

# THE HUMOUR OF TERRY EAGLETON

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Terry Eagleton is one of the most prolific literary and cultural critics to have ever written in the English language. The author of over thirty books, scores of articles and literally hundreds of reviews, Eagleton has published on such diverse topics as the politics of the parish in the Catholic church, Shakespeare, theories of a Marxist "science of the text", histories of English literary criticism and aesthetics, and the concept of tragedy as it has functioned throughout Western history; and his best selling *Literary Theory: An Introduction* remains the standard primer in the field, twenty years after its first publication.

Perhaps the most distinctive characteristic of Eagleton's varied array of writing is his unique sense of humour. In his recent memoir, *The Gatekeeper*, he remarked that:

there was a time when I would occasionally be mistaken for Terry Jones of the Monty Python team, since we share a first name and an interest in literature, and people would jovially recall some rib-cracking antic of mine in *The Life of Brian*, stonily resistant to the suggestion that they had got the wrong man.<sup>1</sup>

I would add that there is another more likely explanation for this confusion, which Eagleton has overlooked: in much of his academic writing, Eagleton displays a sense of humour that would not be amiss in a *Flying Circus* sketch, but which often offends academic conventions and sensibilities.

In the first section of this paper, I will explore some of the rhetorical techniques that Eagleton employs in his writing to convey this humour, and in the second section, I will examine the wider theoretical and political implications of Eagleton's use of humour. I am acutely aware, of course, of the problems that are faced when trying to break down such a thing as humour into categories proper for

academic discourse. As Simon Critchley noted in his intelligent recent study *On Humour* "A joke explained is a joke misunderstood".<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, there are certain key methods of humour that Eagleton utilises throughout the range of his publications that are central to his rhetorical power, and as such deserve exploration, in order to understand and to learn from Eagleton's literary ability.

The technique that perhaps most clearly defines Eagleton's humour is his constant use of metaphor. Eagleton often uses metaphors that are seemingly absurd and hyperbolic, but nonetheless explain an otherwise complicated theoretical proposition in a way that pages of more detailed, conventional argument could not. Indeed, one critic writing on Eagleton, Willy Maley, has even been moved to coin a term for this technique, calling it an "Eagletonism". Maley defined this new category thus:

An Eagletonism is a flexible polemical device which takes the form of a rhetorical flourish designed to debunk an image of high culture, through a gesture in the direction of some banal, bizarre, or brute 'reality'. The Eagletonism is a type of oxymoron, but rather than a seeming contradiction, we get a juxtaposition of politesse and politics.<sup>3</sup>

Maley goes on to offer his list of the top thirty Eagletonisms, but I will limit myself here to a couple of select examples that best convey Eagleton's method.

A number of the most outrageous, and therefore probably the best Eagletonisms, occur in his *Literary Theory: An Introduction*.<sup>4</sup> In this work, Eagleton not only offers a wide-ranging introductory account of literary theory, but also a polemical history of literary criticism itself, with Eagleton not hesitating to offer scathing assessments of various currents of criticism. In one case, Eagleton explains that the problem with the Leavisite claim that to read "Literature" was to make yourself a "better person", was that, "when the Allied troops moved into the concentration camps some years after the founding of *Scrutiny*, to arrest commandants who had whiled away their leisure hours with a volume of Goethe, it appeared that someone had some explaining to do"<sup>5</sup>. While discussing the concept of value-judgement, he notes that "Nobody would bother to say that a bus ticket was an example of inferior literature, but someone might well say that the poetry of Ernest Dowson was"<sup>6</sup>. When attempting to explain the historical genesis of post-structuralism, he states that:

Post-structuralism was the product of that blend of euphoria and disillusionment, liberation and dissipation, carnival and catastrophe which was 1968. Unable to break the structures of state power, post-structuralism found [it] possible instead to subvert the structures of language. Nobody, at least, was likely to beat you over the head for doing so.<sup>7</sup>

In another instance, Eagleton sarcastically describes the "advantages" of post-structuralist doubt as being due to the fact "that it allows you to drive a coach and horses through everybody else's beliefs while not saddling you with the inconvenience of having to adopt any yourself",<sup>8</sup> with the end result of deconstructive readings being similar to a card game in which "the winner is the one who has managed to get rid of all his cards and sit with empty hands".<sup>9</sup> Or, in a more recent publication, he offers his opinion on the current obsession in literary theory with "the body":

