



KEEPING THE REVOLUTION WARM

Interview with
Terry Eagleton

Terry Eagleton is one of the best known Marxist critics writing in Britain today. He has argued for an increased emphasis on critical theory and for a wider range of cultural studies. His books include introductions to the theory of literature: *Marxism and Literary Criticism*, *Literary Theory*; and more specialist explorations of the role of criticism: *Walter Benjamin, Criticism and Ideology*, and, most recently, *The Function of Criticism*. Here he speaks to Geoff Dyer.

Could I ask you firstly about your own background and early political influences?

I was born to a working class family in Lancashire of Irish immigrant descent and educated at a Catholic grammar school run by Christian brothers. I was politically on the Left from about the age of 15 or 16 and was influenced culturally by the Angry Young Man movement of the late 1950s. This seemed to be the first time that an authentic working class voice, or at least a dissentient voice, was coming through - strongly anti-establishment, non conformist. For a disgruntled working class teenager with cultural interests this was a kind of godsend, or at least a form of identity. Of course if one had been more politically astute at the age of 16, one might well have seen that the Angry Young Men would quite likely develop in the reactionary direction they have. But I was innocent of any such insights.

You went to Cambridge as an undergraduate. How did you adapt to student politics at that time?

I went to Cambridge on the traditional

scholarship boy route, from a school which really sent almost nobody there. The Cambridge of those years was a considerably more ruling class place atmospherically than it is now. Oxbridge remains a ruling class bastion but it has over the years, in style and atmosphere, democratised itself. I'm thinking, say, of student life. In those days one was continually aware of moving in a ruling class ambience. Everybody seemed to be over 6 foot six, wore cavalry drill trousers, and brayed rather than spoke. We working class students were in a tiny and salient minority, and tended to hang together. I remember an East End friend of mine being hauled in before his tutor, and asked why he dressed like a garage mechanic, which is perhaps indicative of the different atmosphere of the times. In that environment, encountering Raymond Williams and his work was an extraordinary liberation, as though suddenly in an utterly alien atmosphere one suddenly found a person who seemed to be speaking one's own language, and speaking it in a much more developed and articulate way than one could oneself. It was through him that I had my first introduction to the idea of a left cultural criticism, and to the early New Left. It provided a point where somebody like myself, primarily brought up in a literary training, could connect up with a wider politics.

For the last 15 years you have been in Oxford. How has the climate changed?

What one has to realise about Oxbridge is that the places are really held together less by institutional and organisational factors, by syllabuses, or modes of teaching, or

administrations, than by ideology. In both places there's an ideological consensus so deep and implicit that it can withstand a considerable amount of changed syllabuses and changes in student population. Certainly the student population of Oxford today, while still excluding the working class massively, is in style and culture more middle class than upper class, in contrast to my own student days. Such change can be absorbed to a large extent by this implicit and underlying consensus, and one might say the same of the co-educational development where women were being admitted to a very male institution on very male terms. The more hopeful and progressive side is that once the ideological consensus begins to crack, then places like this are actually in trouble. That came near to happening in the late 60s and early 70s. But it could also happen now in the sense that the kind of work with which I am engaged, and which is gaining popularity with a significant section of students, actually breaks with the whole discourse of the Oxbridge ruling class - that is quite threatening for a system which is really based on talking the same language.

When you got this appointment to Wadham College did you arrive with a strong sense of 'mission'?

Yes I think that's true in the sense that when I came to Oxford one of the first things that I did was to establish a regular informal forum for all kinds of people within, and some outside, the university, who were variously disenchanted with official culture, and in a certain sense it still runs today, in a changed way. These were the years, particularly over the 1970s,

when one had the exhilarating feeling of whole new bodies of Marxist theory coming in. It was a period in which, after the late 1960s, one felt one could lay in a stock of theoretical work, on the basis of which one could then powerfully challenge the cultural orthodoxy. Radical cultural theory as we know it today took off in that euphoric late 1960s period and was intimately involved with wider political initiatives. When the liberationist 60s rolled into the crisis ridden 1970s, these wider political options seemed to be closed down, theory was left, in a sense, keeping the revolution warm, with both the positive and negative implications of that: on the one hand it was something with which radical students could still identify, a way in which they could learn and politically develop; and at the same time, because it was being carried on in a certain inevitable isolation from wider political practices, it tended to substitute itself for these politics.

