

# Back to the Future

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## The Reification of “Theory”

The demise of “theory” has been variously predicted, willed, resisted and repudiated since the start of its career.<sup>†</sup> In the early days of that career, reactions against it were often conservative, so that it became a badge of one’s progressivism to be a principled supporter of it, even if only because of a general democratic belief in the importance of debate. Despite his disagreements with structuralism, Raymond Williams supported Colin McCabe in the Cambridge debacle of the early eighties, as did Frank Kermode. (Both Kermode and Williams developed complex relations to theory as it came to be known and practiced, though for different reasons.) The radical credentials of theory were considerably bolstered by Terry Eagleton’s own *Literary Theory* (1983), a text which has been crucial in the establishment and dissemination of a certain canon of theory to more than one generation of undergraduate students. Doubtless, the mere fact that Eagleton, as a Marxist, was on the side of theory also contributed to the perception of its inherent subversiveness. Today, in the U.S., the language and values of theory have become identified with those of the left to the

<sup>†</sup> This review article examines Terry Eagleton’s *After Theory* (Cambridge MA: Basic Books, 2003, 231 pp.).

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extent that an attack on the former appears by definition to be an attack on the latter, though the reality of this situation is cast in partial doubt by one of the most forthright critics of the politicized academy: “the real battle that is now shaping up is not between radicals and conservatives but between radicals and old-style liberals. Or perhaps one should now say that the classical liberal position—which fought for ideals of quality, disinterested scholarship, and for advancement according to merit, not adherence to a given political line—is now castigated as conservative and reactionary” (Kimball 229). Clearly, for Kimball, the current conjuncture represents a change in understanding of what constitutes reaction. His truck is with a real or perceived relativism which is nonetheless hitched to an expressed desire to undermine dominant political, institutional and ideological arrangements. This seems to me accurately to capture the general ideological complexion of what appears to have been a determined and highly organised backlash against theory in the U.S., one which, as Ellen Messer-Davidow has demonstrated, has been highly successful in denying funding to theory-led projects, especially those perceived (consequently) to be left-wing (193–233). In this context, any challenge to theory may be perceived as part of a more general reactionary agenda, and indeed, informally, I have heard responses to Eagleton’s *After Theory* along precisely these lines. This is no doubt because, superficially, Eagleton appears to share certain preoccupations with the Kimballites, since attempts to rehabilitate ideals of truth, objectivity, virtue and morality and to return to foundational thought, tend to be considered self-evidently the province of the political right these days.

But here we touch on a paradox, since Eagleton, who has maintained a principled commitment to Marxism through a period when many fell off that academic bandwagon with greater or lesser degrees of dignity, has begun to sound merely old-fashioned. In part Eagleton’s own argument helps to illuminate why this should be, since that paradox is generated by theory’s complicity with modernity. What I mean by this is illustrated in part by Eagleton’s dismissive opening discussion of cultural theory’s concern with the body. The parodic qualities of his account do Eagleton few favours, and are likely to be unconvincing to those who have found the work to which he alludes compelling, but his general point is, as usual, a dialectical one which recognizes that such apparently dissenting work is mostly in keeping with our desublimated times. To point out that recent theorizations of the body are indebted to its practitioners’ relatively privileged distance from the more immediate needs of the body—and, indeed, to imply that the wealth of those who do such theorizing is indebted to

the poverty of others—is to seem out of keeping with those times, to be resistant to their “progressive” characteristics. Too much cultural theory of this sort, suggests Eagleton, seems to be taking issue with past norms, since “our new ruling elite consists increasingly of people who snort cocaine rather than people who look like Herbert Asquith of Marcel Proust” (17). The argument for much of this book—and of earlier works, such as *The Illusions of Postmodernism* (1996) to which this is most closely related—is that post-structuralism and postmodernism are insufficiently critical tools since they are too bound up with the material and ideological forces that constitute our world. His aim, in the later chapters at any rate, is to challenge the dogmas of theory through the examination of pressing concerns posed for us by our contemporary moment, though the intellectual resources to which he turns will no doubt serve to confirm for some that the agenda here is actually pre-theoretical: Aristotelian and Christian ethics, as well as Marxism, for instance, figure prominently. Since the arguments of the chapters are clear enough, I want to dwell less on the details of them than on the general proposition that the time of theory is behind us, partly—since the assertion in Eagleton’s title is not itself an original one—by considering others’ reflections on this state of affairs.

