

# Terry Eagleton's Latest

Reviewed by Albert Colón

*After Theory* by Terry Eagleton

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Terry Eagleton's *After Theory* is a book that is meant to incite. While Eagleton is not so naive as to believe that theory is ever going to be exhausted -- he writes "if theory means a reasonably systematic reflection on our guiding assumptions, it remains as indispensable as ever" (2) -- he is bold enough to pick a fight with postmodernism. While this may not be a particularly new tactic, it is the manner and the precision of the argument that Eagleton presents that makes his book a brilliant and necessary document.

In a note on page 13, Eagleton defines postmodern as "the contemporary movement of thought which rejects totalities, universal values, grand historical narratives, solid foundations to human existence and the possibility of objective knowledge." He goes on to write that postmodernism "is skeptical of truth, unity and progress, opposes what it sees as elitism in culture, tends toward cultural relativism, and celebrates pluralism, discontinuity and heterogeneity." This is a succinct description of postmodernism and it seems to be difficult to argue with Eagleton's definition. I don't think, though, and I believe Eagleton would agree with me, that the work of Michel Foucault or Edward Said ignores the truth. Indeed, it takes the truth as the basis of its argument. But I digress. In his first chapter, entitled "The Politics of Amnesia," Eagleton lays down his argument that, while much of the work of Foucault, Said, Louis Althusser, Jacques Derrida, Julia Kristeva, Jurgen Habermas, Helene Cixous and Roland Barthes (among others) continues to be of importance, it has had its run. These writers cast such a huge shadow over the field of literary and cultural criticism that what came after them were merely disciples who may have expanded and applied their theories, but did nothing new in a practical sense. Also, the world that greeted these writers when they sat down at their typewriters to write their books is not the same world we live in today. While Foucault (a personal favorite of mine) may have been cutting edge in the 1980s, we are living in 2004. Where are the great thinkers to tackle the present?

For Eagleton, the grave problem with postmodern thought is that it has given up on asking the big question. Instead, it has celebrated difference (and *différance*) to such an extent that we cannot see ourselves as being part of any unified whole. Instead, we cultivate our small groups and consider primarily the questions that are important to our unique selves. This abandonment of engaging the big social questions has led to an increasing interest in the

humanities on the body or vampires or porn; perhaps these topics are worthy of serious intellectual thought, but what they represent to Eagleton is a white flag that English majors are waving at the world. We know that we cannot engage the questions that are relevant to most of the world, so we will work on the margins and impress a very small audience. This reminds me of Martin McQuillan's introduction to *Deconstruction: A Reader* wherein he writes that "a definition (if we really must have such things) of deconstruction might be that deconstruction is an act of reading which allows the other to speak" (6). Eagleton scoffs at the fascination with the Other in contemporary literary studies, preferring to remind us that the situation of what we normally define as the Other is really the situation of most of the world's population. They are not exotic and our study of their differences merely serves to highlight our need to congratulate ourselves on having taken them seriously enough to write a paper on their problems. Eagleton challenges us to see that their problems are our problems and we must begin to behave knowing that as an immutable fact.

It may be important to note at this point that Eagleton is a theorist and he champions the work of those theorists that look at the big picture. He has a lot of good to say about Foucault's *The Order of Things*, but he does have a problem with Derrida. The problem he has with him can be summarized quite easily. Derrida is a fine close reader, but he reads too closely. Eagleton believes that Derrida may be too enamored with words and their seemingly endless possibilities. The major problem, though, that he has with postmodernism and its practitioners is that they have rejected Marx and socialism. Most of the seminal French philosophers of the 1960s were weaned on Nietzsche and Marx, but they decided to reject Marx as outdated and impractical. Eagleton remains perhaps the most important Marxist literary critic writing in the English language and it is the turning away from Marx that is at the core of postmodernism's problems. He makes his claim boldly at the end of chapter four, entitled "Losses and Gains":

Most of the objections to theory are either false or fairly trifling. A far more devastating criticism of it can be launched. Cultural theory as we have it promises to grapple with some fundamental problems, but on the whole fails to deliver. It has been shamefaced about morality and metaphysics, embarrassed about love, biology, religion and revolution, largely silent about evil, reticent about death and suffering, dogmatic about essences, universals and foundations, and superficial about truth, objectivity and disinterestedness. This, on any estimate, is rather a large slice of human existence to fall down on. It is also, as we have suggested before, rather an awkward moment in history to find oneself with little or nothing to say about such fundamental questions. (101-2)

The statement I quote above serves as the engine for the rest of the book. Eagleton writes four chapters that serve to remind his readers that there are such things as truth, morality, evil, and virtue in this world and that it is perhaps time to abandon irony as the primary way to respond to the world's problems.

In the fifth chapter of the book, "Truth, Virtue and Objectivity," Eagleton makes his boldest claim yet for socialism. As he writes, "one reason for judging socialism to be superior to liberalism is the belief that human beings are political animals not only in the sense that they need to take account of each other's need for fulfillment, but that in fact they achieve their deepest fulfillment only in terms of each other" (122). This simple statement is Eagleton's call to arms. In our present political climate it is not enough to write about a sexy topic, get a grade, get a degree, and get a job. We have to get away from simplistic self-interest and political disinterest. In the chapter entitled "Morality," Eagleton makes it clear what morality is. It is "all about the enjoyment and abundance of life" (141). It is not the cynical morality employed by our current administration on the issue of the war on terror. As Eagleton points out, "in the so-called war against terrorism, for example, the word 'evil' really means: Don't look for a political explanation ... You can ignore the plight of the Palestinian people, or of those Arabs who have suffered under squalid right-wing autocracies supported by the West for its own selfish, oil-hungry purposes" (141). This statement is not merely a gratuitous shot at the Bush administration; it serves as a running example for Eagleton's argument. Where is the tradition in postmodern thought, with its praising of relativism, that will adequately address the issues we face?

Once we accept that truth, objectivity, virtue and nature (among other things) are real, then we can move in the direction of true engagement and we theorists can actually be relevant again. We have to also come to terms with the fact that not everything is culturally constructed. We are animals and we have to deal with some realities that other animals have to deal with, such as sexual differences and death. This does not mean that culture has no place in forming us; rather, it means that there are other very powerful things that have say in the way we are. To me, it appears that Eagleton is not so much dismissing all of postmodernism as much as he is challenging its claims, claims that have become so accepted as to go unchallenged.

In the postscript to the book, Eagleton reminds the United States that it holds an extraordinary place in the world today. What he is concerned with is the American belief that you can be anything as long as you want it badly enough. This belief leads to a vicious appraisal of the poor and underprivileged, not only in the U.S., but also throughout the world. He sees this as a weakness. It is in the postscript that the true subject of the book becomes clear. This book is not merely a disavowal of postmodernism. The book serves as an example of the theory that Eagleton espouses throughout the book. It is a theory that is compassionate, thought provoking, and challenging. It is a theory that forces the reader to take sides and passionately argue for them. In short, it is a theory that, while by no means perfect, allows for the reader and the practitioner to engage the fundamental questions that lie at the center of our very existence. I can imagine the arguments readers of this review will have with Eagleton's position. I would urge you, though, to pick up the book and your argument will be more productive and exciting. What more could you ask for from a book on literary and cultural criticism?

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