The contradictions of Terry Eagleton

by Roger Kimball

Chaucer was a class traitor
Shakespeare hated the mob
Donne sold out a bit later
Sidney was a nob

There are only three names
To be plucked from this dismal set
Milton Blake and Shelley
Will smash the ruling class yet.

—Terry Eagleton, “The Ballad of English Literature”

There have always been elements of ironic comedy about the spectacle of Marxist academics fervently proclaiming their revolutionary message while safely ensconced in Western institutions of higher education. As the years have passed and another generation of young radicals has settled into middle age, tenure, and pension calculations, one might have hoped that these freethinkers would have had manners enough to mute their demands for the destruction of the middle class, the bourgeoisie, “the repressive state apparatus of late capitalism,” etc. After all, blue jeans or no blue jeans, what these middle-class beneficiaries of capitalism have unwittingly been clamoring for is nothing less than their own destruction. But no, they continue nattering on about “the contradictions of capitalism,” obviously having missed the vastly more palpable contradiction inherent in their own position as tenured radicals.

The comedy has taken a new turn in the last year or two as history has caved in on the Marxist vision of the world. Though it is still touted by its adherents as the first really “scientific” view of society, we’ve had plenty of time to become inured to the dismal failure of Marxism to predict anything, even its own fatuousness. But the precipitous collapse of Communist regimes the world over would seem to present an unusually large embarrassment for the faithful. Wasn’t it Marxism’s largest boast to
have dispensed—at last, finally—with all the illusions of idealism and to have presented us with an understanding of human life based on the nuts and bolts of historical necessity? A lot of good it does to subscribe to a materialist philosophy if it is consistently so glaringly wrong about the material world.

Yet no one acquainted with the intellectual habits of academic Marxists will be surprised to discover that they are as unfazed by contemporary world events as they always have been by their own tartuffian buffoonery. Though Marxism is rapidly evaporating as a political force, it shows no signs of waning as an intellectual pastime in the academy. Predictably, the combination of academic egotism and Marxist self-righteousness has proved to be a potent talisman for keeping reality at bay. And, indeed, a further index of academic Marxism’s passion for unreality is its recently acquired penchant for the obscurantist jargon of deconstruction, post-structuralism, multiculturalism, neo-Freudian feminism, and sundry other ists and isms. In the face of defeats in the real world, such intellectual gobbledygook has allowed Marxists to maintain their posture of chic radicalism. No longer confining themselves to jeremiads against the middle class and capitalism (though there are still plenty of those), they now often join their feminist, deconstructionist comrades in demanding the subversion of (say) the “white Eurocentric heterosexual phallocracy.”

It would be lovely if we had the luxury of dismissing all this—deconstruction, multiculturalism, and so on, no less than academic Marxism—as bizarre self-canceling phenomena. We might then be tempted to construct a kind of menagerie where some of the more florid intellectual curiosities invented by the human race could be preserved, living cautionary tales for the citizenry at large. A necromancer, a follower of Paracelsus, a Freudian could be recruited to sport with the Lacanian feminist, the disciple of Jacques Derrida, the unreconstructed Marxist. To the objection that this sounds like nothing so much as the English faculty currently in place at any number of premier academic institutions, we can only concede the point. And there, of course, is the rub. For while academic Marxism may be a fertile source of unintended comedy, in its overall influence it is anything but funny. Together with the radical movements with which it has allied itself, it is responsible for transforming the humanities departments of many colleges and universities into the wastelands they are: bastions of intellectual conformity in which a ritual rejection of the social and spiritual achievements of Western civilization is de rigueur.