Let us first revisit the controversies over theory. Despite the fact that progressives generally supported theory, it was never the case that theory/anti-theory divisions mapped neatly onto left/right ones, and defences of epistemological, if not necessarily aesthetic, realism have not all been launched solely in the service of dominant ideological formations. Reading some of these early critiques of theory again, or in some cases for the first time, what is most striking is that they can in no way be said to represent a unified front, so it’s worth glancing at a few. In 1979, Gerald Graff was linking postmodern theory with the radicalism of contemporary capitalism rather than that of the left in a way which pre-empted later leftist claims: “It sometimes seems as if the only way we can keep up—or get even—with an increasingly unreal reality is by abandoning the concept of reality itself and seeing to it that everything is labelled unreal. Only by such a cynical gesture can we avoid being taken in. Alienation is thus combatted by the completion of alienation” (9). More influentially, Frank Lentricchia insisted on the importance of history, though he maintained an openness to Foucault in particular (*After the New Criticism*). In Britain, many of the critiques were characteristically more concerned to defend the category of “literature,” if not necessarily the canon. But if works such as Laurence Lerner’s *The Frontiers of Literature* represented a retreat into organicist metaphors and liberal humanist assumptions (“If a work of literature is like a human being

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... then it has a soul and a body: a purpose and a material existence" [215]), it was not always the case that the ideological bearing of this defence could be read off from the attempt. Patrick Parrinder's *The Failure of Theory* focussed on the values that a changed literary canon such as that proposed by the advocacy of Proletarian Literature might teach, contrasting this with the canonization of certain theorists: "The brave new world of the theoreticist canon—a new pedagogics and a new pantheon in which (say) Derrida takes the place of T. S. Eliot, Lacan of Lawrence, Althusser of George Orwell—is not one which can release creative energies or make the slightest contribution to liberating the world's dispossessed. Proletarian literature, in short, had politically serious objectives; literary theory does not" (105). Critiques of post-structuralism and postmodernism from the Marxist left have, of course, accompanied the rise of their ascendancy, though Neil Lazarus has rightly complained of the tendency for postmodern theorists simply to ignore them (11). What has perhaps sustained the sense of theory's radicalism, is rather the highly visible, sensationalist opposition of figures such as Allan Bloom, for instance, for whom "the post-Sartrean generation of Parisian Heideggerians" represented "the last, predictable, stage in the suppression of reason and the denial of the possibility of truth in the name of philosophy" (379). This, for Bloom, was the culmination of a longer historical process in which relativism had come to threaten American values at precisely the historical moment when global freedom had been entrusted to America. The resonances of this argument down to the present are striking, and serve to reinforce the perception of many that it is theory *as such* that challenges the imperialists.

If these challenges were not finally successful—Canute-like gestures as they now appear to have been—why is it possible now to imagine theory's decline? Eagleton's straightforward case is that we owe its emergence to the writings of certain individuals who produced their major work under specific historical conditions. The figures collected under Eagleton's rubric of the "founding mothers and fathers" are both an eclectic bunch and revealingly limited: Althusser, Barthes, Bourdieu, Cixous, Foucault, Habermas, Jameson, Kristeva, Irigaray, Lacan, Said, Lévi-Strauss and Raymond Williams. Since that list was drawn up, the deaths of Said and Derrida have contributed to the sense it provides of the passing of a generation. Still, the list achieves coherence only at the cost of certain omissions. If Habermas, why not Adorno? If Jameson, why not David Harvey? If Said, why not Fanon? The answers are not simply to do with Eagleton's need to circumscribe the period of theory within certain historical limits, but serve to confirm that ideological equation which covertly determines the listing and provides his

argument with its coherence: theory = (post-)structuralism. Those who do not fit the equation were roughly contemporaneous with its ascendancy, critically influenced by it, or mostly noted—within literary and cultural theory, at any rate—for being critics of it. The one figure here whose career can be said to owe almost nothing to its influence is the only one whose first name needs to be specified: Williams these days seems to figure for many as a tangential or adjacent figure of peculiarly British provenance, someone whose major conceptual tools—structure of feeling; dominant, residual and emergent—appear almost quaintly humanist, totalising and bound up with the antiquated terminology of oppression which derives from that leftist humanism. Bourdieu and Habermas are included in the list, but no part of Eagleton’s argument seriously engages with them.

One of the consequences of this way of conceiving of theory is its consequent tendency to ascribe sophistication to those who practice the genuine thing and various degrees of naivety to everyone else, often on a scale which ranks Derrideans at the top, slightly ahead of Foucaultians, and extending downwards to those pre-“theoretical” individuals of various political persuasions. “Theory” as we have come to know it is a fetish, a reification of certain traditions, intellectual gestures and modes of thought, and its practice—in contrast to the claims originally made that it might democratize debate and deepen the engagement with ideas—has come to entail the foreclosure of thought even as it lays claim to a principled openness. It is, in its arrogation to itself of a certain knowing status, an even more problematic form of shorthand than that other Anglo-American coinage, “post-structuralism” itself.

Eagleton’s account of the emergence of theory is a familiar one—familiar, that is, from his own work as well as from accounts by Aijaz Ahmad (*In Theory*), Perry Anderson (*The Origins of Postmodernism*), Alex Callinicos (*Against Postmodernism*) and David Harvey (*The Condition of Postmodernity*). The argument that theory emerged in the wake of revolutionary anti-colonialism and the defeat of attempted political revolution in France and flourished in times of capitalist reorganization according to principles of flexible accumulation is now widely accepted on the left. But if such accounts pay attention to the larger context in which theory has emerged, they perhaps neglect the specific institutional contexts for that emergence and the extent to which the overvaluation of theory has been one fairly predictable consequence of the division of intellectual labour in capitalist societies. Indeed, to listen to some academic commentators, it would seem as if political and theoretical tasks were coterminous—though those same commentators would disavow the possibility of a terminus—as when, in a