How important an influence was the women's movement to the whole area of radical cultural theory?

Only in the mid and later 1970s, with the growth of feminist criticism, in quite close relation to a practical political movement - the women's movement - did one see new ways of overcoming that split between theory and politics. Whereas ten years ago it would have been possible to radicalise students through some form of Marxist cultural theory, that task has now become more difficult with the changes in political climate. Those possibilities of radicalisation have really been taken over by feminism. But the connections have remained in the sense that Oxford women students

from very non-political upper middle class backgrounds, whose introduction to radical ideas has been through feminism, or feminist criticism, might then go on, for example, to join the miners' pickets at the local Didcot power station. So one sees visibly those connections being made over this period.

Do you feel that your position at Oxford is in any way precarious?

When I first came to Oxford I detected some hostility among my colleagues which I took to be because I was a Marxist, but which I later discovered was because I was from Cambridge. Maybe Cambridge and Marxism are synonymous in their eyes. Oxbridge, like many of the most traditional British ruling class institutions, has always prided itself on its liberalism, by which I mean its capacity to absorb and defuse any sort of radical criticism. And one has to concede, grudgingly, that it's rather good at that.

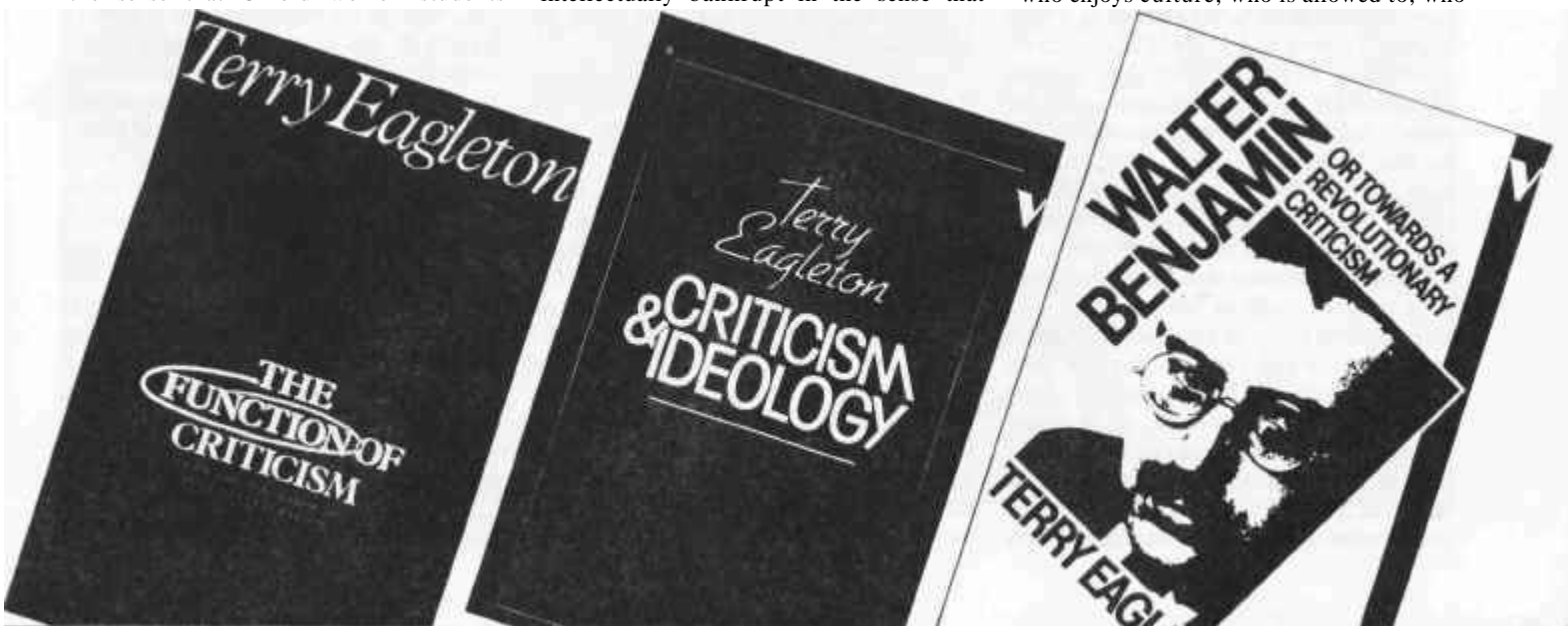
I've no doubt that my own entry into Oxford was in part the self-congratulatory tolerance of a group of people whose position, they thought, could not be in any real way threatened: the tame radical syndrome. But whether or not one can be absorbed of course depends on much more than that, it depends on what's going on politically at the time.