There will soon be more bodies in contemporary criticism than on the fields of Waterloo. Mangled members, tormented torsos, bodies emblazoned or incarcerated, disciplined or desirous: it is becoming harder, given this fashionable turn to the somatic, to distinguish the literary theory section of the local bookshop from the soft porn shelves, sort out the latest Jackie Collins from the later Roland Barthes. Many an eager masturbator must have born away some sexy-looking tome only to find himself reading up on the floating signifier.<sup>10</sup>

These are typical Eagletonisms: grossly overdone statements, such as comparing the *Scrutiny* literary project with Nazism and the holocaust, or the writing of Barthes with pornography and Jackie Collins. One should, by no means, ignore the pedagogical problems of Eagleton's style. As can be seen even from the small sample given above, Eagleton has a habit of giving positions that he does not agree with a very short treatment indeed, summoning up a caricature of a theory and dismissing it with a scathing one-liner. Yet, despite the seeming absurdity, they are statements that contain grains of truth and penetrating insight which stay with the reader long after a more conventional textbook argument would be forgotten.

Another technique often employed by Eagleton is the Swift-like satirical reversal in argument, where he details a seemingly plausible case at length, only to knock it down unexpectedly with a penetrating

observation and expose it as having been flawed all along. This technique is used to great effect in a number of his publications. In *The Illusions of Postmodernism*, for example, Eagleton spends the entire first chapter sketching a historical picture of the rise of postmodernism, arguing that the conditions of postmodernity are the logical and necessary consequence of the total defeat of the 'left' by global capitalism. Many readers would endorse this conventional analysis of postmodernism, but would perhaps be surprised to see it being argued by Eagleton. But then, with a deft reversal, he concludes the chapter by pulling the rug out from under his reader's expectation:

Imagine, finally, the most bizarre possibility of all. I have spoken of symptoms of political defeat; but what if this defeat never really happened in the first place? What if it were less a matter of the left rising up and being forced back, than of a steady disintegration, a gradual failure of nerve, a creeping paralysis? What if the confrontation never quite took place, but people behaved as though it did? As though someone were to display all the symptoms of rabies, but had never been within biting distance of a dog.<sup>11</sup>

The reader has thus been swept along by Eagleton's rendition of the conventional line, and then abruptly pulled up and made to confront their acceptance of the orthodox argument, with another Eagletonism—comparing postmodernism with rabies—thrown in for good measure.

However, perhaps the best example of this reversal in argument can be found in his inaugural lecture as Warton Professor of English at Oxford in 1992, entitled "The Crisis of Contemporary Culture". In front of an audience that had just appointed Eagleton to the chair on the back of his recent theoretical publications, such as *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, Eagleton announced that he no longer intends to "say much at all about critical theory ... since I find myself increasingly restive with a discourse which obtrudes its ungainly bulk between reader and text". No doubt many thought Eagleton had undergone a remarkable conversion overnight, and were secretly relieved that this brash, theoretical intruder had seen the error of his ways. But as Eagleton went on, the ironical basis of his argument became increasingly obvious:

You may have noticed that some critical languages do this [come between the reader and the text] more than others. Terms such as symbol, spondee, organic unity and wonderfully tactile draw the literary work closer to us, while words like gender, signifier, subtext and ideology simply push it away ... 'Richly metaphorical' is ordinary language, readily understood from Bali to the Bronx; 'radically masculinist' is just the barbarous jargon of those who, unlike C. S. Lewis and E. M. W. Tillyard, insist on importing their tiresome ideological preoccupations into properly aesthetic matters. But I will not speak much of theory because it is in any case the mere tip of a much bulkier iceberg, one element of a project which is out to liquidate meaning, destroy standards, replace Beowulf with the Beano Annual and compose a syllabus consisting of nothing but Geordie folk-songs and gay graffiti.<sup>12</sup>

The argument against 'theory' is thus turned on its head, and the ideological underpinnings of the apparently commonsensical position first proposed by Eagleton are glaringly brought into view. In the face of such an onslaught of obviously overblown rhetoric and shameless exaggeration, it is hard not to get swept along, and would-be critics of Eagleton must first penetrate the multiple layers of irony before they can find an edge in the argument to actually seize upon.

