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TERRY EAGLETON AND THE DEMYSTIFICATION OF LITERARY THEORY

Terry Eagleton's most recent book, *Literary Theory. An Introduction* *, is a clear, concise but all-encompassing survey of literary theory and criticism of the twentieth-century which, in my opinion, warrants a fairly detailed presentation. Eagleton is currently a Fellow and Tutor in English at Wadham College (Oxford University). He is the author of several books (noteworthy studies on Walter Benjamin, on Samuel Richardson, as well as on literary criticism, such as *Criticism and Ideology)* and of numerous scholarly articles.

Addressing itself primarily to the student of literature "with little or no previous knowledge of the topic", *Literary Theory* accomplishes pedagogically, in the best sense of the term, what its title announces, without much of the demagoguery usually encountered in introductory texts. One overall example of Eagleton's pedagogic insight is the first chapter, "The Rise of English", a critical survey of English literature as an academic discipline in Great Britain. Besides conveying interesting and valuable information about the subject to non British-trained students, this chapter in fact calls for these readers to do the same with respect to the formation and historical development of the teachings of their own national literatures. A too often neglected venture into the history of "literary institutions" which would prove to be an eye-opening exercice to a good many students, scholars and teachers alike. The book deploys a kind of history of modern literary theory and yet it is much more than a mere history of the subject or, rather, it is a "history" in the real sense. That is, a methodical unravelling of what modern literary theory is and is about; when, where and in what contexts its various and diverse componants emerge, how and why they develop, and what their functions are. In one word: a demystification

* Terry Eagleton, LITERARY THEORY. AN INTRODUCTION, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1983, VIII + 244 pp.

of the concept of theory itself with respect to the practice of literature. There is also a carefully selected bibliography on each of the main topics discussed, and Eagleton notes that it is designed to be a follow-up reading list, its headings listed not alphabetically but in an order in which all or any of the various fields of literary theory dealt with in his book might best be tackled by a beginner.

Technically speaking, Eagleton first describes and expounds on the dominant traits of each of the major theoretical issues associated with literature during the last sixty years or so. He then proceedis to analyze what these issues actually mean critically and methodologically in terms of the study of literature. In other words, the student is never left completely alone to grabble the information with which he or she has just come into contact. Intelligently negociating the pitfalls of theoretical bombardment which mind-gobble the neophyte, Eagleton is also careful not to vulgarize the subject of literary theory but rather sets out to "popularize" it (p. vii). The language in which he expresses himself is simple yet on the whole precise, terminology is clearly explained without unnecessary stylish frills, and examples are to the point and not devoid of humor. The discussions on particular theoretical problems are always follwoed through with examples which circumscribe socio-historically the practical and ideological implications of applying this or that theory to the literary text. Significantly, the various interrelationships between different theoretical propositions, and their interactions, are explicity dealt with. Literary theory itself is not treated as an abstract, isolatable concept but is shown to be a dynamic, constitutively essential aspect not only of the production of literature as such but of the cultural process in general. "There is no such thing as a purely 'literary' response", Eagleton streses:

> "all such responses, not least those to literary f o r m, to the aspects of a work which are sometimes jealously reserved to the 'aesthetics', are deeply imbricated with the kind of social and historical individuals we are" (p. 89).

For the purpose of the critical description, the book can be divided into four sections, as follows:

I. The "Introduction: What is Literature?" together with the first chapter, "The Rise of English";

II. Chapter 2, 3 and 4, namely: "Phenomenology, Hermeneutics, Reception Theory", "Structuralism and Semiotics", "Post-Structuralism";

III. Chapter 5, "Psychoanalysis";

IV. The concluding chapter, "Political Criticism".

The first two sections are discussed specifically from an angle which suggests "a relationship between developments in modern literary theory and the political and ideological turmoil of the twentieth century". Chap-

ter 5 attempts to deal with the impact of Freudian and neo-Freudian theories on literary theory and criticism from the view point that historical turmoil "is also experienced by those caught up in it in the most intimately personal ways. It is a crisis of human relationships", adds Eagleton, "and of human personality, as well as social convulsion" (p. 151). The final chapter posits the essential question "What it the p o i n t of literary theory?"; an interesting and stimulating open-ended conclusion which circumscribes the sociality of the practice of literary criticism.

