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Eagleton vs Amis, a very literary spat

By Michael Henderson

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If you ever wondered where Dave Spart had got to – and I must confess, I was a bit puzzled myself – he returned to public life this week with a bang that could have been heard on the Left Bank. Merci bien, Terry Eagleton!

Private Eye's all-purpose Trot, who likes to rail against "the utterly sickening and totally predictable assaults" of bourgeois society, reappeared fully robed as Comrade Eagleton of Manchester University unrolled a carpet of invective against all class enemies who wield a quill.

In particular, he trained his sights on those notorious lackeys of the capitalist establishment, Amis K and Amis M.

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Amis *père* was denounced as a drunken racist who loathed homosexuals, women and liberals. Amis *fils*, who has had some tart things to say about those Muslims who want to blow us up, and others who sympathise with the bombers, was compared with "a British National Party thug".

My my, the intellectual heights one must scale these days to become a professor of cultural theory.

Ah yes, the T word! Prof Eagleton has obviously read a few books but he doesn't really understand what it is that writers do. Rather, he is concerned with judging whether their views accord with his, and fitting them snugly into a grand theory of literature, which,

surprise, surprise, is rooted in a narrow, discredited political doctrine.

Where curious readers like to explore books, to see what sort of emotional world the writer has created, theorists are suspicious of authorial independence. They prefer to "subvert" or, better still, "deconstruct" what they call "texts". They award marks to those who hold the right (in other words, Left) views, and withhold them from those who resist easy categorisation. Hence Eagleton's witless description of Evelyn Waugh, possibly the most beautiful prose stylist of the 20th century, as "a dyspeptic Right-winger".

Hence, too, the attack on Kingsley Amis, who could indeed be awkward and was sometimes offensive, but who wrote half a dozen novels that will be read with pleasure 100 years from now, because he was blisteringly funny, which Brother Eagleton is not: not intentionally, anyway.

Having read the Mancunian dunderhead, which is rather like wading through manure, the fair-minded reader is entitled to think: better Amis drunk than Eagleton sober.

In this cosy world of common room rebellion plenty of first-raters get it in the neck. Harold Pinter is derided as "a Champagne socialist", as opposed to a mild-and-bitter one, no doubt.

Amis's pal, Philip Larkin, is accused of writing a poem in which he wanted to send miners to prison. Actually, it was a piece of doggerel he put in a letter.

Anybody who has read Larkin's letters properly may consider them to be the best of their kind since, well, Waugh's. But whisper it, in case Inspector Eagleton sends the Thought Police round at nightfall.

Conservatives, according to this unrepentant Marxist, don't "do" political ideas. But then, on the evidence of his writing, neither does Eagleton. In a recent review of A.N. Wilson's excellent novel, Winnie and Wolf, based on the relationship between Adolf Hitler and Winifred Wagner, he seemed to think that, on the basis of his anti-Semitism, Richard Wagner was a National Socialist avant la lettre. German history is a bit more complicated than that, dear boy.

Nor does he understand what Martin Amis was saying in The Age of Horrorism, his essay on the Muslim threat to Western civilisation.



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Neither Amis, nor anybody else, needs lectures on tolerance from old-style Marxists. Everybody knows how they treated writers in the countries they ran. Boris Pasternak, Terry? Anna Akhmatova? Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn? It was the labour camps or internal exile; sometimes death. Is that the sort of tolerance you had in mind?

What a bore he is, and such a predictable bore. There are ticks for Shelley, Byron and Blake, who all swung leftwards, and a big one for Wilde, who, Eagleton assures us, "is regarded in England as a socialite and in Ireland as a socialist republican". No, he's not. He was a wit and a dandy, and occasionally a good writer. He is only regarded as a socialist republican by people who choose to interpret his work through the blinkers of their own prejudices.

Four years ago Geoffrey Wheatcroft contributed a brilliant essay on Wilde to Atlantic Monthly. Titled "Not Green, Not Red, Not Pink", it challenged the mythology erected in recent years by Irish nationalists, "Marxist intellectuals" and militant homosexuals, which has shrouded in mist the view of a writer who, regrettably, is now better known as a personality.

Wilde was, by turns, quotable and shallow. Yet he said one thing that all critics should pin to their walls, and it should certainly be pinned to one in Manchester: "A truth in art is that whose contradictory is also true." Bravo!

Writers may have political beliefs, or they may not. Whether pure as the driven snow or scoundrels, each one can only be judged by the quality of his or her writing, not the "soundness" of their views.