Among prominent academic Marxists in the humanities today, two names stand out: Fredric Jameson, who teaches literature at Duke University—currently one of the trendiest venues of intellectual anarchy in the American academy—and Terry Eagleton, a prolific British literary critic who teaches at Linacre College, Oxford. Both enjoy a wide and enthusiastic following and—in this country, anyway—great academic repute. Professor Jameson is perhaps the more “theoretical” (that is, deliberately obscure) of the two, Professor Eagleton the more adamant about declaring his working-class sympathies: In a typical gesture, he dedicated his book on the Brontes, Myths of Power
What the working-class movement of West Yorkshire (or anywhere else, for that matter) would have to say about a book that emphasizes the “notion of ‘categorial structures’ as key mediations between literary form, textual ideology and social relations” is amusing to contemplate. In any case, Professor Jameson tends to mingle with the working class only from the vertiginous eyrie provided by the work of such Marxist heroes as Georg Lukacs, Theodor Adorno, Louis Althusser, and Walter Benjamin. Professor Eagleton draws sustenance from the same sources and is capable of writing just as barbarously as the next academic; but he is also capable of writing poems like “The Ballad of English Literature,” which furnishes our epigraph and which—we learn in the preface to Against the Grain, his 1986 collection of essays—is “a fragment” from his “other life” as “an occasional writer and performer of political songs.” I intend to examine Professor Jameson’s contribution to the current intellectual debacle in another essay. Here, I wish to take the occasion of the publication of Terry Eagleton’s new book, The Ideology of the Aesthetic—at 426 pages, two or three times as long as his many other books and clearly meant to be something of a magnum opus—to discuss the evolution and significance of his distinctive brand of Marxist criticism.

Born in 1943, Professor Eagleton was educated at Cambridge University, where he studied with the Marxist critic Raymond Williams and where he taught briefly before going to Wadham College, Oxford, in 1969. If we strip away the accretions of fashionable academic rhetoric—an increasingly prominent feature of his work since the mid-Seventies—we see the origins of Professor Eagleton’s criticism in a compound of Williams’s socialist organicism, F. R. Leavis’s meticulously autocratic practical criticism, and left-wing, liberationist Catholicism. His early work, especially, was written under Williams’s shadow. Shakespeare and Society (1967) is dedicated to Williams, “without whose friendship and influence this book would not have been written.” In its main theme—the relation of the individual and society as it emerges in Shakespeare’s late plays—it rehearses in smaller compass the kind of analysis Williams undertook in Culture and Society (1958). As is the case with Williams, Professor Eagleton apparently cannot write a work on any subject without an exhibition of his political bona fides. At the end of this book on Shakespeare, we are confronted with the suggestion that “spontaneous living is crippled by industrial capitalism,” just as Williams concludes Culture and Society with a plea for the achievement of a socialist-based “common culture” because “we shall not survive without it.”

Professor Eagleton subsequently learned that organic models of society are politically suspect and went out of his way to distance himself—respectfully, it must be said—from Williams. In Criticism and Ideology: A Study in Marxist Literary Theory (1976), he criticizes Williams for his “political gradualism” and “populism,” even his “humanism” and “idealism,” while also praising his work as “one of the most significant sources from which a materialist aesthetics might be derived.” What is
remarkable, though, is not Professor Eagleton’s criticism of his mentor but how much the very things he criticizes continue, despite protestations to the contrary, to inform his own work.

The same cannot be said for the influence of Leavis or of Catholicism. Indeed, religion in general persists in Professor Eagleton’s work mostly in the form of certain rhetorical tics and occasional recourse to millenarian imagery. Sample: “Lenin was in exile, but would come again on clouds of glory with the future bulging in his pockets to judge the quick and the dead.” By the mid-Seventies Professor Eagleton is arguing from the “‘taken-for-granted’ post-atheism of Marx.” (Whether such a position differs significantly from the left-wing, activist Catholicism of his youth is a question we must leave to one side.)