Section I first leads the reader into the problems of the various attempts at defining literature as an artefact, up to the modalities of Russian Formalism. "Essentially the application of linguistics to the study of literature," the principal Formalist notions and concepts are reviewed. The 'estranging' or 'defamiliarization' effect, the differences between poetic language which makes 'strange' the ordinary, 'automatized' everyday language, 'literariness' as a function of the differential relations between various discourses, the notion of literature as a system with its specific laws, structures and devices, and so on, are all explained. Without neglecting to underscore the importance of the Formalists, their breaking away from the Symbolist doctrines and their scientific shifting of the critical attention to the materiality of the literary text itself, Eagleton nonetheless criticizes the Formalist tendency to bracket-off literature as a fixist system, linking this with the ideology of Anglo-Saxon New Criticism which prevailed from the 1930s to the 1950s in England and, particularly, in America. The problems of 'close--reading', the opaque view of the poem as a self- enclosed object, the key notions of 'coherence' and 'integration', the 'disentanglegment' of poetry from any social or historical context, are all explicitly dealt with in the first chapter.

The second section opens up with a discription of Husserl's moving away from empiricism, pssychologism and positivism of the natural sciences of the turn of the century, and of the impact of his reductive 'transcendental phenomenology' on the Geneva School of literary criticism as well as on hermeneutics in general. Eagleton then goes on to explain Heidegger's ahistorical so-called 'hermeneutical phenomenology' and the notion of *Dasein*. At this point, he roughly periodizes the history of modern literary theory in three stages: the Romantic preoccupation with the author, the New Critical exclusive concern with the text, and the increasing attention given to the reader's role in literature, such as it is witnessed by the recent hermeneutical developments of "reception theory" or *Rezepzions Ästetik* in West Germany. Wolfgang Iser and the Constance School are discussed, as well as the underlying *Gestalt* psychology in Roman Ingarden's work. The chapter ends on the introduction of the notion of codes and Roland Barthes' *Plaisir du texte*, in

contrast to Jean-Paul Sartre's *Ou' est-ce que la littérature?* and the American brand of closeted hermeneutical approaches to literature, such as the works of Hirsch Jr. and Stanley Fish. The reader will notice, however, the absence of any discussion on Lukács, or on the Frankfurt School (Lukács and Benjamin are only briefly talked about in other chapters. Wilhelm Reich and Herbert Marcuse are just brushed upon at the end of the chapter on "Psychoanalysis", while there is simply no mention of either Adorno or Habermas).

An important part of the book is the chapter on Structuralism and Semiotics. The Canadian critic Northrop Frye's " 'totalization' of all literary genres" *(Anatomy of Criticism,* 1957) serves as an introduction. Frye insists on the 'autonomous verbal structure' of literature, on the typically structuralist view that its system is self-sufficient, auto-regulating, both structured and structuring: "Literary works are made of other literary works [for Frye], not out of any material external to the literary system itself" (p. 92). Structuralism itself is discussed with a fair amount of details, and criticized in that it is an analytical, not evaluative method which is simply indifferent to the cultural value of its object, and which moreover 'displaces' the text into a different kind of object where the 'content' (of narrative) becomes its own structure (p. 96). Eagleton takes pain to explain the fundamentals of Saussurian linguistics and makes a point about Formalism not being exactly Structuralism as such but that it views texts 'structurally'. Jakobson's six poetic functions are reviewed, as well as the Prague School of linguistics which, for Eagleton, "represents a kind of transition from Formalism to modern structuralism" (p. 97). Semiotics are introduced in terms of C.S. Pierce's work, of Yuri Lotman and the so-called school of Tartu. A brief mention of the major exponents of the "French" school of Structuralism follows (Michel Foucault is essentially talked about in the last chapter). There is also a discussion on narratology, including Lévi-Strauss, W. Propp, Greimas' theory of six a c t a n t s, and Gérard Genette's important distinction between 'narration' and 'narrative'. Again, there are some notable omissions: For example, neither Umberto Eco nor Saussure's current successor in the Chair of Linguistics at the University of Geneva, Luis Prieto is mentioned anywhere. However, the passage about the gains and the failures of Structuralism deserves to be noted (pp. 106—116): Structuralism does represent a "remorseless demystification of literature", making the literary work, like any other product of language, "a c o n s t r u c t, whose mechanisms could be classified and analyzed like the objects of any other science". Perhaps even more important, it does question literature's claim to be a unique form of discourse, whose meaning is nat some "natural" phenomenon, "neither a private experience nor a divinely ordained occurence" but "the product of certain shared systems of significations". Also insight-

fully explained is: if Structuralism "contained seeds of a social and historical theory of meaning. [...] they were not, on the whole, able to sprout." It could dissect the product itself (literature as a social practice and as a form of production), but "it refused to enquire into the material conditions of its making", just like Saussurian linguistics which "strips language of its sociality at the point where it matters most: at the point of linguistic production, the actual speaking, writing, listening and reading of concrete social individuals."

