



## "Why Don't They Do Something Else": Terry Eagleton and Some Symptoms of 20<sup>th</sup> Century Literary Theory.

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*A fact... an interpretation on which everyone is likely to agree*

*Terry Eagleton, Literary Theory.*

*-- ...there are no compelling objections against unrestricted interpretation, except in conformity with the limits of brute memory, fluency, tolerance within habitual practices, pertinence regarding contingent interests or purposes, and what may be shown to be internally coherent in evidentiary ways --*

*Joseph Margolis, Selves and Other Texts.*

Joseph Margolis --whom I have elsewhere dubbed "the generous philosopher"-- admits that the above are not particularly strenuous constraints, and yet, Terry Eagleton somehow manages, in his *Literary Theory* (1983), to exceed almost all of them. To this we shall return, after all an essay on a solitary, badly written, late 20<sup>th</sup> century critical treatise would hardly be worth an entire essay. Professor Eagleton is merely used as a metonym, a symptom, a way into examining something of what was wrong with 20<sup>th</sup> Century Literary Theory as a whole.<sup>1</sup>

Eagleton is a prime target because his work is at once so bad and was, once, so very popular. Its popularity resided, I would guess, in its being a kind of *Cliff's Notes* to what the average, worried undergraduate took to be an arcane and difficult subject. We begin, then, by a close scrutiny of *Literary Theory* merely to expose what was wrong with Literary Theory throughout the last century. Along the way, we shall see how certain people thought --in that century of mass-murder-- and how this was

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<sup>1</sup> What follows may be considered a bad case of *argumentum ad hominum*, and indeed it could be so seen but for the fact that Man is ontologically a creature of collective attributes, a kind of provisionally congealed representative of its ambient social values, as outlined by Pierre Bourdieu. I take Terry Eagleton to be representative of a certain middle-class English type and, as Marx said, "all history has been a history of the class struggle". This essay is but a small addition to that struggle and just as there is no "objectivity" with a capital "O", neither is there any such creature as "Man" --Marx's "Crusoe Man"--to direct argument at.

reflected in the jittery state of the representatives of the Academy. What was wrong with them and it, in one word, was ahistoricism. Radical historicism renders all theory merely provisional. We shall find that 20<sup>th</sup> century Literary Theory can easily be subdivided into three "-isms": teleologism, essentialism, extensionalism. This bald summary, however, leaves out the subterfuges by which these three demons disguised themselves even from themselves, and, indeed, what exactly the three truly entail, and what exactly they were. To put names to the "-isms", we might cite Marx as a teleologist, Freud as an essentialist, and a whole host of Formalists and New Critics as extensionalists. In short, much of its ahistoricism was due to its obsequious reliance on 19<sup>th</sup> Century Thought, while it overlooked what was novel and worthwhile in its own century. The individuals and groups mentioned, represent these "-isms" only if we read them in a full-blooded fashion --and in full-- and if we take them at their word, there are always abject apologists for any cultural icon. It is not true of them, obviously, if we tinker around to make them, perhaps unwittingly, palatable to modern bourgeois taste, as is the case with certain French Feminists, with Adorno, Sartre, Macherey, Jameson or Eagleton himself, especially insofar as Marx and Freud are concerned. Apart from being ahistorical, Literary Theory was predominantly a Western phenomenon whose leading practitioners were Russians, Frenchmen, Germans and, at a distance, North Americans and Englishmen. From this parochial view, it projected its would-be universalizable criteria.

This paper also includes guides to the solution to the problems raised or avoided by that view; problems which the 21<sup>st</sup> century must take into account. That solution is equally easily summarized. In one word, it is the paying of attention to ontology, and its bearing on epistemology, and viceversa, to paying attention to what was best in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Thought. To put names to this "best", we may cite: Wittgenstein, who showed that language was not autonomous; Heidegger, who developed the preformative nature of the human and its radical historical "nature"; W.V. Quine, who destroyed the dogmas of empiricism and the sythetic/analytic distinction; Gadamer, who gave us "the-fusion-of-horizons" and the idea of "effective historical consciousness"; Foucault, who would, at times, even historicize the human body itself. Margolis, for purely propaganda purposes, we treat of as a 21<sup>st</sup> century thinker.

By "ontology", we mean, roughly, "the nature of the beast", irrespective of which particular beast. By "epistemology", we mean, approximately, "what we know or what we think we know --or what we think could possibly be said to be known-- about the beast". Put even more simply, it is the re-thinking of the old problem of the relationship obtaining between Nature and Culture, nature being the "what there is" and culture, the human prejudiced way in which we perforce speculate upon the former. Nature's ontology is an epistemologically dependent posit. We cannot posit the "nature of any beast" except via epistemological means. For instance, Saussure --who was responsible for a great part of the silliness of Literary Theory in the latter half of the last century-- with his "signifier/signified" dichotomy merely reformulated the culture (signifier)/ nature (signified) problem in a new guise, or, the epistemology/ontology problem. He simply resurrected the knower/known or mind-dependent/*ding-an-sich* Kantian pseudo-dilemma in other terms. The resurrection of the Kantian phantom, and the reaction against it, quite easily accounts for most Literary Theory, at least from the late 1960s to the end of the century. The first half of the century hardly even recognized Literary Theory as an entity and, where it did, either pursued it in the spirit of an out-moded nomological/positivistic spirit or else treated the literary as a substitute religion or as a Home Guard recruitment system for the nationalist cause. So, let us begin with critique and explication and, only then set everything right for our own century.

