

Figures of dissent

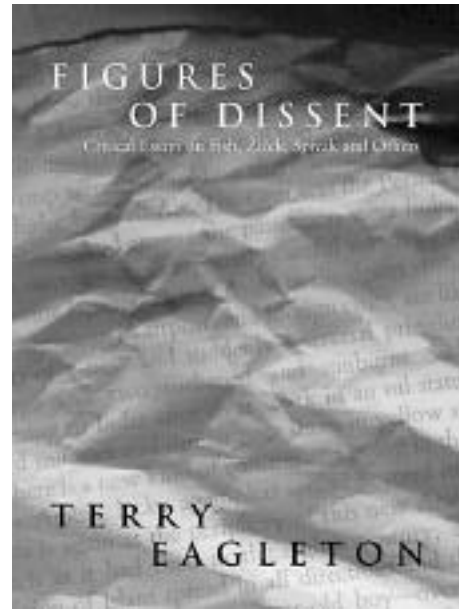
Liam O'Ruairc

Terry Eagleton—"that Marxist goof from Linacre college" as Northrop Frye once called him (102)—is one of today's most important cultural critics. In his latest book, *Figures of Dissent*, some 40 essays based on book reviews written over the last 15 years have been collected. Those essays are 3 to 12 pages in length, and deal with topics ranging from postcolonial theory, the nature of Gothic or utopia to David Beckham and forgery. What gives the collection some form of unity is that the majority of books reviewed have something to do with some of Eagleton's known interests: literary criticism, cultural theory, Ireland, Marxism, Wittgenstein... The essay, as Eagleton writes in a review of a book by Stuart Hall, is "that most supple, tactical of literary forms"; and like that author, "he fashions it with a rare blend of metaphorical flourish and polemical punch, pitching his tone somewhere between heavy-duty theory and zesty journalism, at once quick-footed and high-minded, showman and specialist." (210) Eagleton's tone is combative, provocative and imaginative. Trenchancy comes naturally to him, but he also makes a conscious effort not to be spiteful or unfair. His prose style is humorous, and at the same time, his writing retains a certain opacity. The reviews collected in this book are of uneven interest. His essays on Gayatri Spivak or Slavoj Zizek are likely to have far more impact than those on IA Richards or gallows speeches in eighteenth-century Ireland. However, even his minor pieces are colourful. He notes for example that David Beckham's prose "is as excruciating as one imagines VS Naipaul's shots at a goal would be. Reading this aggressively styleless book is a bit like munching your way dutifully through yard upon yard of muslin." (266). But there are also limits to Eagleton's colourful style. Take for example his critique of deconstruction's ethical turn: "Ethics for the later Derrida, is a matter of absolute decisions, which must be made outside all given norms and forms of knowledge, decisions which are utterly vital, yet which completely evade conceptualisation. One can only hope that he is not on the jury when one's case comes up in court." (247) On the basis of that example, some could object that Eagleton's comical turn of phrase is a substitute for more rigorous argumentation.

The most interesting essays in the collection are those dealing with the small number of innovative theoretical currents that have appeared over the last two decades. "It has been apparent for some time that literary theory is in something of a cul de sac ... The path breaking epoch of Greimas and the early Kristeva, the Althusserians and avant-garde film theorists now lies a couple of decades behind us. Few truly innovative theoretical moves have been made since ... It is as though the theory is all in place, and all that remains to be done is run yet more texts through it." (135) But there are exceptions. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, one of the leading theorists of postcolonialism, "is among the most coruscatingly intelligent of all contemporary theorists, whose insights can be idiosyncratic, but rarely less than original." (161) However, postcolonialism has received so much criticism "that to use the word unreservedly of oneself would be rather like calling oneself Fatso, or confessing to a furtive interest in coprophilia." (158) Eagleton is not very enthusiastic about the current postcolonial hype. He finds Spivakian metaphorical muddles pretentiously opaque. "It might just be, of course, that the point of a wretched sentence like 'the in choate infans ab-original para-subject cannot be theorised as functionally completely frozen in a world where

