

Terry Eagleton. *After Theory*. New York: Basic Books, 2003. Pp. 225. \$14.00 US paper.

A confession: I have a weakness for lively writing and celerity of thought. Those who think that the contracting sales of books on literary criticism and theory is a sign of decline in the discipline, rather than a sign of the times, are not paying close attention. Critical theory in English—whether in Philip Sidney’s apologies for poetry in relation to philosophy and history, or Percy Shelley’s mediations on poets as unacknowledged legislators of the world, whether Matthew Arnold’s thoughts on poetry as a secular religion or Virginia Woolf’s consideration of women as needing a room of their own, whether Oscar Wilde’s serious and comic play on the decay of lying or Toni Morrison’s comments on the challenges of race, whether John Dryden’s ideas on classical decorum or Homi Bhabha’s exploration of the location of culture—has expressed and continues to express itself with great variety and accomplishment. This range of styles, ideas and assumptions across centuries is a matter for celebration. The lively commotion of English criticism is something to enjoy and celebrate.

Terry Eagleton is a theorist I have admired for some time: his writing is full of life and engagement, and it always involves the reader in the debate on the relation between literature and society. He is a theorist who has a wide cultural range and brings the vitality and variety of other literatures and cultures into the English-speaking world. Eagleton has a distinct voice that reaches readers and engages them in what matters about the pursuit of fictions and truths, pleasure and happiness.

*After Theory* is a teaching book that reaches out primarily to students and general readers; it also has much to offer more specialist readers. Eagleton has hope for the future, but is also nostalgic and elegiac. Although his nostalgia is not for the absolute truths that some earlier theories sought, it can be glimpsed in the opening sentence: “The golden age of cultural theory is long past” (1). Even though the age of theory (the early 1960s to the late 1980s) is now over, he notes that those who think that we can return with relief to “an age of pre-theoretical innocence, are in for a disappointment” (1). Eagleton considers the pursuit of theory and scholarship to be pleasurable, but aptly warns: “Like all scientific inquiry, it requires patience, self-discipline and the inexhaustible capacity to be bored” (5). He uses irony and satiric wit to unmask theories that trivialize culture and politics in the face of starving, underfed and marginal peoples. Although the art of interpretation can be seen as early as Plato’s writings, Eagleton equates the most intense period of cultural theory with the period between 1965 and 1980 in which the political left became prominent.

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Cultural and national liberation, as critiques of a dominant capitalism and the conspicuous consumption of wealthy western cultures, became keys to this brief countering of prevailing trends. The awareness of other worlds and movement between them was part of the spirit of the age.

In the 1980s counterculture turned to postmodernism in a global world where Marxism seemed less and less relevant. Eagleton's satirical insights into the denial of historical events and natural occurrences are cautionary. Theory that is blind to the world is not advisable. Jonathan Swift had wicked fun with that in Book III of *Gulliver's Travels*. Repression and amnesia, unraveled by theory to uncover the anti-theoretical nature of humans, might be a survival instinct. Eagleton maintains that cultural theory must be ambitious in trying to make sense of the grand narratives in which it participates. Cultural theory is by necessity abstract, but it needs to engage with the concrete specificity of the art and literature it discusses. Both plain language and conceptual terminology are needed; both close reading and theory share abstraction. Cultural theory, according to Eagleton, "has disabused us of the idea that there is a single correct way to interpret a work of art" (95), but it has also fallen short on many intense human experiences from love through evil to truth. As Eagleton notes, it is important to distinguish truth from dogmatism and he suggests gnominically: "Other persons are objectivity in action" (138).

Cultural theory might explore the interconnections of politics and ethics more than it has in the recent past. Humans are social animals (or, as Aristotle said, political animals), and therefore encounter ethical choices and decisions in their everyday lives. The movement of history is one in which human life improves in some ways but deteriorates in others. Progress then is neither absolute nor categorical; it has an uneven and partial development. The letter and spirit of texts is an important divide in the world in which revolution, foundations and fundamentalism have had such an impact in both the past and present. Fundamentalists try to plug up with dogma "the unnerving vacancy," the open-endedness of human life (208). What Eagleton advocates is a political order based on "non-being as an awareness of human frailty and unfoundedness" and not of "human deprivation" (221). Cultural theory needs to enter contemporary debates and to engage global history with new resources and topics. He ends the "Afterword," which addresses the world after September 11th, 2001, with a satire on American foreign policy and a praise of an "authentic America," that speaks up for justice, humane values and human liberty (228). Eagleton goads readers into thought and away from received ideas—theoretical and otherwise. This process of defamiliarization can only be a good thing even if we cannot always agree.

Jonathan Locke Hart