In abruptly proclaiming Eagleton's book to be bad, of course, some demonstration or explication of his text is required, for, after all: Wasn't he a famous

literary critic in his own right, at some Oxford College or other? It was Wadham, in fact, the delightful F.E. Smith's *alma mater*. The "emperor's new clothes syndrome", however, the kow-towing before the intellectual wardrobe of "fine minds" was part and parcel of 20<sup>th</sup> Century Literary Theory and the little boy in the crowd –ourselves– must not be afraid to shout out that the minds were either shabbily dressed or else naked. There was a pretence that Eagleton's *Literary Theory* was the product of just such a mind, a fine mind. However, could any "good" book contain --any fine mind write-- such a ridiculous sentence as:

"... its bristling armoury is bent on the exploration of... what people find gratifying and what they do not" (192)? Can "armoury bristle"? Do cannons come equipped with huge, hairy wigs? "Its... armoury is bent..." sounds like some medieval army of knights had a pretty raucous night at the "ye olde local". Then, there is Eagleton's obsession with "gush about sunsets" (used twice), where the word "gush" is the type of petty sneer the petit bourgeois would use against the aristocracy, thinking it an aristocratic dilettante expression. In fact, "gush" is typically private school or prep. school terminology, if not simply the creature of an overwrought middle-class imagination. Come to that, what is wrong with admiring sunsets as described in books, and explaining to others why they strike you in the solar-plexus? Again, Eagleton holds it to be, *prima facie*, absurd or useless to invoke the length of Tolstoy's beard in a literary discussion. Surely, the length of the Mandarin's nails had an important socio-political, semiotic dimension, and both Bury --with Cleopatra's nose-- and A.J.P. Taylor --with Serbian 1914 railway time-tables-- have shown that great things can indeed come from the trivial, thus bearing out Margolis' contention –from our opening epigraph-- that the objections to interpretative freedom are much slighter than tight-laced Eagleton fancies.<sup>2</sup>

As for Eagleton's own style, try this for style, from the very pinnacle of Eagletonian rhetoric, the last sentence of the book: "It is not out of the question that the death of literature may help the lion to awaken" (217). Eagleton obviously here attempts to echo Napoleon's verdict on China --generally rendered, "there lies the sleeping Dragon woe betide the world when she awakes". Clumsily, he renders it "awaken". "To awaken" is usually, following the Shorter *OED*, under definition 4 --the only possible one Eagleton could have had in mind-- tied to ideas of sin and expiation, typical of the lower-middle class mentality which, as Gary Taylor, in *Reinventing Shakespeare* (1989: 318-321) clearly shows Eagleton has. Hence this latter's old schoolmarm shudder at Barthes *jouissance* and his absurd claim that all post 1920s English English students were Leavisites.

At Oxford, I only saw Leavis once and I can never remember which was Leavis and which Kingsley Amis, who I also only saw once. I remember neither of them liked the television, for some reason or other. Eagleton's bathetic altering of the dynamic "awakes" to the doleful "awaken", with its one beat too many, however, reminds one of both these old codgers. Further, Eagleton both spoils an inspiring prophecy, turning it into a drab, middle-class prissy puritanism, while inadvertently revealing what else was wrong with Literary Theory in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century; it was all the work of the middle classes. So, minor stylistic carping, perhaps, but major ideological disgruntlement. It is also major carping in its implications, as we shall see. For it is only the middle-class which, as a class, strives to offset aristocratic panache by moral fervour **and** which will always

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<sup>2</sup> On the semiotic nature of human beings and the realism of cultural entities, the fact that man is a self-interpreting text textually interpreted by others, and that such significative elements are at least as real as physical attributes, see especially Joseph Margolis, *Selves and Other Texts: The Case for Cultural Realism*. University Park: Penn. State UP, 2001. Also see my "Pensamiento Prohibido", *A Parte Rei*, Vol. 24, 2002.

support the *status quo* while seemingly attacking it. From its ranks came the Nazis, the Fascists, the Communists who --throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> Century-- sold the working-class down the river whenever they could. Speaking of the middle-class virtues of the Leavisites, for example, Eagleton says: "Englishness" for them "was... country dancing; rural, populist and provincial" (37). Does this not uncomfortably remind us of the "Tomorrow Belongs to Me" sequence in the movie *Cabaret*? Black leather shorts soon to be reworked into black leather jackboots?<sup>3</sup>

On a much more "serious" academic plane, take this example, as proof of how low scholarship fell in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. "English literature usually includes Lamb (though not Bentham), Macaulay (but not Marx)..." (*LT* 1). Marx wrote in German, so why on earth should he be included in English Literature? If Eagleton is suggesting that we read Marx in translation, the question arises as to which translation. Should we read the Victorian *Capital* by Sam Moore and Ed Aveling, edited by Engels (1867) or the cheap but accessible 20<sup>th</sup> century Pelican version by Ben Fowkes (1976)? The same question would arise concerning reading Homer as English Literature; whose Homer, Chapman's or Alexander Pope's? Ontology; "the nature of the beast". Sam Moore's "thing" is not Fowkes' "thing"; Chapman's is not Pope's. Also, we do not include Marx in English Literature because Marx is German Literature. Eagleton never moves into Translation Theory, though he really ought to, if we should include Marx in English Literature courses. Translation Theory also arises, or should arise, again in one of his examples of "the literary", or otherwise, uses of language.

Taking the word "squiggly" from Knut Hamsun's famous English classic *Hunger* (1890), Eagleton wonders if this is an example of "the literary" and concludes that it is, since it comes in the work of a Nobel prize-winning novelist. But, does "squiggly" appear in Sverre Lyngstad's translation or maybe in Robert Bly's? And what adequation obtains between these and the original, given W.V. Quine's doctrine of the "indeterminacy of translation"? That great Spanish classic *Hambre* (Ediciones Orbis, 1961), by the same versatile author, has the word "garabateado" which sounds relatively normal to a Spanish-speaker. The "literary language" question does not here even arise. What Knut Hamsun, the Norwegian writer, actually wrote is a mystery, I suspect, to many; Norwegian not being the most popular of second languages taught in most English-speaking schools: quite possibly it is a mystery to Eagleton too. The point again is that Eagleton, like so many 20<sup>th</sup> century Literary Theorists, while berating his trade, subtly manages to practise it. Dropping the name of Hamsun shows he is widely read and adheres to the ontology of the discipline; he has the lexicon at his fingertips. This also accounts for Eagleton's seeming obsession with the word "enjambement"; dismissive of it, he parades it to guarantee his salary. The lexicographic dimension of the ontology of the discipline demands it. "Enjambement", following *OED* --which, after all, is not that difficult to get a copy of-- is: "The continuation of a sentence beyond the second line of a couplet" and has been in use in English since 1837. Eagleton certainly knows his prosody, just as he knows that prosody has nothing to do with prose. In short, he has the credentials to write books on the Literary, and he makes quite certain that he parades them. Incidentally,

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<sup>3</sup> In his recently published *Memoir*, Eagleton maintains he is from the English-Working Class. The reader unaware of the infinite nuances involved in English class-ridden society should be warned, however, that there are the "deserving" working-class (middle-class aspirants) and the "non-deserving" working class within its ranks, at least. The writer hails from the latter and there will be no end to the class struggle until there is an end to class division. From Eagleton's *Memoir*, I doubt very much that he would even be considered "working-class" at all round my way. On this, see Richard Hogarth's, *The Uses of Literacy* and E.P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class*.