The sobering influence of Leavis’s practical criticism had approximately the same fate in Professor Eagleton’s criticism as did religion: it is gradually forgotten as he moves away from being a mere literary critic to assume the fashionable mantle of Marxist “critical theorist.” The main difference is that for the literary critic, literature—actual, specific works of literature—remains the chief focus of his endeavors, whereas for the critical theorist literature takes a back seat to quasi-philosophical speculations about epistemology, sex, society, politics: anything but literature. Individual literary works come into the picture, in so far as they do come into the picture, only as illustrations of the theory being advanced. In *Shakespeare and Society*, Professor Eagleton insists that his discussion of the relation between the individual and society “needs to be above all a work of practical criticism, where the general assertion can be sustained by actual reference.” By 1976, he is complaining that “bourgeois criticism,” content with its role as “handmaiden” to literature, does not stand up to “the inexhaustible godhead of the text itself.” And by the time he comes to write *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, he explicitly rejects the idea that “theory” should refer to particular works and boasts straightway that his study will not include “any examination of actual works of art.”

At the center of Marxist thought is a vision of the world determined by economic imperatives: the economic “base” of society determines the cultural “superstructure” of politics, art, religion, and so on. Like most academic Marxists, Professor Eagleton knows that, put baldly, the doctrine of economic determinism is patently absurd. So he employs various gambits to soften or conceal the absurdity, without ever really denying the basic model of economic determinism. This is not to say that he is completely free of “vulgar Marxist” rhetoric; indeed, he sometimes sounds like nothing so much as a soapbox Marxist, railing (for example) against “a petty bourgeois liberal humanism, academically dispossessed and subordinated yet in intellectual terms increasingly hegemonic, [which] occupied the bastions of reactionary criticism from within as a dissentient bloc.”

Yet Professor Eagleton also takes great pains to distance himself from “vulgar Marxism”—the phrase occurs often in his works, always in his beloved scare quotes. The vulgar Marxist is a frank economic determinist and holds that the “superstructure” is a more or less direct reflection of economic processes. The sophisticated Marxist, well schooled in the writings of the Frankfurt School Marxists,
allows that the superstructure is “relatively autonomous”—except when he wants to claim economic
determination for some phenomenon of his own choosing. The “vulgar Marxist” is frankly Utopian
and looks forward to the revolution and the establishment of a workers’ paradise; a sophisticated
Marxist like Professor Eagleton dandifies his utopianism with lots of high-flown rhetoric. “Once
emancipated from material scarcity, liberated from labour,” he writes in a typically starry-eyed
passage, “[men] will live in the play of the mutual significations, move in the ceaseless ‘excess’ of
freedom.” Professor Eagleton’s primary weapons against the charge of vulgar Marxism are words
like “hegemony,” “ideology,” and “aesthetic,” all of which in his hands have the wonderful property
of meaning any of about six different and conflicting things. He is especially slippery in his use of
the term ideology, an old Marxist standby that was given new life by the French Marxist Louis Althusser.
When he defines “ideology,” he is usually careful to cast his definition in fairly neutral terms. In
Literary Theory: An Introduction (1983), for example, he writes that “by ‘ideology’ I mean, roughly,
what the ways in which what we say and believe connects with the power-structure and power-
relations of the society we live in.” In at least one place, he even tells us that “there is no reason to
suppose . . . that ‘ideology’ need always be a pejorative term.” But of course he uses it as a pejorative
term, as this somewhat franker description of the function of ideology hints at: “the function of
ideology ... is to legitimate the power of the ruling class in society.”

To appreciate the corrosive nature of Professor Eagleton’s use of the notion of ideology, consider his
explanation of how a Marxist might use the term to analyze The Waste Land. Predictably, the poem
appears as a reflection of a “crisis” of bourgeois imperialism (everything bourgeois is always in crisis
for the Marxist), but “as a poem, it does not of course know itself as a product of a particular
ideological crisis, for if it did it would cease to exist. ... In this sense The Waste Land is ideological: it
shows a man making sense of his experience in ways that prohibit a true understanding of his society,
ways that are consequently false.” How, one might ask, does Professor Eagleton know they are false?
What puts him in a position superior to poor T. S. Eliot, blinded as he was by ideology? Why, the
magic key, of course: Marxist doctrine. Ideology may simply be “the ideas, values and feelings by
which men experience their societies at various times,” but the Marxist is in the uniquely happy
position of being exempt from the blinders of ideology. As Professor Eagleton explains, “historical
materialism”—that is, Marxism—“stands or falls by the claim that it is not only not an ideology, but
that it contains a scientific theory of the genesis, structure and decline of ideologies.”