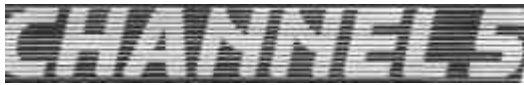
What's happening now, not only here but in all higher education, is that it's becoming very clear that the forms of liberal humanism which are still the dominant ideology of cultural studies in Britain, and which are extremely effective in the teaching of English in schools, are in fact intellectually bankrupt in the sense that

they really can't produce any rationale for themselves. Theory comes about when traditional intellectual practices get into trouble. When, for whatever reason, theory comes unstuck, they are forced into a new kind of self reflection, which is what theory means. For all kinds of reasons, in the late 1960s, the humanities came unstuck, more particularly the liberal humanist version of the humanities which was being pedalled in academia. (I hesitate to say that the humanities entered into a period of crisis because the humanities have always been in a crisis. How could the humanities, the supposed guardians of humane values, not be in crisis in bourgeois society, in a society which, as Marx said, has not time for intellectual and cultural production?) When that happens theory can move in two ways. Either it can be used to refurbish a failing institution, to provide it with a new set of rationales, a new set of tasks, to keep it in business and keep people in jobs. Or it can be used to put the political skids under that institution and suggest that we do something different. At the moment I think that question is still up for grabs.

What are you trying to achieve through your teaching at Oxford?

What I think a cultural radical is trying to do is not to deny, as has sometimes been done by the Left, that culture is about pleasure, fulfilment, enjoyment and excitement. On the contrary, to encourage such notions, but to put them in a different kind of context and to look at the politics of pleasure, the politics of fulfilment and the politics of enjoyment. To look at who it is who enjoys culture, who is allowed to, who





is not, what we enjoy and why, how we use it. To look at all these questions in the broadest possible context. In other words, a lot of the traditional questions of literary criticism are not so much wrong, but are too narrow. Insofar as they address questions of the deepest personal experience, they are addressing a vital area. Insofar as they habitually abstract that personal experience from its historical determinants, they are actively mystifying.

You are known for your attacks on the literary canon. To what extent has this been broken down or reconstructed over the last 10 years?

A project of questioning the canons by retrieving forms of writing which they have repressed - women's and working class writing are the two obvious examples that come to mind - is vital, and I think one can be properly scandalous about the question of cultural values. For example, I work at students to entertain the possibility that Shakespeare could some day be no more valuable than Agatha Christie, a proposition at which even some good radicals might well blench. On the other hand, one can overestimate the business of attacking the canon. When we rightly insist on extending orthodox studies to, say, women's writing, the important question to ask is 'how is that writing going to be treated?' Is it going to be processed by the mill of conventional criticism? There's no reason why such writing is going to be intrinsically resistant to the process of bourgeois ideology.