"enjambement" at least does come in an English dictionary, whereas to read Marx we should require a German one.

To backtrack a little, Marx --that great but criminally ignored English stylist-- or rather what can only be termed "the Marxology" of Terry Eagleton, leads the latter into absurdities well beyond considerations of Translation Theory. Take these Eagletonian "facts" for example. It was Karl Marx who was "troubled by the question of why ancient Greek art retained an 'eternal charm'..." (12). In fact (a favourite phrase of Eagleton's, used over 130 times throughout his text), it was the question which troubled Hegel in his great Lectures on the Philosophy of Fine Art. It seems likely, that Marx lifted his prejudices from Hegel who, in turn, as Wilhelm Worringer, in *Abstraction and Empathy* (1953), clearly demonstrated, systematically underestimated Egyptian Art out of sheer ignorance. So, the question may have worried Marx too, but it might also worry Bill Bloggs from next door, similarly disregarding of the Egyptian stylistic choice --not the Egyptian incapacity-- to produce anything but "symbolic" art. Again, à la Eagleton, Marx once asked: "Who will educate the educators?". Of course (to use the T.S. Eliot phrase which so irritated Flann O'Brien), this is but one rendering of the old Latin tag: "*Quis custodiet ipsos custodes?*" --variously given as: Who will watch the watchers?; Who will guard the guardians?, and a long so on. The Internet Google search engine lists only 8,018 entries --found in 0.18 seconds (10/25/02)-- under the original Latin. However, obviously, Marx came up with the troublesome perplexity most perspicaciously as, in Eagletonland, he did so much else.

Applied to 20<sup>th</sup> Century Literary Theory, this might be dubbed a part of its "slavish school syndrome"; it was a century of Leavisites, Derrideans, Paul DeManians, and so on. Few literary theorists were called upon to think for themselves. So, more than incidentally, the only two Literary Theorists to escape unscathed from Eagleton's low-key, bluff stylistics are Macherey and Jameson, both Marxists and, incidentally, both atrociously unwieldy writers.

What we did, in fact, know of Marx in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, however, was that --apart from his being a frustrated poet like Plato and apart from his never having had to earn a living-- millions were sacrificed in his name throughout it, just as we know that innumerable and nameless innocent "analysands" were incarcerated in Freud's name. That is without mentioning the cocaine addicts Freud helped foment. For Eagleton, however, both Marx and Freud are, somehow, "revolutionary fare", too revolutionary to have entered the sacred precincts of English Literary Academia. Another thing both "thinkers" share in common is the marvellous feat of first inventing, or positing, a hidden entity and then proceeding to investigate it --the dialectic inevitability of history, the Oedipus Complex. Very much late 19<sup>th</sup> century thinkers, together with Nietzsche, they constituted, as Eagleton notes, what has been dubbed "the hermeneutics of suspicion". Curiously enough, that phrase comes from Paul Ricoeur, though Eagleton does not mention that particular "fact". And that for a very good reason. When speaking of Northrop Frye and his Aristotelean-style structuralism, Eagleton seems to believe that it is enough to damn Frye's schemata by pointing out that Frye is a clergyman. He omits to mention that Ricoeur is too, just as he had omitted to mention that it was Ricoeur who coined the phrase that Eagleton likes. Why then is not Ricoeur knuckle-rapped, but rather cited namelessly and with respect? In 20<sup>th</sup> Century Literary Theory terms, "the hermeneutics of suspicion" has that orbicular, oracular flavour which holds the ignorati at bay, keeps them out of the gourmet kitchen, as it were. Also, yes, Paul Ricoeur is solidly sold on Freud. In general, Eagleton follows the rule: the better the theorist, the more deserving of his scorn. Though I am not suggesting this is the case with Frye, it certainly is with Barthes, Gadamer and Derrida. Another thing wrong

with 20<sup>th</sup> Century Literary Theory was this; the petty bickering it inspired amongst shrivelled souls.<sup>4</sup>

Well, Eagleton likes the former unholy trinity --Freud, Marx, Nietzsche-- precisely because, in the scheme of each, a hieratic interpreter is essential, someone who escapes the very conditions which Freud, Marx and Nietzsche, each in his own way, posits as a "something" all are subject to without exception, and which distorts everyone's self-deceived, "self-evident" outlook on the world: the Oedipus Complex; "false consciousness"; the Will to Power. Odd thinkers indeed are they who think they can think outside or beyond or beneath the limiting conditions which each sets upon all human thought or behaviour whatever. Still, more of that later. They are part of the dead baggage of 19<sup>th</sup> century thought which helped cripple 20<sup>th</sup> Century Literary Theory, and which we mentioned at the opening of our study. Here, with reference simply to why Frye is condemned and Ricoeur namelessly invoked, we may note that, "in fact", this is part of Eagleton's entire rhetorical strategy; in the words of Dr. Johnson, his book "is both good and original; but the part that is good is not original and the part that is original is not good". One has only to think of the worn analogy between dissecting literature and dissecting the body or of his foolish "dogs must be carried..." example of ambiguity: no William Empson he.

Of course, theorizing about theory has often led to its own dubious share of theories. Eagleton begins his book by quoting Keynes' to the effect that "those economists who disliked theory, or claimed to get along better without it, were simply in the grip of an older theory" (Eagleton, vii). Against the inevitability of theory, as it were, we might set Elizabeth Bruss' fine put-down: "an increase of theoretical activity... arises whenever the function of criticism is itself in doubt" (Bruss 32). It is worthwhile noting here that Bruss easily slips from "theory" to "criticism", a point to be taken up later. Almost all writers on Literary Theory sooner or later blur the distinction between it and criticism, if there is one. Still, back to theory, where there is always Stanley Fish's dry, pragmatic, summary: "... theory is just another name for making your way through life and there's nothing much to say about it or claim for it..." (Fish 229-230). Theory led certain ex-fascists like Paul de Man to hold the world to be one great fiction, on the basis of the fact that we could not know "Das ding-an-sich", the thing in itself, the noumenal world of Kant, so it follows that the world must be made up, invented, though, unaccountably, rarely gifted critics, like De Man himself, had certain insights into the Real, and the Literary was the only form of language which was honest enough to "forever take leave of" the myth of non-mediated linguistic apprehension (that is, the myth of correspondentism, a subsection of extensionalism). Since the world was a fiction, then, the expert in fiction, the literary Führer, should certainly be there to guide us. This tactic is, of course, identical to Freud, Marx and Nietzsche's, mentioned earlier; a human condition posited as hidden but universally obtaining is, somehow, escaped by the sage who invented the condition in the first place. Rum for the rest of us.