Professor Eagleton expatiates further on the notion of ideology in Literary Theory: An Introduction. He
spends his introductory chapter attempting to convince readers that the idea of literature is so
indeterminate that, when you come right down to it, “literature” (the scare quotes are his) doesn’t
exist. What we have are the products of various “social ideologies.” Perhaps you thought that George
Eliot was the author of Middlemarch. No: according to Professor Eagleton,
The phrase “George Eliot” signifies nothing more than the insertion of certain specific ideological determinations—Evangelical Christianity, rural organicism, incipient feminism, petty-bourgeois moralism—into a hegemonic ideological formation which is partly supported, partly embarrassed by their presence.

Similarly, he tells us that Henry James, like Joseph Conrad, “is ... no more than a particular name for . . . an aspect of the crisis of nineteenth-century realism.” The idea is to downgrade the notion of individual genius, as if George Eliot’s personal contribution to the writing of *Middlemarch* were somehow accidental, the more important thing being the “specific ideological determinations” she embodied. The main point of all this is that nothing is what it seems; or, as Professor Eagleton puts it in *Criticism and Ideology*, “there is no 'immanent' value”: everything in the realm of culture is determined by something outside culture—namely (catch that whiff of vulgarity?) the oppressive economic relations of capitalism.

In *Literary Theory*, Professor Eagleton argues that the “point” of studying literature is not itself, in the end, a literary one. Now there is a sense in which “bourgeois criticism,” as he likes to call it, would agree. And in this context it is worth noting that when we insist on the basic *autonomy* of art, we do not suggest that art exists in a vacuum, apart from any human values or concerns; we mean, rather, that art should not be pursued as a species of propaganda but as realm of experience that possesses its own criteria of validity. Finally, “in the end,” the “point” of studying literature is “outside” literature, just as the point of reading—and understanding what is read—is outside the act of reading. This is what we mean when, for example, we say that studying literature is enriching, that it broadens our horizons, that it deepens our understanding.

Professor Eagleton scoffs at the “liberal humanist” idea that literature “makes you a better person” because such formulations are too vague, too idealistic, too “abstract” (this latter being a favorite Marxist criticism). What he wants is a program. But there are times when vagueness and abstractness are virtues. When Rilke ends his famous sonnet on the archaic bust of Apollo with the admonition *Du musst dein Leben andern* —“You must change your life”—we are in fact as grateful for its vagueness as we are for its enspiriting challenge. We know perfectly well what the demand to change one’s life means. Yet for Professor Eagleton, as for all professing Marxists, the experience of art is incomplete when it is “only” about beauty or “only” involves a moment of self-recognition. They want art to issue specific instructions: contemplating that antique fragment of sculpture we should realize that its message is “You must overthrow the ruling class” or at least “You must realize that the social order that gave birth to this sculpture was oppressive.”

In the end, Professor Eagleton is in the uncomfortable position of being a literary critic who doesn’t care much for literature except in so far as it is an instrument for social change. He begins *Marxism and Literary Criticism* (1976)—a brief, hagiographic primer written to accompany the far more abstruse
speculations contained in *Criticism and Ideology*—with the requisite paean to Marx’s general brilliance and profound grasp of culture: Marx wrote poetry, “his acquaintance with literature . . . was staggering in scope,” and so on. It all might have come from the Soviet Encyclopedia *circa* 1930. But Professor Eagleton goes on immediately to note that one shouldn’t expect a full-fledged theory of art from Marxism because, after all, “Marx and Engels had rather more important tasks on their hands than the formulation of a complete aesthetic theory.”