Finally, one could not discuss Eagleton's humour without examining the genre that Eagleton has almost claimed as his own—the book review. While it is unlikely that many of his reviews win him new friends in academic circles (to judge from the number of outraged letters to the editor of *The London Review of Books* following certain reviews), they undoubtedly capture some of Eagleton's best writing, with Eagleton savaging academic images and cant with a combination of scathing irony, absurd hyperbole and the occasional good old-fashioned polemical rant. Nor does he apologise for such a method, instead claiming it as a necessary political move. As he stated in the preface to the recent collection of his essays, *Figures of Dissent*:

Liberals and conservatives really cannot complain when radicals take them to task. That is what we are in business for. Our political opponents should remember that there are many more of them than there are of us, and that they exchange quite enough plaudits amongst themselves to be able to dispense with ours.<sup>13</sup>

Many an academic superstar has been subject to such a taking to task. Stanley Fish, for example, was termed in one review the "Donald Trump of American academia, a brash, noisy entrepreneur of the intellect who pushes his ideas in the conceptual marketplace with all the fervour with which others peddle second-hand Hoovers", and was then labelled an "intellectual boot-boy, the scourge of wimpish pluralists and Nancy-boy liberals, and that ominous bulge in his jacket is not to be mistaken for a volume of Milton".<sup>14</sup> In another review, Harold Bloom was said to idolise "Shakespeare with all the sticky sentiment of a teenage groupie";<sup>15</sup> while in a notorious review of *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, Spivak's writing style was said to represent "the overcodings of an academic coterie" and combine "the vocabulary of Hegel with the syntax of *Hello!*"<sup>16</sup>

But perhaps the most amusing, and most vicious, review of all was a hatchet job that Eagleton offered on Jacques Derrida's *Specters of Marx*, entitled "Marxism without Marxism". While many other reviewers of *Specters* remarked on its frustratingly dense, obscure style and criticised Derrida for his obfuscation, none offered an outright attack to match the parody of Eagleton. As Eagleton wrote of *Specters*, "there is something pretty rich, as well as movingly sincere, about this sudden dramatic somersault onto a stalled bandwagon", before offering a stinging satirical imitation of Derrida's writing:

The portentousness is ingrained in the letter of this book, as one theatrically inflected rhetorical question tumbles hard on the heels of another in a tiresomely mannered syntax which lays itself wide open to parody. What is it, now, to chew carrots? Why this plural? Could there ever be more than one of them? Could this question even have meaning? Could one even speak of the 'chewing' of a carrot, and if so how, why, to whom, with what onto-teleo-theological animus?<sup>17</sup>

This parody certainly outraged Derrida. In an article entitled "Marx and Sons", which was written by Derrida as a response to Marxist critics of *Specters*, Derrida singled out Eagleton and castigated him for his "imperturbab[le] triumphal tone", sarcastically commented on Eagleton's "finesse, grace and elegance", and claimed that Eagleton did not understand the "tone" of *Specters*, such as "the irony and humour that I am fond of cultivating in all my texts".<sup>18</sup> All I will say here is that Derrida is a brave man indeed to accuse Eagleton, of all people, of not understanding irony or humour.

Thus, whatever we may feel about the relative merits of Eagleton's criticisms, it cannot be denied that he manages to escape the pedantic and lifeless style that so often mars book reviews, and to write with genuine enthusiasm and flair.

This brings us to consider the wider implications of Eagleton's use of humour. For the use of humour by Eagleton is more than simply an amusing aside or light-hearted relief from otherwise heavy handed theoretical work, but rather is an important theoretical and political move in itself. This issue cuts to the heart of a problem that has plagued Western Marxism, namely, that of how radical intellectuals can bridge the gap between their discourses and the discourses of those on whose behalf they presume to speak. As Martin Jay noted in his study *Marxism and Totality*, while Western Marxists may have frequently professed their disdain for rigid Soviet intellectual orthodoxy, they have often, in fact, replicated Leninist intellectual elitism, as "rather than attempting to present their theories in a manner easily accessible to uneducated minds, they almost invariably wrote in a style whose complexity defied popular comprehension".<sup>19</sup>

In his recent study *On Humour*, Critchley proposes a theory of humour as a form of *sensus communis* or common sense, in that "jokes are the expression of sociality", and that "humour is shared".<sup>20</sup> As Critchley explains, "Every comedian knows that a joke that does not get a laugh is not a joke—end of story".<sup>21</sup> There is little space here to follow through on all the implications of Critchley's discussions of humour. Instead, it could be suggested that Critchley's notion of humour as a necessarily shared experience between writer and audience interestingly ties in to what Eagleton envisaged as the role of the socialist intellectual. As Eagleton wrote in *The Function of Criticism*, "one of the most vital tasks of the socialist intellectual" is that of "the resolute popularisation of complex ideas, conducted within a shared medium which forbids patronage and condescension".<sup>22</sup> Indeed, one of his main criticisms of Spivak is for her perceived failing in this regard, with Eagleton claiming that: "Radical academics, one might have naively imagined, have a certain political responsibility to ensure that their ideas win an audience outside senior common rooms".<sup>23</sup>