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<sup>4</sup> In this context, it is interesting to note that Marx was from a family including a long line of rabbis whose father converted to Protestantism to keep his job as a wealthy lawyer. Nietzsche's father was a Lutheran Minister and Eagleton was an English Catholic who converted to Marxism. All of them, in short, had something of the Frye/Ricoeur about them. In the case of Eagleton, we might note the connection between Catholic countries and Communist Parties which is well documented. My father was an atheist, farm worker, a landless peasant, in short, and of Irish descent. In passing, the uncanny thing about Nietzsche is that, while he dwells at length on slavish fathers/slavish sons, he never applies this observation to his own case, see especially *Beyond Good and Evil*.

Kant, however, had shown --around two hundred years before De Man-- that the world we did think we knew, we knew through "our categories of understanding", via the Mind, and that that was the only world that could be known. Epistemology. In effect, the world we thought/think we know is the Real world. Kant, in effect, then merely posited a noumenal, unknowable world that, in fact, was not even worth talking about. Fictional worlds exist within this Real World. The fictional and the factual are grammatically related by disjunction. What is "real" is not "fictional", what is "fictional" is not "real", but made up. The resurrection of this ghostly 19<sup>th</sup> Century specter, under Nietzsche's banner, came to dominate late 20<sup>th</sup> Century Literary Theory and was, mistakenly, taken to imply that the world, "our world" was only made up, was not real. This, in turn, led to the *non sequitur* that reference could be dispensed with. The whole thing was scatty. People do refer to the world and there is a real world, we know that, if we did not, we would not: desperately seek high academic salaries; nor follow tin-pot demagogues; nor indeed would we --lesser mortals with lower incomes-- even be able to buy any food. As Wittgenstein put it: "What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence" (*Tractatus* 74). It is the noumenal that is a fiction, and one "we must pass over in silence". The simple point to make is that while we posit that the physical world is ontologically prior to human existence, that posit is itself epistemologically dependent upon human existence, which is logically prior to the ontology of the world. At any rate, obviously, Humans can refer to anything they want to. They are so frightfully clever. They can also "baptize badgers" if they want to, though Eagleton says, unaccountably, that they cannot. On Saint Anthony's Day (17<sup>th</sup> Jan.), in Spain, for example, hundreds of old ladies take their pets to be blessed --and if blessed, why not baptized? Well, it is accountably, really; it shows Eagleton is "one of the lads" using old time folksy sayings.

The attempt to remind people that perhaps they are not "so frightfully clever" is what Derrida's *différance* and deconstructions were primarily invoked for. Derrida's is a technique to undercut any in-place interpretive hegemony. Each of us approaches the world with preconceived but ephemeral categorizations, the pre-text for our own textualizing of phenomena. The irony is that De Man took Derrida's "il n'y a pas de hors-texte" and converted it into "il n'y a (rien en) dehors (de) texte" (see *Interpretation* 172) and that the immense majority of American middle-class theorists sheepishly sequented him over the senseless Yalean cliffs.<sup>5</sup>

The 20<sup>th</sup> century abounded in literary and language theories of all kinds reaching the apogee of absurdity, perhaps, in Noam Chomsky's amazement at the fact that little babies could parse sentences and distinguish between the jussive, say, and the preterite indefinite. The simple point to make, insofar as this type of theory is concerned, is that a skill can be practised without any ability on the part of the practitioner to characterize that skill. Just because you can ride a bike does not imply that you need be an expert in aero-dynamics. The elementary mistake infecting Chomsky's view is similar to that committed by the Hegelians --including Marx-- who do not see that their teleologies are a retrospective mapping onto **the past** of their own **future present**. The unfolding of the *Weltgeist* only ever gets as far as their own, limited, historical horizon. Prussia is the true end of History because Hegel lived in Prussia and was impressed by the fall of Napoleon. Chomsky sees a hotchpot of sophisticated grammar in the poor baby's brain because he himself is loaded with all this top-heavy apparatus, and he is a grammarian and wants grammar to be all

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<sup>5</sup> Marxists and Freudians fill the halls of American Acedemia, noted for its risqué avante-guardism. Linda Hutcheon is a typical example of a Literary Theoretician who finds it impossible to tell Fiction from Non-fiction and who thinks reference can be abandoned.

important for, otherwise, "why doesn't he do something else"? The Nietzschean Institutional Will to Power.<sup>6</sup>