In many respects, The Ideology of the Aesthetic is a summary and update of Professor Eagleton’s views on the relation between aesthetic experience and ideology. (In this sense, it might just as well have been titled The Aesthetics of Ideology.) But it is also something of an historical overview of philosophical thinking about aesthetics from the eighteenth century down to the present. Despite Professor Eagleton’s disclaimer that he was not attempting to provide a history of aesthetics, that is largely what the book amounts to, and we can be sure that it will be adopted as such by many colleges and universities. It gives special emphasis to Marxist critics like Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno, and it includes provocative chapter titles like “Schiller and Hegemony” and “The Marxist Sublime”; but otherwise it provides a fairly predictable trip through the literature. Beginning with the work of Alexander Baumgarten—who coined the term “aesthetic” in 1750—Professor Eagleton takes fourteen chapters to rehearse the aesthetic theories of Burke, Shaftsbury, Kant, Schiller, Hegel, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and others. Mostly, the names are as familiar as the opinions Professor Eagleton expresses. Indeed, by the time one comes to “From the Polis to Postmodernism,” the longest and most original chapter, one has the distinct impression of having just sat through Professor Eagleton’s latest batch of homework assignments to himself.

As usual, the sheer bulk of the assignments is formidable. Professor Eagleton has read a great deal and has clearly devoted much effort to the book. Yet considered as an introduction to aesthetic theory, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* is a dismal failure. For one thing, notwithstanding his prodigious reading, Professor Eagleton is often not up to the task of explaining the philosophy he discusses—largely, one suspects, because of his ideological commitments. For example, Baumgarten’s aesthetic theory, growing out of the work of philosophers like Leibniz and Christian Wolff, was essentially an effort to supplement the rationalism of Cartesian thought by providing a fuller account of the “sensuous perfection” that was embodied in art. As logic was to the faculty of reason, so aesthetics was to the faculty of taste. But for Professor Eagleton, “the call for an aesthetics in eighteenth-century Germany is among other things a response to the problem of political absolutism.” His discussion of Baumgarten’s aesthetics transforms a philosophical innovation into a dramatic example of class warfare with reason cast as the tyrant and aesthetics as a kind of proletarian lackey. “Reason,” he writes, “must find some way of penetrating the world of perception, but in doing so must not put at risk its own absolute power”—as if reason were a feudal lord oppressing the “serfs” of sensation.
Then, too, in his eagerness to uphold the universality of class warfare, Professor Eagleton often drastically misreads the philosophers he discusses. About Schopenhauer’s extreme pessimism, for example, he writes that it is “a fact that throughout class history the fate of the great majority of men and women has been one of suffering and fruitless toil. . . . The dominant tale of history to date has indeed been one of carnage, misery and woe.” But this is totally to misunderstand Schopenhauer, for whom suffering and woe were essential, irremediable aspects of existence, not the products of “class history.” Sometimes, indeed, Professor Eagleton’s explanations take on a positively surreal quality, especially when he ventures into modish literary theorizing. Consider this piece of gibberish: “Kant’s Oedipal protectiveness towards the maternal body places the real reverently out of bounds, prohibiting that impious coupling of subject and object for which Hegel’s dialectical programme will clamour.”

To all this Professor Eagleton might reply that, first, he was not attempting to present a standard history of aesthetics and, second, that his real interest is in the way the aesthetic embodies the contradictions of the middle class under capitalism. This brings us to one of Professor Eagleton’s central claims in *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, namely, the whole idea of the aesthetic is based on or embodies a “contradiction.” One must always be suspicious when a Marxist uses the term “contradiction,” because it usually means that some aspect of reality is not conforming to his vision of things. Thus the contradictions of capitalism: they are contradictions only so long as you measure capitalism by a Marxist model of historical necessity. Minus that, capitalism is merely a complex economic process that, like everything else in the real world, refuses to accommodate itself to the predictions of philosophers.