teleology is schematised into geo-graphy' is to subvert the bogus transparency of Western Reason. Or it might be that discussing public matters in this hermetically private idiom is more a symptom of that Reason than a solution to it." (159) Also, for Eagleton, the theoretical radicality of postcolonialism fails to translate itself into a radical political praxis. "Orwell's politics are much more far-reaching than his conventionally-minded prose would suggest. With much postcolonial writing, the situation is just the reverse. Its flamboyant theoretical avant-gardism conceals a rather modest political agenda." (164) But it would be wrong to think, on the basis of his critique of the hermetic and turgid sentences of postcolonial theorists, that Eagleton believes that the theory has no valid insights to offer; Eagleton writes on Irish issues from a postcolonial perspective. The book contains essays on a number of Irish writers (for instance, Wilde, Yeats and Heaney). Eagleton's fascination with Ireland perhaps partly comes from the fact that because the Irish "were condemned to express themselves in a language not of their own, they could reinvent it with a brio and boldness less marked in the metropolitan nation." (48) On the basis of that idea, Eagleton demonstrates the originality of Seamus Heaney's translation of Beowulf. Eagleton's postcolonial criticism does not suffer from a modest political agenda as can be seen from his excellent review of the leading revisionist historian of Ireland, Roy Foster. Eagleton shows how the so-called 'great demythologiser' of Irish history remains trapped in a few myths of his own. Foster blames hostility to the British state on some deluded demonology of the Republican version of Irish history. Eagleton comments that "there must be a fair few Satanists with scars from plastic bullets." (232) He is entirely correct to note that "Foster's constant nationalist knocking, far from representing some daring dissidence, is now the purest platitude in these islands. In fact it would be hard these days to get an academic job in Irish history without a certificate of proficiency in the pursuit." (233) But what Eagleton fails to take into account, is that in spite of its hermeticism, postcolonial theory has proved to be much closer to the spirit of the Republican Socialism of James Connolly and more radical on Ireland than most of the intellectual British Marxist left (like Eric Hobsbawm or Tom Nairn and the New Left Review) who adopted a position reminiscent of the old "socialist colonial policy".

For Eagleton, Slavoj Zizek is "the most formidably brilliant exponent of psychoanalysis, indeed of cultural theory in general, to have emerged in Europe for some decades." (200) Unlike the turgid sentences of postcolonial theorists, "his writing is splendidly crisp and lucid, even if his books can be fearsomely difficult. ... His style is deep and light simultaneously, shot through with an intense political seriousness, but never at all portentous." (203) What Eagleton presumably likes about Zizek is that he is a lot more practical and political than most contemporary theorists. Zizek shows how we are haunted by the Lacanian real by using examples from popular culture, switching from Hegel to Hitchcock. Eagleton's criticism is that Zizek "never really takes time off from his explorations to reflect on just what a hideous view of human life he is delivering us, or on how this is compatible with the political dissent which he clearly still embraces." Just as human existence for Lacan is the fantasy by which we plug the terrifying void of the Real, "so Zizek's chirpy wit and anecdotal relish serve in part to mask the obscene vision of humanity he offers."



(204-205) Eagleton also deals with the studies, inspired by the work of Foucault and Deleuze, on sexuality and the body. Eagleton predicts that, "there will soon be more bodies in contemporary criticism than on the fields of Waterloo". "Somatic criticism" as Eagleton calls this new field of cultural studies, makes it difficult to distinguish soft porn from literary theory sections in bookshops; "many an eager masturbator must have borne away some sexy-looking tome only to find himself reading up on the floating signifier." (129) But for the new somatics, not any old body will do. "If the libidinal body is in, the labouring body is out. There are mutilated bodies galore, but few malnourished ones, belonging as they do to bits of the globe beyond the purview of Yale." (131) Eagleton engages in a brilliant discussion of the relation between body and mind. Eagleton's Roman Catholic background enables him to have good insights and to write well on topics such as the body and soul, confession and resurrection. He corrects quite a few mistaken ideas about what Christianity has to say about the body. Eagleton constantly displays a sharp political edge in those essays. The central problem for him is not so much the flat-footed style of those texts written by the cultural left, but that cultural theory today is limited by the social and political context in which it is inserted. "Today's left, bereft of the political opportunities of a Lenin or a Lukács, is accustomed to practice limping behind theory, or even being replaced by it." (90) The divorce between theory and practice has pathological consequences. "Radical theory tends to grow unpleasantly narcissistic when deprived of a political outlet. As the semioticians might put it, the theory then comes to stand in metaphorically for what it signifies." (160) These are no longer the days "where 'Marxist' and 'cultural theorist' are as synonymous as Ivana Trump and liposuction." (209) Today "socialism is as alien a territory as Alpha Centauri." (165) But one certainly cannot accuse Eagleton of capitulating in those essays to the current zeitgeist of hermetic sentences and political shyness.

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