rather different manifesto for the period “after theory,” Thomas Docherty argues that “post-marxism asserts that thought is only possible at the very interface between theoretical systems.... This means, however, that post-marxist or postmodern thought is not ‘responsible’ or answerable to any determining or governing theory.... It is only in the refusal to be answerable to a governing theory that thought, and above all theoretical thought, becomes possible once more” (218). “Thought,” then—and the idealism signalled by that privileged term should already be obvious—has little to do with any theory/praxis dialectic and everything to do with the creative space between theories, or language games, as Docherty would have them. Why this counts as “*above all* theoretical thought” is clear only once the reification of theory has been accepted; indeed, it might even be said that it is that very reification which governs Docherty’s project.

But the creativity that Docherty claims for “theory” is not necessarily what it has delivered. In yet another collection which, even on the part of its dissenting voices, equates theory with post-structuralism, we find Christopher Norris attempting to “stick up for theory ... in any case we are all talking about it—even ‘doing’ it—despite these qualms and misgivings. It happens regularly at conferences nowadays, this idea that time has passed, that ‘theory’ has had its day, that we need to move on, and then you get everyone discussing it again and the same issues coming up” (Kermode and Norris 115–6). That sounds like being stuck in a rut, and the problem is surely that the desire to move on is defeated by the very terms of the theory that people like Norris insist on defending. The difficulty is precisely one of getting beyond “theory,” then, since the very notion of a beyond is what is called into question by the very thinking being done. Derrida’s own attempt to formulate what it means to be after deconstruction suggests why this might be:

I try, I would say, in principle, to live my life *after* all these things [philosophy, deconstruction, literature] by trying to be consistent with what I say, or what I write, or what I teach as a philosopher, as a deconstructive philosopher without making my life a simple application or consequence of what I say.... I love the voice, I love presence, I love ... ; there is no love, no desire without it. So I’m constantly denying, so to speak, in my life what I’m saying in my books or my teaching. Which doesn’t mean that I don’t believe what I write, but I try to understand why there is what I call Necessity, and I write this with a capital ‘N’ ... I try to articulate the Necessity which urges me, compels me to write and to teach what I write, and this articulation

means that it's *because* there is no pure presence that I desire it. There would be no desire without it. (Derrida 8–9)

So, we desire what we can never fully attain, and deconstruction—on this account—appears to be the recognition, and constant reiteration, of this condition. This is a philosophical version of that temper Eagleton considers to have been characteristic of theory more generally, that of “libertarian pessimism. The yearning for utopia was not to be given up on, but nothing was more fatal to its well-being than trying to realise it” (51). Whilst, in a sense, nothing could be more creative—or, at least, productive of discourse—than a mode of thought which recognizes the impossibility of attainment, nothing, surely, could finally be duller. “The engagement with Theory is the experience of an endless promise” write the editors of *Post-Theory*, making it all sound a bit like listening to *Tristan* on a loop. “Post-Theory promises that ‘Theory’ will only take place when one can ‘finally see sight’” (McQuillan xv). And that would be the theory which seeks to liberate us from metaphysics? Maybe not.

One of the consequences of the reification of theory is that it has established its own inside and outside, so that individuals find themselves designated “theorists” or not, often without much choice in the matter; in some cases they may be regarded as insufficiently on the inside. (In many ways, Eagleton is himself is often regarded as inauthentic, a figure who has often enough invoked the language of deconstruction though mostly in ways which are deliberately and provocatively inauthentic [Alderson 6, 61–98].) One of the problems this creates, though, is that it distorts debates in all sorts of ways by installing theory as the crux of all matters with the consequence that what for many of us are more substantive matters for agreement or disagreement remain blurred, out of focus, unclarified—or to put it another and more significant way still, mystified. I often find myself sitting through academic papers wondering whether the theoretical terminology in which an argument is couched means I can't really agree with the otherwise admirable conclusions that are reached or, alternatively, whether the proficiency in a certain kind of language serves strategically to distract attention from the quite reactionary views being expressed by creating a false consensus.

Let me take one instance of the kinds of confusions which can occur, one that occurs to me because of recent experience. There are all sorts of reasons why one would not want to be associated with Raymond Tallis, who has been polemicising against theory since the late eighties. Initially he did so in two related books—*In Defence of Realism* (1988) and *Not Saussure* (1988)—whose failure to register with those he was attacking

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prompted his more recent return to battle in *Theorrhea and After* (a title which takes its characteristically abusive neologism from a much better book, J.G. Merquior's impressive, also neglected, history and critique of structuralism, *From Prague to Paris* [1986]). The opening to Tallis's latest book laments the failure of others to take notice of his arguments, but the opening paragraph of *Not Saussure*, might provide him with some kind of clue as to why he's not been taken seriously, with its reference to the "baleful influence" of (post-)structuralism, to "the present unhappiness in the Groves of Hackademe," to fiction which isn't to his taste as "talentless anti-realism" (*Not Saussure* 1). His odd personal appearances at conferences and seminars on the Literary Studies circuit more graphically reveal his animus. The recent experience I allude to involved him placing on an overhead projector a diagram of a bull shitting in order figuratively to indicate what he thinks of Lacan's work. If he reflected on these modes of engagement, he may well grasp why it is that he's mostly dismissed as a buffoon: because this is how buffoons behave. Nonetheless, his anger is sufficient indication that something serious is at stake.