Keynes views the practice of other economists in terms of his own vantage, and only then retrogressively maps out a prior "episteme" within which he judges their practice. Indeed, theory is a kind of practice just as practice can be made to yield a theory. In short, like Bellamy, we are always "looking backwards" and taking our own inventions for the inventions of God, or projecting them forwards and attributing them to the unfolding of some predetermined providence or inevitable dialectic. Eagleton endorses Keynes' verdict, or so it seems. Later, he will renege and rage against Literary Theory altogether. However, just considering Eagleton at this point in his book, it is interesting to note that Keynes was an economist and that Marx, Eagleton's hero, really put economic theory on the map of human consciousness (to paraphrase the subtitle of R.G. Collingwood's early work) and that Keynes was also a close friend of Bertrand Russell, perhaps the greatest extensionalist in 20<sup>th</sup> century philosophy. Thus, at the opening of Eagleton's account, we find, though absent, Marx the teleologist and Russell the extentionalist. Later in the book, *Literary Theory*, we shall find praised Sigmund Freud, the essentialist *par excellence*. Freud invented some wild story -- based on an old Greek play-- in which there were three, and only three (why not 11, as in a football team?) components to the human psyche --which, since he presumably had one, he could not know-- and that these were invariant and unchanging. That is what we usually mean by essentialist. That is, there is an unchanging component in human life, infecting all societies, at all times, under all circumstances. This ahistorical outlook is incompatible with Marxism, of course, but that does not stop the redoubtable Terry. In fact, any essentializing universalism is totally irreconcilable with historicism, as should be obvious to even Chomskian super-babies. Still, read correctly, the very first page of Eagleton's book --its margins and absences as well as its emphases-- encapsulates what was wrong with Literary Theory and makes the rest of his text redundant. What was wrong with it was that it was dominated by 19<sup>th</sup> Century thinking, by the likes of Marx and Freud and Nietzsche. This is not to say that nothing can be salvaged of Nietzsche and Marx, as we shall see later, though, anything useful from the detritus of Freud is much less recyclable from the dustbin of history (to up-date a handy Engelean metaphor). A case could, perhaps, be made out for his advocacy of cocaine, but Bush and the DEA wouldn't like it. However, the whole Freudian "just-so story" which rested on the ubiquity of the Oedipus Complex and subconscious incestuous urges was empirically exploded when it was discovered over and over again that physical propinquity with no restraint or sanctions in early childhood led to physical aversion at the age of sexual maturity, just as Edward Westermarck, back in the day, suggested it would. Westermarck, of course, fell victim to the calumnies of the "Viennese Witchdoctor" (to use a handy Nabokovian designation for Freud).<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> By far the wittiest put-down of Chomsky is Ian Robinson's *The New Grammarian's Funeral*, London: Cambridge UP, 1975. Chomsky's is but another new form of Platonism, similar to Wolterstorff's theory of art, except that, for Chomsky, the Forms are biological.

Throughout Eagleton's *Literary Theory*, there is the unacknowledged privileging of "factory workers", apart from there being, post-Thatcher, very few factories left, Eagleton's tactic reminds one of what Eldridge Cleaver said about those white middle-class advocates of Soul Food. Cleaver points out that "soul food" eaters would much prefer sirloin, but they cannot afford it, similarly most factory-workers would surely prefer to be sipping sherry at six in their Oxfrud rooms to sweating on the factory floor.

<sup>7</sup> By now the literature empirically discrediting the Freudian "id-ego-superego" structure, the Oedipus Complex and the other hocus-pocus --but more especially, Freud's high bourgeois

In some "subconscious" way, Eagleton must have realized his book was not worth the writing for --in the text of five chapters, a Preface, an Introduction, and a conclusion-- only three deal with what might be considered "true literary theory" while the others treat of things like: the history of teaching English Literature --mainly lifted from Chris Baldick's book, *The Social Mission of English Criticism 1848-1932*; the subtleties of psychoanalysis, long since empirically demonstrated to be completely untenable; a bit of literary criticism; and a call to give it all up (Literary Theory, that is) and do something else. I suppose it must be grudgingly admitted that his summaries of the various "movements" or "schools" is adequate and would serve in an emergency should one have to sit some Literary Theory examination, which makes it, after all, of some use. That is, it serves its Cliff's Notes function.

It own theory of theory is, however, curious since the book begins by advocating it and ends by advocating its overthrow. Self-contradiction, however, is one key-note of the Eagleton style. So, at times, human life and natural languages form a structure, at others, they are held to be unstructured and unstructurable. On pages 108-109, Eagleton pontificates:

*Structuralism is a modern inheritor of this belief that reality, and our experience of it, are discontinuous with each other... Like Freud, it exposes the shocking truth that even our most intimate experience is the effect of a structure. (Italics added).*

while on page 112, our heresiarch proclaims:

The 'materiality' of the text itself... was in danger of being abolished: the 'surface' of a piece of writing was little more than the reflection of its concealed depths. What Lenin once called 'the *reality* of appearances' was at risk of being overlooked. (Italics added)

Eagleton pits truth against reality, bandies terms about and contradicts himself. Is his "truth" alethically meant, heuristically meant? He does not say. He does, nevertheless, make the inane remark: "It was not entirely clear how one knew there was no system as a whole" (143), when the short answer is surely only god could know

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parochialism-- is quite extensive. Key works to consult are Robin Fox's *The Red Lamp of Incest* (1980) and Arthur P. Wolf's various studies of Taiwanese and Southern Chinese marriage customs. Almost all the experts cite Kibbutz studies and the Taiwanese "forced marriages". They also, contra Freud, emphasize the "primitives" rather expert knowledge of gene-transmission. The empirical evidence is overwhelmingly in favour of Westermarck's reasonable thesis which may simply be rendered thus: "No-one will show any sexual interest towards those whom one has known intimately in infancy". This makes good evolutionary sense and good economic sense. Freud makes a hash (or a cocaine?) of both, confusing sex and marriage, and Upper-class 19<sup>th</sup> century Vienna with eternity. Lacan is even worse, of course.

On the inability of Freudian-inspired critics to even read the simplest of tales, see my "The Radicalness of These Differences: Rereading the 'Purloined Letter'", *The University of Mississippi Studies in English*, New Series, Vol. 8, 1990.

Eagleton conveniently overlooks the fact that the immense majority of "liberal" middle-class American Literary Theoreticians are either Marxists or Freudians. We must take it, I suppose, that the US is more radical than dull old England; Uncle Joes Stalin and MacCarthy, Aunties Karl and Sig.-- reign in the Academies over there, such "revolutionary ideas", according to Eagleton, stop at Calais, the Nazi invasion did too (The Channel Isles always excepted).

that there was a system as a whole. Indeed, Eagleton's question is very reminiscent of the Christians': "How can you know there is no God?" Does his "reality of appearances" (or Lenin's) not *ipso facto* call into question the "truth" that our experience is "the effect of a structure"? Incidentally, what is here attributed to Lenin (of course) could equally well be attributed to Thomas Aquinas' "we must begin from what is most familiar"; another case of Eagletonian Marxology, like the "*quis custodiet ipsos custodes*", already noted.<sup>8</sup>

As far as "structures" go, probably the safest thing to say about them is that if they were known to exist they could only be known to exist by creatures or Gods beyond the structure itself who could see the structures "clearly and see them whole", also it would be interesting for anyone of a structuralist bent to succinctly outline for us the structure of something like the French Revolution, of which Nietzsche spoke when inveighing against "the text (which) disappeared beneath the interpretation" (*Beyond* 49). From a more complex, philosophical angle, what would follow if structuralism of any kind did really obtain would include at least the following:

*"...the slightest change in a would-be structuralist system logically entails altering that entire interrelated system.*

*Hence, (1) there can be no meaningful approximation to the putatively totalized system fitting any domain; (2) no inquirer lacking a grasp of the totalized system can understand any putative part of it; and (3) no pair of inquirers lacking a common system can understand one another at all".*

(Texts 176)

As with structuralism --which is both true (Eagleton) and absolutely unlikely (anyone who thinks about it)-- so it goes with Science, with a big "S". Marx always insisted that his socialism was "scientific" so Eagleton is bound to be a little edgy when dealing with the standing of science. He is unsure whether to make it the be-all-and-end-all of human aspirations or just another academic discipline keeping the capitalist machine chugging away. He would hardly dare cross swords with the likes of Nancy Cartwright (*How the Laws of Physics Lie*) or Bas Van Fraassen (*The Scientific Image*), let alone Paul Feyerabend and his *Against Method* --for whom the epistemological and ontological standing of scientific entities, theories and practices is not too hot-- simply because they are scientists and philosophers and know more than he does, so, throughout his text, we find a lot of nifty, side-stepping as he does the intellectual soft-shoe shuffle. One thing he never does is to ask scientists: "why don't they do something else?" So, science is "in" on pages 106, 108 and the whole Freudian section, it is "out" on pages 45, 122 and 136. Science is implicitly "good" when Eagleton begins his Preface with "the young Russian Formalist Viktor Shklovsky" and 1917. He is implicitly saying that *real* Literary Theory began then, that is, when criticism took a pseudo-scientific turn. Eagleton's pretence cannot last for long, however, and Shklovsky is only mentioned again (three times), briefly, throughout the book, just as "Literary Theory" soon lapses, in *Literary Theory*, into "Literary Criticism". Literary Criticism is tricky to deal with because it would seem to be coextensive with the

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<sup>8</sup> It seems redundant to have to remind anyone of Wittgenstein's comments on rule following or on the only rule which does not measure a metre being the metre measure in Paris, but amnesia is rife, apparently. We follow rules but there are no rules to follow, we measure with the metre so the metre cannot measure a metre. The same thing goes for structures. Incidentally, "*quis custodiet ipsos custodes*" finally made it on the tele. Rupert Rhys-Davis used it in the series "The Untouchables" not long ago. One wonders if Marx was the producer of the series.

beginnings of literature itself. Thus, Aristophanes practises it on Euripides and, it has been suggested, the lost Homeric Comic Epic practised it on the "serious" Homeric poems. Without the scientific touch, obviously, Eagleton would have had no book to write. This science "in" / science "out" insecurity is manifested in one of the most curious analogies ever penned. We read: "Thinkers who have argued that the apparent meaning is not necessarily the real one have usually been met with scorn. Copernicus was followed by Marx..."(108). What, one might ask, has Copernicus to do with Marx, and what did Copernicus ever say about "apparent meanings"? Copernicus never even speaks of meanings in any of his scientific works, at least there is no entry for "meanings" given in the Copernican Compendium.. So, the answer to both questions posed above is: "nothing". Linking Marx (and, even worse, Freud) with Copernicus is simply a yoking together of the nothing-to-do-with-one-another to shed the kudos of science over the myth-making of the latter two "thinkers". Further, the conclusion here drawn directly contradicts Lenin's praise of the "apparent". The science question, nevertheless, is but a minor part of the general fuzziness and self-contradiction of Eagleton's outlook as a whole, and that alone concerns us here, since the reader should be alerted as to why the book is so bad and why there was so much "badness" simply germane to most 20<sup>th</sup> Century Literary Theory. It had ontological *angst*.<sup>9</sup>

On Science, it will suffice us here to quote Feyerabend, without endorsing his own proposed antidote, simply to show that science is just another thing some people do:

*... today science prevails not because of its comparative merits, but because the show has been rigged in its favor... the lesson to be learned is that non-scientific ideologies, practices, theories, traditions can become powerful rivals and can reveal major shortcomings of science if only they are given a fair chance to compete. It is the task of the institutions of a free society to give them such a fair chance. The excellence of science, however, can be asserted only after numerous comparisons with alternative points of view. (Feyerabend 102-103)*

The "scientific approach" is what Eagleton attempts to smuggle in via mentioning Shklovsky and by the pretence of separating Literary Theory from Literary Criticism, while his own "scientific method" seems to consist entirely of quite blatantly paraphrasing (one almost says plagiarizing) Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida in his opening peroration, without acknowledgement, while nit-picking at their achievements in the body of his text where these thinkers are specifically treated of. The same tack is taken with Gadamer, whom Eagleton would shallowly equate with T.S. Eliot. Thus, Eagleton will "place" certain terms "under an invisible crossing-out mark, to indicate that these terms will not really do..." (11). Very daring of him. That is, ten years after the event, he clumsily anglicizes Derrida's *sous rature*, and says, in effect, "what a good boy am I". Page 74, beginning with "Literary texts do not..." and ending with "...the author" is pure Barthes, yet, later, Barthes raises Eagleton's lower middle-class wrath with his *jouissance* and actual enjoyment of literature, while the greater part of humanity starve. Still, later, this self-same Oxford Don, Professor Eagleton, somewhat

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<sup>9</sup> For reasons of economy, I take the Unity-of-Science Movement, Carnap, Hempel and the rest of the reductionists to be subsumable under the blanket term "extentionalist"; the attempt to make all forms of knowledge conform to extentional methods of measurement, be they derived from physics, biology, mathematics or what-not. Cultural Realsim denies this is possible and holds that the intentional and intensional are REAL.

belatedly, points out that people start out reading because it is enjoyable and holds that it is the literary institution which dulls their joy. That is, when Barthes enjoys his job -- which is reading and writing about it-- that is a bad thing, an immoral thing -- when the little man likes his book, that is a good thing. Though, typically, even in his condemnation, Eagleton's phrasing is hackneyed. Barthes and Co. "had overlooked the possibility that the erotic *frisson* (was) an adequate solution" to monolithic state set-ups (143). Doesn't Eagleton mean "inadequate" or does the passage simply make no sense? Who knows, the way his prose goes? There is also the bizarre mystery of "Yet is is a vital project nevertheless" (216), thus out-Heideggering Heidegger in the blur of "creeping Teutonic mist". Still, the fact is that when it is the little middle-class man and his book against the establishment, the enjoyment of reading is a good thing and it is only the Academy which destroys his enjoyment. (Heavy shades of the middle-class Puritan versus the Pope, the Chief of Sinners alone with his Bible?) Curious.