Eagleton then introduces Emile Benveniste's move from 'language' to 'discourse' to mark the breaking away from Structuralism in France, while Mikhail Bakhtin (the linguist [Voloshinov] and the anti-Formalist [Medvedev]) is given the credit for building the foundations of "a materialist theory of consciousness itself." That is, Bakhtin's "shift from the abstract [Saussurian] system of l a n g u e to the concrete utterance of individuals in particular social contexts" (p. 117). Perhaps useful here, would have been a follow-through presentation of Bakhtin the medievalist and the theoretician of the novel (especially since narratology has already been discussed); it would have rendered a more comprehensive view of the fundamentally dynamic and de-structuralizing orientation Bakhtin had introduced in the field of literary, and cultural, studies. Among other consequences of Structuralism pointed out by Eagleton, the English philosopher J.L. Austin and the problems of speech act theory, and Noam Chomsky's notion of linguistic 'competence', are also briefly discussed. But he does not mention the distinction between 'enunciation' and 'discourse', first introduced by the historian and linguist Régine Robin (*Histoire et linguistique*, 1973). Still, particularly noteworthy about this chapter, is Eagleton's own emancipation from structuralist segregative contingencies which had straight-jacketed his earlier *Criticism and Ideology* which, nonetheless, was an important and necessary book at the time of its publication.

Weaker and rather fuzzy is the chapter on Post-Structuralism. A fairly long, and sometimes awkward introduction is devoted to the problems of logocentrism, to traditional Western thought and philosophy, and how this affected language, leading up to the notion of 'transcendental signifier', to Jacques Derrida's metaphysics and his concept of Deconstruction. Eagleton's use of several works by Roland Barthes to illustrate the move from the "era of structuralism" to the "reign of post-structuralism" somewhat defeats the purpose, except in terms of the critical shift from 'work' to 'text'. However, the view that all literature is intertextual is not a Barthian product, as Eagleton seems to suggest in his presentation of S/Z. This masterpiece of intertextual study of Balzac's *Sarrasine*, moreover, is, in my opinion, a highly sophisticated mode of structural analysis. If Barthes talks in terms of the t e x t e p l u r i e l, Eagleton does not mention the notion of intertextu-

ality itself, which should be attributed to Julia Kristeva (*Sémiotiké* [1968], *Le Texte du roman* [1971]). But, it should also be pointed out that in an attempt to explain and apply the Bakhtinian concepts of 'ideologeme' and 'dialogism' to textual problematics, Kristeva herself profoundly distorts Bakhtin's thought and confuses the problem of textual production with that of textual productivity. This is a major misconception in contemporary literary theory and, to my mind, it is the first consequence which has to be reckoned with in terms of the so-called "p o s t" Structuralism. Clearer and much more convincing is Eagleton's criticism of the North American particular use of Deconstruction as a literary critical method. It is the postulates of the Yale school of criticism (and its ever increasing number of disciples) which contribute to what he notes as being "the widespread opinion that deconstruction denies the existence of anything but discourse, or affirms the realm of pure difference in which all meaning and identity dissolves", and is, according to Eagleton, "a travesty of Derrida's own work and the most productive work which has followed from it" (p. 148).

After such hermetic squabbling, the problems dealt with in the chapter on "Psychoanalysis" are surprisingly refreshing. Eagleton dilligently (and sometimes humorously) goes through the motions of explaining the fundamentals of Freudian theory, stressing the importance of dreams, the 'royl road' to the unconscious, and the mechanisms of dream-work. Jacques Lacan's controversial rereading of Freud is discussed; his comment that the 'unconscious is structured like a language', his concept of the 'imaginary', language as a prey to desire, as well as the contentious notions of the endless chain of signifiers and the constant 'repression' of signifieds. Louis Althusser's "lacanized" reinterpretation of ideology is also briefly presented. Eagleton notes that "there is indeed a real problem about how social and historical factors are r e l a t e d to the unconscious... [but] one point of Freud's work is that it makes possible for us to think of the development of human individual in social and historical terms" (p. 163). I do not believe, however, that L a c a n ' s reinterpretation of Freudianism in terms of language permits us to explore the relations between the unconscious and human society, as Eagleton seems to think (p. 273). The example *par excellence* of this problem is Kristeva's work, which Eagleton himself criticizes in that her arguments are dangerously formalistic, and that she pays too little attention to "the historical conditions in which [the deconstructive] overturning of the signified is carried out, and the historical conditions in which all of this is interpreted and used" (p. 190—91).

