

Asking important questions – an interview with Terry Eagleton

In the 1970s, as one of the first lecturers in an English university to embrace 'literary theory', Professor Terry Eagleton shook up the world of English Studies. Barbara Bleiman went to Manchester University to ask him about his contribution to English Studies over the past thirty years, the role of literary theory and its relevance to A Level students today.

Professor Terry Eagleton, the radical English academic and literary critic, was once described by Prince Charles as 'that dreadful Terry Eagleton'. In the past he's been attacked both in the press and by other academics. As he says, in his recently published memoir, *The Gatekeeper*, he was seen by his tutor at Cambridge as a 'Marxist viper in his bosom, which was finally let loose upon the world to poison all that he held precious'. So why should an academic, teaching and writing about something as seemingly harmless as English Literature, have stirred up such a storm in the literary world and beyond?

When I met him, in his room in the Department of English and American Studies at Manchester University, I asked him just that.

'A lot of those people have really ceased to believe that there's much value in the ordinary social world, and, therefore, literature and culture have become for them privileged places where deep values exist. Culture is absolutely vital for them, particularly 'high culture', because it seems the only remaining fragile enclave where value exists. This rests upon a very alienated and aloof kind of view of the ordinary world. If they feel that nasty, grubby, people like me are getting our hairy little hands on high culture, then it's no longer theirs. If they still believed in religion then that would be different. But I believe that literature or culture has increasingly stood in for the role of religion in our society. Ever since religion began to fade in a mass kind of way, there has had to be some substitute, something that seemed to embody absolute value, something that was at once deeply personal, like religion, and utterly universal, and which connected the two. I think that literature has been a way of doing that. And, therefore, what the right wing sees as attacks on culture, I suppose, is equivalent to what Christians saw as the atheistic attacks of the nineteenth century.'

The idea of value in literature

I questioned what he meant by 'attacking value'. Was it to do with the idea of the canon – the idea that there is a body of literary texts that are 'great' and the only ones worthy of study. Traditional critics believe that there are absolute values – that a writer or a text can be said to be good or bad, without this being open to debate.

'Anybody who challenges the canon is thought to be challenging value as such, which I think is a ridiculous idea, as though either you think that value is rigidly hierarchical or you don't have any value at all – you're either an elitist or a nihilist. But there are lots of positions in between. Nobody, in practice, doubts the importance of value. Valuing is part of everyday life. People scrap fiercely over a particular episode of *EastEnders*. Valuing is part of living. So it's not as though the right-wing hold to values and we don't. Culture, in some dim and powerful way, is supposed to embody certain standards and we, on the left, are suggesting that these standards aren't quite as absolute as was thought. They have historical roots. The interesting questions that we have tried to open up are questions of where values come from, what different range of values there are, whether different values can co-exist and so on.'

Changing ideas about English

For A Level students today, questioning where values come from is a much more accepted part of their study. It is recognised that different readers interpret and value texts differently. When Eagleton was at school, these questions just weren't asked. I asked him to talk about what led to him becoming interested in these kinds of questions, rather than the ones that he had been encouraged to ask in his English A Level lessons.

'Usually the questions at school were about character and plot – "List the characteristics of St. John Rivers in Jane Eyre" and so on. But one teacher, [whom Eagleton now describes as a 'left Leavisite' – see page 33], set an exam question on Henry IV Part II. It was something like "The atmosphere of the play is heavy with evil, sickness and foreboding". This was like an illumination to me. It gave me a precious glimpse of a whole new way of thinking about literature that wasn't just plot and character and the rest.'

Then I went to Cambridge. But all the time I was at Cambridge, although I could do English all right and did very well, I didn't really understand what I was doing or what I was supposed to be doing. There seemed to be very few clear cut rules. I had a tutor who said about two characters in a Jane Austen novel, "I wouldn't marry either of them myself." So there I was back to plot and character, though my own thinking had gone beyond that.'