Curious too is the fact that Hans-Georg Gadamer --the German hermeneutic phenomenologist, who, in fact, shares Marx's ahistorical lapse in advocating an invariable tradition stemming from the Greeks-- is erroneously cited by Eagleton as placing all his faith in a High German Tradition, whatever that is (73). Anyone who has read Gadamer knows that the transhistorical humane tradition he treats of is the Hellenic, not the Germanic. Gadamer indeed hardly ever even mentions Germans, he speaks of Plato, Aristotle, Aeschylus, even of Paul Célan, but he never really mentions the Germans, outside Goethe, that is. Indeed, one of Gadamer's reasons for pinning his hopes upon the "Great Greek Tradition" is precisely his horror and dread of recent German history. German patriotism --albeit of a mild, cultural kind-- is scrupulously avoided in his work. Unscrupulous Eagleton foists a "High German Tradition" on the unfortunate Gadamer because otherwise Gadamer could be seen as having made the same mistake with regard to the Greeks which, according to Eagleton, Marx had inexplicably made. Scholarship. On the Germans, Eagleton also trots out the tired cliché of how a great deal of explaining was called for by the fact that Nazi Concentration Camp Commandant's were often men who read Goethe or listened to Mozart. Apart from them being welcome to Goethe, from my personal point of view -- one I happen to share with Byron-- this cliché, I believe, first saw the light of dullness in George Steiner's *In Bluebeard's Castle* (1974). The actual allied troops liberating Auschwitz were never asked their opinion on the matter, but it is unlikely that they would expect much else from their own ruling cliques who also read "Alt Kultur". As Bill Bryson, in another context, perceptively pointed out: "Common people did not expect to speak like their masters any more than they expected to live like them" (Bryson 46). This appears to have been the case with Canadian, British and American troops too. All post-Second World War free elections point in that direction; there was a massive movement to the Left, to men in the Socialist Tradition who were brought up on Tom Paine or John Bunyan, the Bible or Dickens, Glenn Miller or Flanagan and Allan, not on Shakespeare or Hayden.

That, however, is only a theory, but no more bizarre a one than that ordinary soldiers from time immemorial would see any great discrepancy between cultured manners and bloodthirsty behaviour. One has only to recall Harry Lime gazing down from the Big Wheel in *The Third Man*. The case of Heidegger --Eagleton's Heidegger-- is similarly abstruse. We read:

*...Heidegger's belief in an "authentic" existence-towards-death superior to the life of the faceless masses, led him in 1933 into explicit support of Hitler. The support was short-lived...(64)*

Another Eagleton fact? In fact, Heidegger's Nazism was very long-lived and very active. He personally incited Hitler to greater university purges and never gave up

Nazism until it was totally certain the Nazis had lost, in fact, as late as 1945. He used his position as Rector of Freiburg to promote his own Röhm-faction favorites. He telegraphed Hitler directly for permission to carry out the ideological "cleansing" of Academia. His essay on Plato's theory of truth was only published through the direct intervention of Mussolini. Victor Fariás has documented all this in his careful study, *Heidegger and Nazism*. Eagleton's manipulation of "facts", like the "in 1933 into" phrasing above, is torpid, to say the least. It is not, however, ingenuous. Like most 20<sup>th</sup> Century Literary Theorists, he bows before the greater aura which serious philosophers shed. Everyone knows Heidegger is a name to conjure with hence he cannot be treated too harshly, Eagleton would never dare to go so far.

Indeed, the general cannibalizing of philosophers is part of what was wrong with Literary Theory in the last century. The "subject" did not understand its own ontology; the study of the "literary", however its own practitioners cared to define it. The point here is a double one. First, like any other human institution, Literary Theory, once established, wished to justify its own existence and prolong its own precarious life. Second, it wanted to be considered of supreme importance. In its heart, it knew it was not. There were the physicists --and those other serious types admired by society at large, paid large salaries by governments and big corporations--which is why Literary Theory began by aping positivism and the Unity of Science crowd from Vienna. As more and more philosophers turned to language as the focus of their investigations (Wittgenstein, J. L. Austin, W. V. Quine, Gadamer, Derrida), so too did the Literary Theorists abrogate to themselves more and more importance, for, after all, were they not the guardians of the art of language? If, to some extent, there could be no world without language, no world which was not texted, was it not only logical that high-level language experts, Literary Theorists, were pretty damned important in the scheme of things? "Maker of worlds", you do not get much more important than that.

Before pulling the strands together as to what was wrong with 20<sup>th</sup> Century Literary Theory in general, and Eagleton, in particular, we shall begin the end of this paper with some passages which may clarify how epistemology and ontology might be better viewed. First, we shall deal with the epistemology and ontology of academic disciplines, then with those of works of art and, finally, with those of the Human Condition itself. However immodest the goal, the brief passages cited will clear the air and show why Eagleton, and with him Literary Theory, could hardly fail to have been so bad in the barbarous 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

Peter Claws in his excellent discussion of the Ontology of the Disciplines shows how any academic discipline from Pure Maths to Domestic Economy consists of a lexicon and a corpus. The lexicon is "the jargon of the trade" and includes recognized practitioners and the dropping of their names. The corpus comprises propositions held by the community of practitioners to be important --not settled or agreed upon-- but important. He devises a thought-experiment to discover empirically who among us are physicists, doctors, literary critics and so on. Somewhat like the fabled Ancient Chinese Civil Service exams. --where one was locked in a room to write down *everything* one knew, for year after year-- there would be two gigantic data bases concocted. One would register vocabulary and what one considered important names, the other would be a list of propositions or bits of knowledge held to be of vital interest. By matching the sets, clusters would form, revealing who was who and what. Wittgensteinian family resemblances would appear, and overlap might obviously be found between, say, "molecular biology" and "nuclear chemistry". Should any cluster contain sufficient members, these will link together, establish journals, conferences, academic chairs, and the rest. An academic discipline will have been born. If it contains sufficient numbers, or sufficiently powerful individuals, it will begin a "colony strike" within the Halls of Academia. Eagleton is quite wrong, then, to hold that "Literary Theory" is a

non-subject. There are journals like *Tel Quel*, *Signs*, *Critical Inquiry*, and such like. They discuss the "writerly" and the "readerly", the forms and importance of intertextuality, narratology, diagesis, and the rest. There are Lecturers, Full, Associate and Assistant Professors who teach Literary Theory. Eagleton's index, doubtless compiled by some hapless undegrad., gives us all the names we need. As Barthes said: "Literary Theory is what gets taught", paradoxically enough, though usual for him, Eagleton at one point concurs.