Writing in a style that is accessible, Eagleton also has argued, is particularly important in the case of literary theory, when we consider one of the central claims the 'theory' movement made with regards to the inherit bias of liberal-humanist discourse. As he explained in a recent interview, while literary theory offers the possibility to serve as a gen-

uinely democratic movement in the academy, the obscurantist style of many contemporary 'radical' theorists undermines any such claim:

It's genuinely democratic in the sense that what it sets out to replace is a criticism that has a very different kind of starting-point. This mode of criticism says, "Look, in order to be intelligent, you have to have a certain kind of intuition, one bred into you by a certain sense of culture: it's a matter of blood and breeding". Literary theory stands against this and says "Anybody can join in this activity if they are prepared to learn certain languages or certain kinds of language." These languages may not be easy to learn, but no one would expect that it should be easy to learn that language of surgery, for instance. It's then particularly scandalous that people engaged in what is basically a democratic enterprise should write in such an obscurantist way.<sup>24</sup>

In this context, Eagleton's humour has been one of the main factors that have allowed him to bridge this gap in discourse, and access an audience beyond the confines of the academy. His *Literary Theory: An Introduction* has sold more than a million copies, he now regularly writes for generalist audiences in *The New Statesman*, *The Guardian* and *The London Review of Books*, and he has even been described as "that dreadful Terry Eagleton" by Prince Charles, when the Prince of Wales was giving advice to new Rhodes Scholars as to which lecturers to avoid during their time at Oxford. If Eagleton's humour is managing to offend the House of Windsor, one is tempted to add that it is obviously having its desired effect. Thus, while Eagleton's continued commitment to Marxism has rendered him a somewhat unfashionable figure among current movements in literary and critical theory, his rhetorical skills are perhaps unequalled by contemporary critics, and are something that many critical theorists, otherwise hostile to Eagleton, could benefit from studying.

### **Notes**

- 1 Terry Eagleton, *The Gatekeeper: A Memoir* (London: Allen Lane 2001), p. 100.
- 2 Simon Critchley, *On Humour* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 2.
- 3 Willy Malcy, "Brother Tel: The Politics of Eagletonism" *The Year's Work in Critical and Cultural Theory*, ed. Stephen Regan (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), pp. 270-287.

- 4 Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983).
- 5 *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, p. 35.
- 6 *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, p. 10.
- 7 *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, p. 142.
- 8 *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, p. 144.
- 9 *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, p. 147.
- 10 Terry Eagleton, "Body Work", *The Eagleton Reader*, ed. Stephen Regan (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), p. 157.
- 11 Terry Eagleton, *The Illusions of Postmodernism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), p. 19.
- 12 Terry Eagleton, "The Crisis of Contemporary Culture", *The Eagleton Reader*, pp. 144-5.
- 13 Terry Eagleton, *Figures of Dissent: Critical Essays on Fish, Spivak, Zizek and Others* (London, New York: Verso, 2003), p. ix.
- 14 "Stanley Fish", *Figures of Dissent*, p. 171.
- 15 "Harold Bloom", *Figures of Dissent*, p. 170.
- 16 "Gayatri Spivak", *Figures of Dissent*, p. 159.
- 17 "Marxism without Marxism: Jacques Derrida and Specters of Marx", *The Eagleton Reader*, p. 261.
- 18 Jacques Derrida, "Marx and Sons", *Ghostly Demarcations*, ed. Michael Sprinker, (London: Verso, 1999), pp. 234, p. 265 n. 26.
- 19 Martin Jay, *Marxism and Totality: the adventures of a concept from Lukacs to Habermas* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), p. 11.
- 20 Simon Critchley, *On Humour* (London and New York: Routledge), p. 2.
- 21 *On Humour*, p. 2.
- 22 Terry Eagleton, *The Function of Criticism from the Spectator to Post-structuralism* (London: Verso, 1984).
- 23 *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, p. 159.
- 24 John Higgins, "A Grim Parody of the Humanities: An Interview with Terry Eagleton", *Pretexts: Literary and Cultural Studies*, vol. 9, no. 2 (2000), p. 215.