The influence of Raymond Williams

Eagleton described how he became influenced by Raymond Williams (see page 33), both as a critic and as a man. 'Raymond Williams was the only person who seemed to me to be talking about literature in ways that connected with my own background and experience. It was a revelation. It made instant sense to me. For him literature seemed to be part of his whole life experience. For a 19 year old, this was very impressive. He didn't approach it in a narrow, dry or technical spirit, as my own supervisor – and a lot of people at Cambridge at the time – did. And he didn't give you the

sense that it was something that you could only acquire if you were a special kind of privileged person. He pretty obviously wasn't. He was one of the very few people in Cambridge in the early '60s who clearly wasn't. He didn't have the cultural marks of the traditional kind of don, and I suppose he appealed to me because I didn't have the marks of the traditional student. It was an extraordinarily eye-opening experience to hear him lecture. It was like being in a young offenders' institution and seeing the Governor get up and talk in ways that obliquely hinted that he was a young offender himself. He opened up the concept of culture, rather than a narrow concept of literature. He put it in an historical context. But even more, the experience was just of a man talking about literature, quite passionately, but as part of his own life world and other people's worlds, not as a specialist or separate thing.'

The role of theory

Eagleton has been seen as a key voice in modern 'literary theory'; one of his best known books is called *Literary Theory* and is a guide to all the major theoretical schools of thought of the twentieth century, from Russian Formalism, through Structuralism and Post-structuralism, to Psychoanalytic Theory and Feminism, Marxism and Post-colonialism. I asked him to explain what he saw as the role of theory.

'Theory asks some pretty fundamental questions. Not just do you like this bit in Jane Austen, but what is involved in people saying that they do. What standards are they using? Theory asks questions of that kind – not just what does the poem mean, but what is a poem or what is a novel. Those are very exciting questions to ask. Theory tries to dig a bit deeper than the usual sort of literary or critical question.'

Basically, I suppose, when you get down to it, it means encouraging people to reflect on what they're doing, simple as that. It's a kind of self-attentiveness. That's always useful. It's not a luxury that only the 'best' sort of students should be afforded.'

Is theory too difficult?

With the new AS and A2 exams bringing a greater emphasis on alternative interpretations (AO4), there's been considerable debate about how much A Level students should have to do with theory. I asked Eagleton for a view on this.

'Some theorists have gone in for a terrible sort of obscurantism which I think is a great pity, not only because obscurantism is a pity in general, but also because theory is actually a very democratic thing. It really says, "You don't have to have blue blood in your veins, or have parents who are themselves extremely 'civilised', in order to read." Anybody who's prepared to learn a certain way of doing things, a certain language, can be in on the arguments. Theory is a levelling sort of thing. It should be. And as for doing it at A Level, I do think that beginning to raise questions of that kind, slightly more general questions, is very useful.'

But what about the language used by literary theorists? Doesn't the jargon of literary theory exclude people?

'All trades have their jargons. I can't walk into a dental surgery or a garage and expect instantly to understand the language that dentists or garage mechanics use. It's a language for particular purposes that I may not be familiar with. I wouldn't, I hope, just dismiss talk about my carburettor as some mystifying jargon. It's a matter of students picking up a certain way of talking. I don't know why 'signifier' is seen negatively as jargon whereas 'symbol' isn't. One person's jargon is another person's ordinary language.'

Ists and isms

Eagleton's own take on theory has been described as Marxist, though in the interview he seems more naturally to use the word 'left' or 'left wing' when describing himself. In practice, what does taking this theoretical approach mean, when it comes to looking at texts? For instance, in talking about Dickens or Austen or another canonical writer, what would interest him?

'I'm interested to show how they embodied or contested power, how they were caught up in a process, not just of meaning and value but also of power. And I don't mean by that anything silly and crude, like "all works of high culture are on the side of the ruling powers". On the contrary, actually. Quite a lot of canonical writers haven't been on the side of their ruling powers. Works of literature are battlegrounds where meanings can be tested.'

And what about labels in general? I was interested to know if he felt that the proliferation of labels such as Feminist, Marxist, Structuralist, Post-colonialist and so forth, was useful or constraining.

'I enjoy annoying a certain kind of liberal by saying that I love labels and I can't get enough of them, as opposed to the person who says, "Well we're all human beings really and we don't want to be boxed in by these things." I say I'm very proud to be called anti-racist or a lot of other labels. They're very useful things, as long as you're aware of their limitations. They're ways of signalling a body of beliefs or a way of doing things. They put you in the picture, they give you a framework, as long as you don't think they're exhaustive.'