For Tallis, "theory" is all-of-a-piece, something to be reviled rather than embraced, and this totalization suits his revealingly indiscriminating agenda perfectly:

High Theorists are always moving on: structuralism gives way to Althusserian Marxism; this yields to post-structuralism and deconstruction; soon this is replaced by, or breaks up into, Lacanian feminist criticism, cultural criticism, post-colonial criticism; this is superseded by a variety of historicisms—new, newish and very new; and so on. In short, Theory, which offers itself as a general, all-purpose instrument of indignation and resentment, is difficult to engage with since it is for ever moving on to the next place, like a speed-skater always keeping just ahead of the cracks in the ice. (*Theorrhea* xi–xii)

Note the reference to "indignation and resentment" which perhaps belies Tallis's main agenda, in which the Eagleton of *Literary Theory* is consistently an object of his indignation and resentment. The totalization he provides is made plausible partly because much of Tallis's argument is conducted with such primers, and this mode of engagement in turn permits all sorts of sleights of hand. Take, for instance, his initial treatment of Derrida's most over-quoted phrase which he initially interprets to mean "language cannot reach out to *extra-linguistic* reality" (*Not Saussure* 17) before going on apparently to modify that interpretation. "Apparently," because when he does so just over the page, he claims to be outlining characteristic moves

in the arguments of “theorists” whose identities remain unspecified. He believes that Derrida’s statement entails a conviction that “language cannot be used to refer to anything other than itself” (18). The insertion of “be used to” makes this a subtly, but importantly, different claim and, in itself, is indicative either of Tallis’s intellectual limitations or the dishonesty of his enterprise (though it is also indicative of a confusion of aims which fissures that enterprise: defending philosophical realism at the same time and often by the same means as he defends literary realism). At this point, then, his strategy involves attributing a manifestly absurd claim to Derrida before going on to refute, point-by-point, the arguments of no-one in particular. Maybe Tallis finds language more difficult to pin down than he claims, as he is incapable of grasping some fairly obvious meanings of Derrida’s phrase. If Derrida claims “there is no outside-text,” then quite plainly enough this suggests that “reality” is *not* extra-textual (I will avoid the reduction “extra-linguistic,” since “text” is not synonymous with “language” for Derrida). Two things follow from this: “reality” is not something beyond textuality which we can posit as that to which it straightforwardly, even primarily, refers; but nor are textuality and reality separate realms in the rather different sense of being an inside and an outside which might be, if we could possibly know it, entirely askew. Derrida’s claim is both less absolute and more disconcerting than Tallis’s traducement of it. If you misrepresent the post-structuralist case to be “that language cannot be used to refer to anything other than itself” in order to facilitate the obvious refutation “But it is!” and thereby demonstrate the palpable imbecility of your opponents then the only people who will look like fools are those who cheer you on.

Tallis’s later, more careful reading of Derrida is disfigured by this kind of habitual silliness, but there are nonetheless moments of insight, not least in his recognition that Derrida’s project is enabled by its demand for and love of a kind of presence—“*pure* presence”—which it simultaneously knows to be metaphysical. Tallis rightly argues that only by conceiving of presence in such grand terms, rather than in the necessarily mediated forms in which we usually encounter it, can Derrida’s project exert its disconcerting force (*In Defence* 225–33). The argument has been made elsewhere and by individuals with whom Tallis thinks he couldn’t be in stronger disagreement, here, for instance, in relation to ethics: “For Jacques Derrida, ethics is a matter of absolute decisions—decisions which are vital and necessary but also absolutely ‘impossible,’ and which fall outside all given norms, forms of knowledge and modes of conceptualization. One can only hope that he is not on the jury when one’s case comes up in court” (153–4). The only question more compelling than whether this places Tallis and Eagleton

together in the anti-theory camp is: what ideological work is being done by establishing the grounds for consensus *on these terms*?

My true disagreements with Tallis—that is, the ones which matter most to me—have little to do with theory at all. They reveal themselves, for instance, in Tallis’s frequent assaults on interdisciplinarity, not because I am an advocate of interdisciplinarity—I’m often unsure what is meant by it—but more because of what those attacks reveal about Tallis’s general ideological disposition. Reading him pronounce on literary criticism, linguistics, philosophy, psychoanalysis and even critical legal studies from his position as a Professor of Geriatric Medicine is about as enlightening as watching a footballer celebrate an own goal. Even so, the study of literature would seem to prescribe interdisciplinarity on Tallis’s account of it as including “not only Chaucer but also Locke, not only Shakespeare and Webster but also Peacock and Beddoes” (*Theorrhoea* 292). But it’s the way in which Tallis’s blindness to his own contradictions manifests itself which is revealing, since his kind of amateurism in these fields would naturally resist anything so vulgarly professional as interdisciplinarity. His prime objective is the resacralization of unexamined terms, that is to defend from its critics the literary canon and the values he considers it to reinforce.