If you accept Wilde's judgment as a good place to start in any estimation of literature then you might think that Eagleton, blinded by his zealotry, fails to grasp the value of writers, which is a bit of a drawback when your calling is to instruct students in the glories of the written word. Literature has never been about drawing lines in the sand, but in revealing human character.

It is Blake, another of Eagleton's approved poets, who supplies the test of character that the professor fails: the celebrated lines, "He who bends to himself a Joy/Doth the winged life destroy".

Sadly, all this theorist's birds are wingless birds. He will never live, as Blake hoped we all would, "in Eternity's sunrise". How galling for a man who knows so much more than the rest of us. Hoist with his own petard, poor lamb.

Next week, one gathers, Mr Spart is launching an attack on the Harvest festival, "a demeaning neocon attack by the agents of monoculturalism on the commercial interests of farm workers". Can't wait.

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I suppose there is one level at which one must feel sorry for this Eagleton person. Somebody with his bizarre far-left views and who retains them in spite of the glaring lessons of history, has probably only two jobs open to him - the one he has or a local councillor in a particularly grotty inner city ward.

However, I do sometimes wonder how socialism has retained such a grip upon some champagne drinkers, how the Guardian survives, how the BBC continues to be the propaganda engine for labour - it is surely the likes of Mr Terry Eagleton, ferreting away at the minds of impressionable students - you know, the dreary ones with the Che Guevara poster on the door of their digs.

Best comment of the day goes to Al Hamilton 12:56AM.

Posted by Graham King on October 6, 2007 12:51 PM

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I should think a "Marxist Intellectual" is a contradiction in terms!

Posted by Andy on October 6, 2007 12:40 PM

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Al,

The scary thing is that Eagleton was Trinity (Cambridge) before Oxford (various colleges) before Manchester.

Are any UK university above 1960s style sniping?

Posted by DavidN on October 6, 2007 12:14 PM

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During the early 1980s I heard Eagleton, ensconced as he was in the turgid, fatty rolls of the educational establishment, describe himself as "the worm in Thatcher's apple".

At the time I was certainly caught up in the dizzy, new Tory ideology that freed us from the Old Left. Eagleton's comment brought me up short. So far as one can discern it had absolutely no effect on the Conservative Body Politic, which was madly prosecuting its war on the unions and inflation and the decrepid remains of Sovietism.

Eagleton however - the rebellious heir to Raymond Williams (who, with Stuart Hall, marxised the Birmingham School from 1970) - represented the future, and he knew it. When one reads in the dailies of, for example, Bristol firemen punished for discovering four homosexuals in flagrante repulsivo, one really should reflect on how amazingly successful the cultural left has been ... and how utterly derelict in their duty to preserve

our political and social culture Conservative have been.

In particular, the supposition that having a good laugh at the Neo-Marxian left constitutes some sort of politically meaningful response has been proven utterly worthless. Just visit this page from the Avon Fire & Rescue Service website, and you will understand:-

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Posted by Guesseworker on October 6, 2007 12:05 PM

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One wonders whether established writers and personalities despair particularly as to their own demise not least because they know they can expect to be deconstructed by the likes of Professor Eagleton in what amount to fleeting moments of reflected glory.

Posted by simon coulter on October 6, 2007 11:51 AM

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Regarding Kingsley Amis, what Mr Eagleton fails to understand (like all hard nosed Leftists) is certain right-wing people, if they have the facility, love to wind the buggers up. You can't argue with people like Eagleton because his brain is too wired to finding racism, sexism, homophobia in every sentence. It's easier to shock their sensibilities with a bit of insensitive bluster.

Posted by Jeffrey Smith on October 6, 2007 11:39 AM

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Splendid article. It should have children jeering in the streets whenever Eagleton struts by. Evidently a fully functioning brain is not needed if one wants to become a professor of cultural theory (which is a subject for those who find English Literature too demanding).

Posted by Clothilde Simon on October 6, 2007 9:46 AM

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Leave the crypto-commies in the obscurity they so deserve. If they start their ravings ignore them - after all, they are just like children.

Posted by Nick R on October 6, 2007 9:14 AM

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I shouldn't worry about this too much. We all remember novelists and poets, but the only Professors who are noted by History are Scientists. The rest disappear without trace.

Posted by jon livesey on October 6, 2007 1:32 AM

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Yesterday the Telegraph described Terry Eagleton as a "Marxist Intellectual" is that not an oxymoron or is that Oxford Moron?

Posted by Al Hamilton on October 6, 2007 12:56 AM

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