Professor Eagleton holds that the aesthetic is “contradictory” because aesthetic experience gestures toward a freedom usually denied to man while at the same time it embodies the ideological imperatives of the ruling class. Hence the aesthetic is both “the ideal paradigm of material production” and “the very paradigm of the ideological” — indeed, he tells us that “aesthetic judgement is every bit as coercive as the most barbarous law” though “this is not the way it feels.” Now, at least since the time of the Greeks, art has been held up as a source of great spiritual refreshment, so it is no surprise that Marxists, too, should single it out as a model for “unalienated labor.” But why should we grant that the aesthetic is fundamentally ideological? If nothing in our experience suggests that it is—and nothing does—why should we cede art and aesthetic experience to Marxist theory?

The Ideology of the Aesthetic is a deeply confused work that tells us almost nothing about art or aesthetic experience. It is more revealing on the subject of ideology, but mostly an example of ideology in action, not as an explanation or analysis of the phenomenon. Yet it must be admitted that there is an unusually perceptive critic lurking in the interstices of this book. Professor Eagleton is not very good as an expositor of philosophy, and his ruling passions—to be politically correct and to be
intellectually fashionable—regularly lead him into any number of silly statements. But his last chapter, especially, shows him to be capable of trenchant and perceptive criticism. True, this chapter contains the usual quota of Marxist hooey. Yet it also contains a some perceptive criticism of a subject that is clearly dear to Professor Eagleton’s heart: Marxist criticism. For one thing, Professor Eagleton makes what he rightly calls the “vital distinction” between liberal capitalistic society and totalitarian regimes: This in itself is a welcome change from the typical academic Marxist tactic of pretending that the United States is a recapitulation of Hitler’s Reich. But even more to the point, he even ventures to criticize several chic left-wing theories and their proponents. Thus he warns his fellow academics against the deconstructionist attack on the notion of truth, noting that it is not the case that “ambiguity, indeterminability, undecidability are always subversive strikes against an arrogantly monological certitude-” You might think this could be taken for granted; but in the prevailing climate in the academy, to challenge the triumph of undecidability and ambiguity is to risk the charge of heresy.

Professor Eagleton also dares to characterize thinkers like Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida as “libertarian pessimists,” and to suggest that Foucault underestimated the Enlightenment’s “vital civilising achievements.” He makes similar observations about other left-wing academic saints, from Jurgen Habermas to the exalted Fredric Jameson. Perhaps it is this side of Professor Eagleton that the historian Maurice Cowling had in mind when he spoke of his “intellectual brutality.” In any event, though it is rarely on view in his work, such critical independence is to be encouraged. The real treat, of course, would be to have this Terry Eagleton give us an analysis of the Terry Eagleton who writes “Milton Blake and Shelley/ Will smash the ruling class yet.”

1. *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, by Terry Eagleton; Basil Blackwell, 426 pages, $49.95; $17.95 paper.

2. This is from Professor Eagleton’s novel *Saints and Scholars* (1987), a tediously didactic tale set in 1916. The plot centers on the arrest and execution of James Connolly, a leader of the Irish insurgency. That true-life story provides the political core of the book. The academic embroidery is supplied by Bertrand Russell, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and Nikolai Bakhtin, a friend of Wittgenstein’s and elder brother of the currently fashionable literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin. All three are characters in the book. Professor Eagleton reproduces various well-known anecdotes about Russell and Wittgenstein and transposes Wittgenstein and Bakhtin out to the west coast of Ireland so that they can encounter Connolly. Despite its bludgeoning political message—the English are pigs, the Irish noble freedom fighters—the bookis terribly ”literary,” including even a brief appearance by Leopold Bloom from Joyce’s Ulysses.
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