It’s not because Tallis’s opinions matter that much to me that I’ve taken issue with him here; it’s rather to emphasize the extent to which theory isn’t, or shouldn’t be, the basis of our disagreement. On the occasion of the Lacan = bullshit encounter, I felt called upon to defend theory in ways which elsewhere I would normally question, and the absurdity of the situation was made clearer by the fact that Tallis recruited to his cause someone who, I suspect, has been multiply embarrassed and compromised by the various figures who have considered him their comrade. I found the Sokal hoax and subsequent book, *Intellectual Impostures*, amusing and valuable. It made a serious point about whose limitations Bricmont and Sokal were clear—“We make no claim to analyze postmodernist thought in general; rather, our aim is to draw attention to a relatively little-known aspect, namely the repeated abuse of concepts and terminology coming from mathematics and physics. We shall also analyze certain confusions of thought that are frequent in postmodernist writings and that bear on either the content or the philosophy of the natural sciences” (4)—but the debate that ensued serves to illustrate my larger point here, as the unfortunate Sokal was denounced by theorists as the reactionary he never was and embraced as such by others who really are. In fact, Sokal’s activist credentials are more convincing than those of just about any theorist I can think of. Meanwhile, the whole affair has invited ridicule from outside aca-

demia which itself can only be parodied as right-wing anti-intellectualism. In a book intended for a general readership, Francis Wheen, biographer of Marx, mounts a defence of left rationalism which includes a chapter attacking postmodern theory (one heavily reliant on one of Eagleton's own polemics). He gets Sokal's motivations exactly right: "For two centuries, progressives had championed science against obscurantism. The sudden lurch of academic humanities and social scientists towards epistemic relativism not only betrayed this heritage but jeopardised 'the already fragile prospects for a progressive social critique'" (Wheen 90). It seems to me that the main lesson to be learned from this affair is how urgent is the task of extricating ourselves from the theory/politics entanglement. What resources exist for doing so?

### Style and substance

The obscurantism to which Sokal objects is a feature most obviously of the style which is often cultivated in theory-driven texts. By contrast, the general lucidity of *After Theory* is no doubt a deliberate rejection of such infelicitousness. To put the matter that way makes it sound as if the issue is simply one of taste, but this is an issue to which Eagleton has returned repeatedly in his writings, as he does again here, emphasizing that his concern is not trivial: "There is something particularly scandalous about *radical* cultural theory being so wilfully obscure. Not because it could reach hordes of the labouring masses if only it used shorter words. It is scandalous because the whole idea of cultural theory is at root a democratic one" (76). Indeed, Eagleton has made increasingly scathing criticisms along these lines in more recent years. When Derrida speaks of politics in *Spectres of Marx*, he can only manage "a kind of slipshod late-Frankfurt swearing" (*Eagleton Reader* 262), whilst Spivak "combines the vocabulary of Hegel with the syntax of *Hello!*" (*Figures* 159). In each of these cases, there is a point being made about the ideological bearings of these writers as manifest in their styles. Derrida's revealingly contrasts with the precision of his philosophical discourse, whilst Spivak's represents an ideological combination of high philosophical, if eclectic, discourse with a commodified prose indicative of her academic star status. The larger point, though, has to do with Eagleton's sense that the problem with theory is its lack of purpose, that it has become self-regarding because it has become increasingly divorced from attempts to solve real problems.

One of the effects the theoretical mode is to have sealed off academic debate on the left from a broader public and to have established Higher Education as a necessary basis for participation in that debate. It is not that

theory is meaningless, as some would no doubt want to claim, but that its way of expressing itself is symptomatic of its status as the professionalized vocabulary of that sphere, helping to underwrite individual success through proficiency in it. The institutionalization of theory must at some level be grasped as the product of the professionalization of and competition between corporate Universities whose strategies have included investing relatively large sums of money in individuals. The success of theory has made individuals marketable and has reinforced tensions—ideological, disciplinary, personal—which would no doubt have occurred anyway, but would have taken different forms had theory never happened. Helene Moglen, for instance, has argued that (post-structuralist) feminist theory, by contrast with women’s studies—to the extent that it is separable from it—has both taken advantage of and served to consolidate institutional and ideological structures in the academy:

Self-critical and internally divided, unabashedly undergraduate in focus, concerned with pedagogy, experience and social change, women’s studies often seems to be an embarrassment to its upwardly mobile mothers, and has not been a major beneficiary of feminist theory’s privileged positioning. Indeed, the relation of women’s studies to more modish forms of feminist theory might now be described as similar to that of ethnic studies to colonial and postcolonial discourse, and of gay and lesbian studies to queer theory. (Moglen 1997, 184)

What has happened in women’s studies is, as Moglen implies, a specific manifestation of these tensions, which can be found in different forms across academic institutions. This is not the fault of theory *per se*, still less of individual theorists—the implication that feminist theorists are guilty of betrayal is perhaps too strong in Moglen’s argument—but rather a consequence of the ways in which universities dictate the terms of theory’s “success.” Still, this is no reason for theorists simply to shrug their shoulders and unreflectively continue to apply themselves to what they’ve been doing and the ways in which they’ve been doing it up to now. Indeed, the relationship between intellectual production and the division of labour is, or should be, a properly theoretical one.