Any assault on the present cultural establishment that bases itself on the argument over the canon is likely to be outflanked. One might wake up - it's a horrible thought - to an Oxford in which Robert Tressell and Mary Wollstonecraft were more widely studied than George Eliot and Jane Austen yet where just the same kind of critical and ideological responses remained. What differentiates radical from liberal criticism is that a radical critic must hold on to the perspective of a situation in which there would be no canon in the sense that there would not be a received body of work whose value was assumed to be, in some sense, immutable. As long as a canon is in place then radicals don't really have any choice about addressing it. In this area, as in many areas, it's not the Left who call the tune. As long as the establishment has determined that Jane Austen and George Eliot are to be the terrains of ideological struggle, which

is what the canon really means, then we have to respond in kind. As in other fields of political life, one is constrained by one's opponent.

What do you see the role of the socialist intellectual as being? What do you think is the extent of your influence and is it a problem for you that some of your books are fairly inaccessible?

I think that some of my books are inaccessible but I've always tried to write, alongside the more specialist work I've done, more popularising texts, like *Marxism and Literary Criticism*, and the recent *Literary Theory*. But I agree that there is a real problem in the translation of these ideas into some kind of practice. One relevant area is that of the teaching of humanities in schools, with which I've actually had some involvement. I think that unless one cracks it there one isn't really going to change very much. There are now increasing numbers of teachers of English who are trying to put these ideas into practice in the classroom. What impresses me when I speak to such teachers is that they don't tend to produce what really is the philistine complaint that the ideas are too difficult. What the teachers tell me is that they don't need to be convinced that liberal humanism leaves something to be desired - they know that it doesn't work because they've lived it, and they've seen it tried in the classrooms of inner city schools. They don't need to be told that such liberal humanism is profoundly political. It's not that they're looking for a political alternative to what goes on at the moment; they're looking for another kind of politics from the present politics of English teaching. So that's one way in which ideas can be disseminated.

How have your own politics changed over the last ten years?

That is difficult. Put it this way. Over those years I've followed a now familiar track on the Left, from a Trotskyist organisation to the Labour Party. One of the reasons for this move could be summarised by saying that the Trotskyist organisation hadn't really taken account of Gramsci. That is to say, the kind of model of analysis that they worked with, while I still think it was very powerful in certain respects, was ultimately unable to account for the real facts of ruling class hegemony. There was no way in which an analysis which locates

counter-revolutionary forces primarily at the political level, in the reformist trade union bureaucracy, can displace an understanding of other and perhaps more central forms of hegemony. That is why I think the whole area of cultural discourse is so important. Indeed, until we know more about the way political issues are figured, lived, experienced, in complex and contradictory ways by individual people, I think we can say with some certainty that we won't actually be able to resolve some of the most pressing political problems we're facing. In that sense radical cultural analysis seems to me of paramount importance.

What do you see yourself as going on to do next?

Quite frankly I don't know. At the moment we're getting to the end of a particular theoretical phase. Going back to what I said about the 1970s when a whole new stock of theoretical categories was being stored in, that phase has come to an end. Now we do have the ideas and it's dangerous, it risks theoreticism to simply carry on elaborating at that kind of level. The leading question then is the application of those ideas, the intervention of those ideas into the routine life of the academy. What I think has happened over the past few years is that an academic establishment which is deeply nervous of cultural theory has been bowing its knees a little more reverentially to it, aware that it's not likely to go away, and tolerating it to a greater degree, but in the form of ghettoising it. We now have to break out of that ghetto. We have to find some way of bringing these ideas to bear on the practical study of culture, whether in literature, films, television, or what have you, both in universities and in schools. I try and do that in my own teaching, in my own activities. On the other hand I do feel that as a theoretician my future is interestingly insecure. In my last couple of books I've been trying to argue that we won't really find a different and more productive role for a critic until wider political changes have taken place. That is to say, it's not simply intellectuals within the academy who can dream up better and different things to do. How far these better and different things can be effective is a matter of wider political movements. In that sense my last two books have been kind of self-destructive - I'm rapidly arguing myself out of a job!