What he fails to recognize is that a similar process went into the making of his preciously praised medicine (198) and had he read Christopher Hill on its growth as an academic subject in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, he might have discovered that it was itself a violently imposed "non-subject" which established its niche by burning witches, outlawing folk remedies, monopolizing access to curatives, while giving "professions" to useless second, third or fourth sons of the aristocratic and professional classes –the ones not directly inheriting and who were unfit for the Army or the Church. Very humanitarian. Claws' essay is much oversimplified here but is certainly enough to show up Eagleton's little game. Incidentally, Eagleton never "gave it all up" and a long succession of dreary publications followed: *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (1990), *The Illusion of Postmodernism* (1996), *Sweet Violence: The Idea of the Tragic* (2002).<sup>10</sup>

Still, back to 20<sup>th</sup> Century Literary Theory. Eagleton is a clear symptom of its malaise. It wanted to be something else: a substitute religion or a substitute science or a substitute revolutionary political movement. It wanted to be all important. It was overwhelmingly middle-class, and hence at basis of a conservative nature, sometimes overt, as with Eliot, sometimes covert, as with the ahistorical, soft relata structuralists. It helped bolster the status quo and cluttered the languages of the world up with jargon, as all "new" academic disciplines always do. It was virtually always ahistorical and was heavily dependent upon outmoded and discredited modes of thought. It was, in short, an academic discipline and so suffered from Nietzsche's arch-enemy, The Spirit of Gravity. To be sure there were exceptions: William Empson, Mikhail Bakhtin, Roland Barthes, once he had shrugged off the structuralist shroud. In general, however, it was, ontologically speaking, the type of beast that all academic disciplines are, the hidden agenda of which is to reproduce itself while keeping society pretty much as it had found it, though with various rain-forests somewhat more depleted.

Literary Theory as an academic discipline should not be confused with literature. Their ontologies are altogether quite distinct, the latter having more in common with the human condition or the ontology of the human, of the self. What Marx contributed to an understanding of latter was his theory of praxis. Very roughly, the idea that while man makes things, the way in which he makes them makes new kinds of men. Obviously, a sufficiently strongly praxicalized view of human being is completely at odds with Freudianism for the simple reason that a new kind of man or woman will have a new kind of psychic configuration and hence not be subject to his triple transhistorical invariants. For the same reason, structuralism is incompatible with the praxical; no would-be structure could ever remain in place for long since different types of humans –with their different languages, conceptual make-up, gestures, habits, beliefs, and the rest-- are constantly emerging into history to disrupt any presumed prior structure. The form conceptual novelty is likely to take is, by definition, conceptually impossible to foresee.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Judging by the titles alone, we see how closely Eagleton follows American fashion. For instance, all the above were treated of (exhaustively) by Daniel O'Hara in the 1980s.

Nietzsche's contribution to understanding human ontology resided, primarily, in his assaults upon conventional morality by way of insinuating that no seemingly in-place conceptual scheme could exhaust all alternative, possible such conceptual schemes, a theme taken up by post-structuralists such as Derrida and Foucault. The ontology of the human, like that of the work of art --openly stealing from Joseph Margolis, with whom we began-- is to be "a physically embodied, culturally emergent entity", subject to the five following constraints:

1. Reality is cognitively *intransparent*. That is, all discourse about the world is mediated by our conceptual schemes.
2. Reality and human thought about it are *symbiotized*. That is, there is no means of deciding what the "mind" contributes and what the "brute" world contributes to our representing of reality.
3. Thinking has a history, is *historized*. That is, all human thought is a contingent artifact of historical existence, hence there are no invariances of any kind which may be counted on, all are limited to the historically perspectived nature of various and varying historical societies.
4. Our thinking is *performed* and self-modifying. That is, we inherit forms of thought from our immediate forebears or the particular historical society we are "thrown into" at birth and our thinking changes under new external pressures and experiences, thus creating the preformation of succeeding generations.
5. We and art works, including literature, are *socially constructed* and hence have no "natures" but are, rather, histories or careers, all subject to interpretation by other similarly situated cultural entities.

Taken together, 1-5 represent a radical historical ontology of the human self and one which obviates all essentialisms, teleologies, structuralisms, foundationalisms, correspondentisms, in fact, "-isms", in general. It is an ontology which owes its development to what was best in 20<sup>th</sup> century thought: to Wittgenstein's "forms of life"; to Heidegger's investigations regarding *Dasein*; to Quine's exploding of the synthetic/analytic distinction and the dogmas of empiricism; to Derrida's *via negativa*; to Foucault's *epistemes*. It confines to the scrap heap, or the myth pile, of history: Freudianism and old time Marxism, the stuff that Terry Eagleton's *Literary Theory* is made on.

As for literature itself, like all art, it is coterminous and co-extensive with humanity itself and, where there is art, there will always be interpretations of art, humans being, amongst other things, interpretive beasts. And it is real. The urge to read a certain book or see a certain film or listen to Charlie Mingus is almost physiological, your stomach may ache to get the appetite assuaged, the "heart beats rhythm and the soul starts singing the blues", as it were. That is why there can be no end to literature, however defined, and no end to the criticism of it. There can always be an end to human life on the planet through massive self-destruction, or natural catastrophe, and, of course, the species could easily survive without Literary Theory or Literary Theorists, but then again, it could also survive without doctors, scientists of all kinds, politicians or any other specific professionals or specialized groups. Literary Theory will continue so long as there are a sufficient number of humans interested in it and the funds to pay for its rites and rituals. And that's a fact, n'est pas, Monsieur Eagleton?

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<sup>11</sup> The point is Alisdair MacIntyre's, not mine. Its implications, however, spell death for the ideas of Marxist teleology and Freudian psychic fixities, together with the untenability of traditionalism, progressivism or extentionalist reductionism.

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