The gap which has opened up between academic and broader public debate, in part in consequence of theory, is one which has resulted in some bizarre attempts to justify what it is that academics do. One of the most prominent in the last decade, for instance, argued that interpretative virtuosity is its own reward. Stanley Fish believes that the only justification necessary—or possible—for literary criticism is that it makes him happy

and keeps him in a job (I genuinely don't think that's a misrepresentation of his view). He might want to reflect, not merely on how much ice this would cut outside his own office, but more importantly perhaps on the kind of social revolution which would be required to make those values universally convincing and applicable. The conservatism of Fish's position is a specifically postmodern one, conventionalist and entirely rooted in his grasp of the cultural specificities of the academic world. For those on the outside, it's a curiously U.S. blend of subjectivation—"there is no moral dimension to my position at all (I am not urging a practice, but reporting on the imperatives built into a practice)" (44)—and subjectivism—he personally takes great delight in this practice. Fish and others in the U.S. academy—including those who would not endorse his conservatism—seem to view the subject as nothing and everything at the same time: those elements of subjectivity which remain inadequately theorized within anti-humanist ideology—here, delight; elsewhere, purpose and intention—simply reappear in one form or another as givens.

But on the face of it, Fish has a point. For him, attempts on the part of literary critics to establish themselves as public intellectuals are undermined by the things which they privilege as important and the ways in which they express themselves. Of Louis Montrose's New Historicism, he claims that "his interpretive act will not be a political one except in the sense that he rejects: i.e., it participates in academic politics, in the (internal) politics of Shakespeare and Spenser studies" (50) and, more generally, he suggests that "the language of literary theory is not subversive, but irrelevant; it *cannot be heard* except as the alien murmurings of a galaxy far away" (91). There is no point, for Fish, in speculating on the way in which the values of Montrose or others may at least gesture towards a differently constituted social order: as it is, so it must be. But, then—and I don't want to target Montrose specifically when making this point—so many literary critics and cultural theorists actually do write as if the only readership they can envisage is the one they have.

Things might be otherwise, and there are those who are or have written in full awareness of the contradiction which Fish exploits in his impersonal defence of a world which has rewarded him so well. The problem is that his grasp of academia is remarkably undifferentiated: the U.S. academy is his model for academic environments past, present and elsewhere. His critique of Montrose is bound up with a critique of Raymond Williams and he thereby manages to elide the distinctions between the two, distinctions which relate not merely to theory—how often must this be stated: cultural materialism is *not* in any kind of way a version of new historicism—but

Fish has a point. For him, attempts on the part of literary critics to establish themselves as public intellectuals are undermined by the things which they privilege as important and the ways in which they express themselves.

also to their different responses to their institutionalization: Williams was acutely aware of his position within academia—not least because it entailed the experience of dislocation—and this became a theme and motivating factor in all that he wrote, right from his early attempts to reclaim culture as “ordinary.” Eagleton recalls Williams’ lectures as “an extraordinary personal liberation: it was like seeing someone stand up in the most improbable place, formal and begowned, and articulate with enviable ease and eloquence all the struggling, smouldering political feelings you had yourself, but which were not so to speak official or academic, and which one had simply not expected to hear given voice in such an environment” (*Eagleton Reader* 311). Nor does Fish acknowledge Williams’ attempts to combine intellectual labour with cultural and political activism. Williams’ legacy has encouraged others who feel his sense of dislocation to speak to those outside strictly academic circles, amongst them Alan Sinfield—another of Fish’s sparring partners—for whom the point of intellectual labour has little to do with professional jockeying: “If there is a case for lesbian and gay intellectuals,” he has argued, “it is not that we can hide in universities, use long words and become big fish in little ponds, but that we may contribute to the self-understanding and political effectiveness of lesbians and gay men” (27). This is a project to which Sinfield has remained faithful throughout his career, engaging generously with both academic and non-academic writing as well as cultural production more generally, and mediating between these whilst developing his own distinctive, manifestly socialist, understanding of subcultural dissidence. His is a position which recognizes both his own situation and that of others, exploiting the privileges granted him by being an academic in order to further a project whose aims could never be judged simply by their effects on the academy, still less his own career.

For Toril Moi, indeed, intelligibility itself is the new dissidence:

if we ask if “theory” today is still a source of new and original work, then the answer is no. There is an awful lot of derivative and second-rate work out there. “Theory” is the orthodoxy, the dogma that’s taught to every student. If you want to be a really radical student today, one that annoys the professors terribly, you can just start claiming that words have meanings. What I and many other people have been trying quietly to do for the last ten years is to find different ways of thinking, ways that make sense to me and allow me to say something that I can *believe in*, that I can *mean*. (166)

Of course, there is nothing necessarily progressive about annoying the professors or stating one’s convictions—I’m sceptical that what we teach

in whatever form has done a great deal to prevent students getting more conservative—but Moi's emphasis on *conviction* contrasts with the negative force of theory, its conventionalism and anti-foundationalism, even in its laboured attempts to redeem those categories such as agency which it has been responsible for over-problematizing in the first place.