Psychoanalytic literary criticism is nonetheless schematized in a useful way by Eagleton: it can attend to the a u t h o r (a "speculative business", he notes); to the work's c o n t e n t s (critically of a limited value and often too reductive); to the work's f o r m a l c o n-

struction ("just as the [Freudian] dream-text can be analyzed, deciphered, decomposed in ways which show up something of the processes by which it was produced, so too can the literary work" ([p. 181]); and it can also attend to the reader — a point which Eagleton does not develop but which would have interesting repercussions in termes of reception theory. If Freudianism is a science, he concludes, "it is a theory at the service of a transformative practice". However, "this is not to suggest that psychoanalysis alone can provide the key to problems of literary value and pleasure... [These problems] would seem to lie somewhere at the juncture of psychoanalysis, linguistics and ideology, and little work has been done here as yet" (p. 192). Somehow missing in Eagleton's discussion, here, is a mention of Gilles Deleuze/Félix Guattari's *L'Anti-Oedipe* (1975), and their notion of "schizo-analysis".

In the concluding chapter, Eagleton comes to grips with the underlying theme of his book, "that the history of modern literary theory is part of the political and ideological history of our epoch". He explains that the conclusion "is not meant to mean: 'Finally, a political alternative'; it is intended to mean: 'The Conclusion is that the literary theory we have examined is political'," (p. 195). Hence, the idea that there are "non-political" forms of criticism is simply a myth for Eagleton:

> The difference between a conventional critic who speaks of the 'chaos of experience' in Conrad or Woolf, or the feminist who examines those writes' images of gender, is not a distinction between non-political and political criticism. It is a distinction between different forms of politics (p. 209).

In other words, the study of literature, literary criticism, is not an a priori ontological or methodological problem, but a matter of strategy; "asking first not what the object is or how we should approach it, but why we should want to engage with it in the first place" (p. 210). Though not really developed in precise literary critical terms, what Eagleton is calling for is a theory of discourse. He argues that he is countering "the theories set out in this book not with a literary theory, but with a different kind of discourse — whether one calls it of 'culture', 'signifying practices' or whatever is not of first importance — which would include the objects ('literature') with which these other theories deal, but which would transform them by setting them in a wider context" (p. 205). Eagleton's concluding argument is that "it is not a question of debating whether 'literature' should be related to 'history' or not: it is a question of different readings of history itself" (p. 209).

Interesting, stimulating, with insightful analyses and some innovative and provocative projections, as well as conveying a deep concern for history, *Literary Theory* is on the whole a very good introduction of the subject and would serve well as a first basic text. Even

though Eagleton does warn in his Preface that his "project obviously involves omissions and oversimplifications", there a r e some regretable lacunas which could have easily been filled in. Nonetheless, this book is perhaps the clearest introductory acccount of the history of modern literary theory in Western Europe and North America which is currently available in English.

TERRY EAGLETON I DEMISTYFIKACJA TEORII LITERATURY

STRESZCZENIE

Dzieło T. Eagletona (Wadham College, Oxford University) *Wprowadzenie do teorii literatury*, jest dla anglojęzycznych studiów oraz dla naukowej krytyki literackiej bezsprzecznie tekstem najbardziej znaczącym. Praca ta jest zarysem historii badań literaturoznawczych, jak i swoistą demistyfikacją nowoczesnej teorii literatury w najlepszym sensie tego określenia. Eagleton przedstawia powstanie i rozwój najważniejszych kierunków teoretycznoliterackich dwudziestego stulecia, przy tym zaś rzuca ciekawe światło na znaczenie krytycznych implikacji tych kierunków dla praktycznego wyjaśniania oraz interpretacji tekstów literackich.

Na całość dzieła T. Eagletona składają się następujące rozdziały: Wprowadzenie — czym jest literatura? 1. Ukształtowanie się nowoczesnego pojęcia literatury. 2, Fenomenologia, hermeneutyka, teoria odbioru dzieła literackiego. 3. Strukturalizm i semiotyka. 4. Post-strukturalizm. 5. Psychoanaliza. Zamknięcie — krytyka polityczna.

Książkę zamyka wybrana załącznikowa literatura przedmiotu oraz indeks.

„Demistyfikacja" w ujęciu Eagletona to krytyka utrwalonych przeświadczeń literaturoznawczych: zakwestionowanie opozycji między „prawdziwością" a fikcjonalnością, ahistoryzmu fenomenologii, konserwatyzmu strukturalistycznego, aprobata dla krytyki psychoanalitycznej, uznanie dla badań marksistowskich.

Przełożył *Jan Trzynadlowski*