This reaction, while savage, would in fact serve to consolidate Eagleton's public position as one of the most prominent of British Leftist intellectuals,

particularly in the wake of Raymond Williams's death in 1988. This period would see Eagleton emerge as one of the most forceful critics of postmodernism, embodied in works such as *The Illusions of Postmodernism* (1996), as well as being a period in which he diversified critical modes, with an increased range of output now occurring in non-specialized periodicals such as the *London Review of Books*, or in the form of dramatic works such as those published in *Saint Oscar and Other Plays* (1997), capturing a space as a 'public intellectual' in wider cultural debates. It would also see Eagleton increasingly concerned with Irish history and culture, as he released a trilogy of works on these issues, launched by *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger* (1995).

The final break with Oxbridge came in 2001, with a move to the University of Manchester as the John Edward Taylor Professor of English Literature, with Eagleton now dividing time between living in England and Ireland. In his most recent critical direction, his writing has undertaken what he has termed a 'metaphysical' turn, re-engaging with the themes that occupied his earliest works in the 1960s, in order to reconnect with topics such as tragedy, as undertaken in *Sweet Violence* (2003), as well as to goad the Left into new forms of critical engagement beyond the standard cultural theory topics of 'class, race and gender', a position most directly developed in *After Theory* (2003).

That then, in its barest outlines, has been the shape of Eagleton's career. I will thus now proceed back to the point where it all began, to Eagleton the Christian radical of the 1960s.