And it has been here, on issues relating to subjectivity, and where the claims made for theory are often strongest, that it has surely been at its weakest and most reductive. It is also on this topic that theory has contributed significantly to the demise in the influence of Marxism, not least since Althusser's crude essay on Ideological State Apparatuses (1971) came to be regarded as Marxism's most important contribution to cultural theory. It remains probably the most commonly required—insofar as any is required—Marxist reading for students of literature and culture. There is a tacitly held view in those fields—one reflected clearly enough in a number of student readers—that Althusser's work represented the terminus of Marxism and that that terminus was a consequence of Marxism's inherent inadequacies. The essay on ISAs contributed significantly to this perception, even as it helped establish the philosophical basis for understanding subjectivity in much current theory. It is often said that before Althusser Marxism had failed to theorize subjectivity. It's not clear to me that this was such a grievous omission, since some understanding of subjectivity was at least implicit those writings, but I am convinced that Althusser's response to this perceived lack resulted in the most spectacular failure of all, since his way of addressing the complex relations between subjectivity and ideology was simply to collapse the two. Of course, Althusser's argument (or is it merely a pun?)—that we are subjects positively only in a deluded sense, since we are negatively subject *to* ideology, that which enables us to pronounce ourselves individuals—was later to be regarded as, if not untenable, at least insufficiently general in its grasp of the forces which constituted that subjectivity, since it focused exclusively on class. It was also wedded to an understanding of science as that which was beyond ideology, an understanding which was indefensible even—and, perhaps, especially—from the perspective of most philosophical realists, but one which ironically has functioned for many since as an instance of the manifest impossibility of making realist claims at all. The recognition that Althusser's science/ideology distinction (gulf?) was untenable consequently led, not to the recognition that no such relation could be theorized in any hard and fast way because the very attempt entailed the prior reification of the terms involved, but to the “realization” that no such privileged realm of scientific objectivity could reliably be said to exist. Indeed, we were

encouraged to accept, not least through Althusser's student and fellow anti-humanist, Foucault, that science, reason and truth were actually the principal means by which power asserted itself, not least in and through subjectivity. In a generally approving essay, Warren Montag has argued that "Althusser's central thesis (ideology interpellates individuals as subjects) only takes on its full meaning in relation to what we might call Foucault's reading of the materiality of ideology, a notion rewritten as the 'physical order' of the disciplines" (75). What appears to be in Althusser a barricade against Foucaultian scepticism is in fact its Trojan horse.

In his large corpus of writing, subjectivity has been one of Eagleton's central preoccupations, but even in his allegedly Althusserian phase, he never carried a card. Those who think he did have not been sufficiently attentive to the crucial criticisms of Althusser and Macherey made in *Criticism and Ideology* (1976). The importance of those criticisms became fully significant over time and in the context of that intellectual history outlined above: as those who were less critical of Althusser capitulated to postmodern logics, Eagleton maintained a fidelity to a great deal else that he argued in that same book. Crucially, he has always refused to collapse subjectivity and ideology in Althusserian fashion—"though ideology is 'subject-centred,' it is not *reducible* to the question of subjectivity" (*Ideology* 223) (one might add: or *vice versa*)—and this refusal has also been the basis of his rejection of the Foucaultian view that subjectivity is an effect of discourse. This desire to retain some substance to the category of the subject has led him to engage critically with psychoanalysis—there could be no question of him straightforwardly endorsing the often reactionary claims of Freud or Lacan—and his understanding of the complex and historically variable relations between power, subjectivity and ideology are the focus of what is arguably his most important book, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (1990), in which he argues that subjectivity is not merely to be grasped in undialectical fashion as the manifestation of power, but also as the indispensable basis of resistance to power.

In part what is at stake here, though, is what we mean by power at all, since for Foucaultians power is endowed with the qualities of an originary force, even as it continues to be regarded with suspicion. As Peter Dews notes, "A *purely* positive account of power would no longer be an account of power at all, but simply of the constitutive operation of social systems. At many points, Foucault appears to believe it possible to adopt such a neutral stance ... while at others he continues to use the concept of power in a critical sense" (162). Althusser was similarly ambivalent about the concept of ideology, from which there could be no liberation, only different forms

of it. The possibility of achieving, and being conscious of having achieved, something we might call freedom is thereby called into question. Eagleton used to speak frequently with derision about “liberal humanism,” but seems increasingly to have developed a critical respect for both liberalism and humanism, having returned to a more classical Marxist position which sees socialism as the expansion of the freedoms made possible, but systematically denied, by bourgeois societies, a freedom grounded—paradoxically for liberals—in the recognition of mutual dependency. “Love” is the Christian ethic which informs Eagleton’s argument—crucially revising his otherwise Aristotelian discussion of morality as a kind of virtuosity—just as it represents a socialist alternative to liberalism’s desire for “individuals to flourish in their own space, without mutual interference” (169).