On the other hand, they can be confusing, not least for people starting in the field. I had a very bemused student from another university come to me the other week, saying that he'd been told to put more theory into his MA thesis and

would I tell him which theory to use, as though when you got up in the morning there were all these theoretical hats on the pegs and you said, "I think I'll wear this one today – the Buddhist one, and tomorrow it'll be the Post-structuralist." That's a symptom of desperation isn't it, all these flashily packaged commodities, different theories which the consumer has to choose between. Whereas, of course, these theories, among other things, are about beliefs and perhaps beliefs aren't just things that you choose like a hat. They go deep in you. **Theories are ways in which people work out the implications of certain beliefs that they have.**

I challenged him on the idea that one couldn't usefully 'try out' what different theories might have to offer in approaching a text. 'There's a difference between different kinds of theory. Some theories really are methods of literary analysis, ways of doing things, ways of tackling literary works, or films or whatever. Other theories, like say Marxism or Feminism, aren't only that at all. They're theories about the world. Not only do they extend far beyond literary works, they didn't start in the area of literature. They started somewhere else. It's a mistake to think that all these things are on a level. You can't just decide to be a Marxist or a Feminist. You can go through an imaginative exercise – what would the world look like to me – but in an ongoing way, this is something that you have to live or come to.'

The importance of language

Interestingly, when talking more concretely about what discussions with his students focus on, Eagleton emphasises the central place of language. For him, the good student is one who goes beyond talking about content to focus on language and form.

'It's a kind of discourse analysis, as one might call it in a more technical way. I think it was Jameson, the famous American critic, who said that any theoretical approach which doesn't in the end come to terms with the shape of the sentences isn't really useful.'

What makes a good English student?

He says of his undergraduate teaching in the past:

'Alarm bells always rang for me when I got the kind of student who knew exactly what he or she was going to do all the way through, who had it all buttoned up to begin with, because they usually then drew back in alarm from the kind of exploratory process that one was trying to take them through. You would get a very good student who would come from school well primed and intelligent enough to see that these deeper theoretical questions were opening up new horizons – a territory that was unknown – and who would then face a certain moment of decision whether they were going to launch themselves into this rather dark, unmapped terrain, or draw back and stay with what they safely knew. The good students were the ones who took the leap, ones who were prepared to follow a journey without any sure sense of the destination.'

The future of English

What of the future of English studies? Eagleton talks of the subject being 'post-theoretical'. That doesn't mean that it's going back to the old 'pre-theoretical' ways of doing things, but that theory has come down to earth a bit.

'What really interests postgraduate students these days is Feminism, Post-colonialism and Post-modernism. Over half the theses being written at Oxford nowadays are in some sense in one of those areas. When I first started teaching at Oxford, you couldn't even write a thesis on somebody who was still alive, let alone on literary theory. It was a great temptation to take a gun to your chosen author! What's interesting about the three currents I've listed is that of course they're all theoretical, but none of them is just theory. They are all about forms of life and politics and culture. It's not just an intellectual shift. It's partly because of the shift in real life, because culture has become so much more important – culture, in terms of media or ethnicity – and that's put an end to high theory and generated these new kinds of currents.'

The Gatekeeper – a memoir

Terry Eagleton's most recent book is not literary criticism but a memoir, *The Gatekeeper*. It is an unusual autobiographical work, not really a 'life story', more an exploration of ideas and experiences and an account of people, places and events that have influenced him. People have even asked him whether it is an 'anti-memoir'. I suppose one shouldn't expect something conventional from someone who has spent so much of his professional life challenging traditions and disturbing the status quo. He says, 'There was a kind of impulse of mischief, of devilment in it, to defeat certain readerly expectations of the confessional mode.'

Why he wrote it, what models he had or how it differed from writing literary criticism were all questions he found difficult to answer. For someone so reflective about what literature is and what other writers do, he was engagingly honest about being unable to explain the mysteries of his own creative process.

'To be honest, I never understand why I write a book. I never remember, I never know at the time why I'm doing it. It's a graphic illustration of the death of the author thesis, that I can tell you no more about it than you can – a living example of the obituary for the author!'

Terry Eagleton may have been regarded as the 'bête noire' of the English literary establishment, but his influence on English studies has been considerable. His views were once on the margins. Now literary theory is a key element of English in the universities. While reading theory may sometimes be quite a challenge, listening to him talking about it, was anything but.

Terry Eagleton was interviewed by Barbara Bleiman

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