In many respects, though, Eagleton’s movement beyond theory is enabled by a return to ideas against which theory as we have come to know it defined itself. The term “existentialism” is problematic for some of the same reasons as “post-structuralism,” but it perhaps describes more specific connections between a group of thinkers than the latter. In fact, it may be more satisfactory to see the affinities between writers such as Althusser and Foucault as consisting in their post- or anti-existentialism than in any relationship either of them may have with structuralism. For that reason, it is perhaps not surprising that some recent attempts to supersede theory have returned to the writings, less of Sartre himself, than Merleau-Ponty and Simone de Beauvoir. It is Merleau-Ponty who informs Eagleton’s discussions of the materiality of the body in *After Theory* and elsewhere (Alderson 82–98), arguing as he does against the twin errors of objectivism and subjectivism on the grounds that our bodies are the material medium for our being-in-the-world. It is a part of our *situation*: “Man is a historical idea not a natural species.... All that we are, we are on the basis of a *de facto* situation which we appropriate to ourselves and which we ceaselessly transform by a sort of *escape* which is never an unconditioned freedom” (Merleau-Ponty 170). More recently, Toril Moi has taken this emphasis in Merleau-Ponty and Simone de Beauvoir as the basis of her critique of poststructuralist feminism of the kind which regards sceptically any claims made about the body as attempts to impose norms (“if one concedes the materiality of sex or of the body, does that very conceding operate—performatively—to materialize that sex?” [Butler 11]). There is no need for such scepticism, Moi argues: we do need to be able to understand our bodies as material forms, as part of our situation—something both enabling and to be reckoned with—but it does not follow from this that they are prescriptive in the ways that normative ideologies of gender ideology want to claim.

Theory has become a force which fails to surprise or challenge us, an available vocabulary and set of intellectual moves we've absorbed or been taught to rehearse.

Whereas for Judith Butler being a woman can only be the effect of power, for Moi, being a woman is to be an embodied figure who attempts to realize her projects, often in the face of sexism (Moi 30–83). To insist on the body as both situation and situated is to recognize the subject's particularity in a fully materialist sense, though not one which denies the importance of the subject's access to universals—amongst them “woman,” but also “human,” *both* being important, and the relationship between them representing a key philosophical problem within feminism which Moi also moves towards resolving (236–7).

What is so impressive about Moi's argument, in addition to its obvious importance for feminism, is the way she goes about it, the way she reflects on—or theorizes, if you like, but in a way which is refreshing precisely because it is unrecognizable as “theory”—what it is she aims to achieve and how best to go about achieving those aims. Drawing on the philosophical resources of Wittgenstein and Stanley Cavell, she repudiates theoreticism—the tendency for theory to dwell on its own self-created problems—in the belief that the value of theory lies in its usefulness, the extent to which it helps us in our purposes (whatever they may be: I take it this need not be a narrowly utilitarian valuation).

It would be nice if “feminist theory” could eventually come to mean a kind of thought that seeks to dispel confusions concerning bodies, sex, sexuality, sexual difference, and the power relations between and among women and men, heterosexuals and homosexuals. Such theory would aim to release us from the metaphysical pictures that hold us captive, and so return our words to the sphere of the ordinary, that is to say the sphere in which our political and personal struggles actually take place. (120)

The “metaphysical picture” she invokes here is of the kind imagined by Wittgenstein as holding us captive, unable to move beyond its confines. The writings of de Beauvoir permit Moi to see things differently and from this position the mystifications of contemporary theory start to disappear. Her achievement lies not only in articulating the most persuasive critique of post-structuralist feminism, but in returning language to the sphere of the ordinary. She exemplifies in her meticulous argument two of her other central points: that complexity and difficulty should not and need not be confused and that style and purpose are related. It should be clear enough that the importance of Moi's arguments are not confined to feminist debate.

None of this should be understood as an argument on anyone's part for an uncritical return to the existentialists; nor should it be understood as a rejection of all that has been argued in the name of theory. Rather, it is intended as additional support for the call to move beyond theory as it has been narrowly and reductively conceived in ways which should include a reevaluation of those resources in philosophy and political thought which have been effectively suppressed by theory's hegemony. Theory has become a force which fails to surprise or challenge us, an available vocabulary and set of intellectual moves we've absorbed or been taught to rehearse; in political terms, it has become a set of values to be descriptively or prescriptively—it's often not clear which (see Alderson 126–7)—mapped on to any situation, in ways which are frequently as insensitive to the specificities of those situations as anything theory has taught us to reject. I am not persuaded that Eagleton's latest book will have the effect that the quotations on its dust jacket predict, not least since the resources to move beyond theory have been there from the outset if only there had been the will to recognize them. Still, the postscript to this book invites us to consider the importance of thought in relation to u.s. dominance and global politics: "Theory—which means, in this context [of attacks on and by the u.s.], the taxing business of trying to grasp what is actually going on—is unpatriotic" (223). That is a definition of theory—realist, purposeful, engaged—many will hopefully subscribe to, but it represents a reappropriation of the term from its current shorthand usage. Long live theory.

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