

TERRY EAGLETON CRITICISM AND IDEOLOGY (1976)

Chapter 3: "Towards a Science of the Text"

Eagleton's thesis here is that the study of literature, from a Marxist perspective, leads to a scientific knowledge of how a particular stage of historical development 'thinks' its relation to history albeit necessarily from a peculiar vantage point within that historical stage. The text does not imitate the Real (which is inaccessible in and of itself): it regurgitates, rather, the significations or constructions imposed in determinable ways by a particular historical epoch upon the Real. While it may ultimately gesture towards history, the material that it operates on *per se* are those ideological forms and representations that are readily to hand and of which history is the concealed underside. In a nutshell, Eagleton is of the view that the text's "relation to ideology so constitutes that ideology as to reveal something of its relation to history" (68-9).

For Eagleton, the forces and relations of the general mode of production determine the forces and relations of literary production and thus shape the "possibility of certain distinct literary *genres*" (61). As a result, a particular genre can be produced only at a certain stage of development of a given literary and thus general mode of production. Whether "this potential is historically activated is determined not by the LMP alone" (61) but by its conjuncture with both the prevailing general ideology and the aesthetic ideology. What artistic forms actually develop may be dictated by aesthetic ideology on the basis of general ideology. Conversely, a new form may develop relatively autonomously within aesthetic ideology. As Eagleton puts it, "literary practices are typically the product of a complex conjuncture of LMP/GI/AI, with one or another of these elements assuming dominance" (62). The text is a "multiply articulated structure, determined only in the last instance by the moment of its contemporary GI" (62-3). Moreover, the text's "various aesthetic elements may be the product of distinct ideological formations, may belong to disparate 'histories', so that it is not necessarily identical, ideologically speaking, with itself" (63).

Implicitly responding to Lukács's mimetic model of Marxist criticism, Eagleton argues that the text less imitates / reflects real history than it regurgitates particular ideologically-informed significations thereof long in circulation within a given social formation. In any text, he writes, the significations it works into fiction are already representations of reality rather than reality itself. The text is a tissue of meanings, perceptions and responses which inhere in the first place in that imaginary production of the real which is ideology. (75)

In other words, while it may ultimately gesture towards history, the material that the text operates on *per se* are those ideological interpretations of history in circulation in a given society.

In a nutshell, Eagleton is of the view that the text's "relation to ideology so constitutes that ideology as to reveal something of its relation to history" (68-9). According to Eagleton, particular generic forms and linguistic devices, "selected from that always preformed content which is ideology" (76), signal as such specific ideologically-determined perceptions and assumptions. The actual form taken by a text consequently grants visibility to these pre-existent significations of reality. It delineates their contours, thereby making scientific knowledge of them and, ultimately, of history possible. Eagleton argues that the text need not always be in a conflictual relationship with ideology since it bears historically variable relations thereto of support, interrogation, subversion, etc., hence the critical need to constantly renegotiate the exact nature of this relationship

between the text and ideology.

Eagleton is of the view that the text's "material is ideological rather than historical" (80). The text, as a result, "exists in the 'hollow' it has scooped out between itself and history . . . it lacks a real particular referent" (80). Ideology pre-exists the text and presents itself in several forms--"accredited symbol and convention, codes of perceptual habit" (81)--as well as in more formalised ways: "aesthetic, political, ethical and other formulae which . . . permeate 'ordinary language'" (81). Eagleton warns that ideology most often but not always presents itself to the text as "'life' rather than category, as the immediate stuff of experience rather than as a system of concepts" (81).

While ideology pre-exists the text, the ideology of the text "defines, operates and constitutes that ideology in ways unpremeditated . . . by ideology itself" (80). The categories of an ideology produce a series of ideological significations which form the immediate materials of the text; and those significations can be seen as a concrete 'production' of the ideological categories. The study of the text is a study of the production of such produced categories--an analysis of ideological production to the second power. (81)

This, Eagleton warns, is not to be understood in a Hegelian fashion as a matter of "discovering the general within the particular. It is not in 'raising' the particular to the general that such a work reveals its ideology" (82). The text, rather, "through its formal devices, establishes a transformative relationship between itself and ideology which allows us to perceive the usually concealed contour of the ideology from which it emerges" (82).

Eagleton's view is that this relationship is one not of reflection but of occlusion. He draws in this regard on the views expressed by Althusser's colleague Pierre Macherey in Towards a Theory of Literary Production. For Macherey, given the obfuscatory nature of ideology (i.e. it functions to conceal and mystify the true nature of the relations of production), a text can only address reality indirectly. Accordingly, it is not what a text openly says that links it to reality / history but what it fails to or cannot say. The text is accordingly dividable into manifest and latent levels of meaning, a 'said' and a 'not-said,' as it were. The result is an analogy between the literary text and the dream, the censorship of ideology and the dream-censorship, that is particularly indebted to Freud.

It was Macherey's view in A Theory of Literary Production that this distantiation is achieved via the effect of the form which the text bestows on ideology. Eagleton stresses that the text establishes a relationship with ideology by means of its forms, true enough, "but does so on the basis of the *character* of the ideology it works" (84) which, *in conjunction with* the transmutative operations of the literary forms it produces or enables, . . . determines the degree to which the text achieves significant or nugatory perceptions. (84)

The materials worked by the text offer themselves to it in a certain form. Ideology is a relatively coherent formation which "broadly terms those structural definitions and distributions of meaning we term form" (85). However, the forms of the text are not "mere epiphenomena of an ideological 'content'" (85). While the ideological problematic has a "generally determining effect upon the form of the text, not least in the determination of *genre*: it is, rather, a unique production of it" (85).

Eagleton's important point is that "in producing ideological representations, the text reveals in peculiarly intense, coherent and compacted form the categories from which these representations are produced" (85). Ideology operates to dissimulate and to naturalise itself, "dissolving them into the spontaneity of the 'lived'" (85). However, what "ideology does to history the literary work raises to the second power, producing as 'natural' the significations by which history naturalises itself" (85). The text reveals to informed scrutiny how that "naturalness is the effect of a particular production" (85), in

short. The text displays itself simultaneously as 'natural' and as constructed artifice: "it is in this duality that its relation to ideology can be discerned" (85).

The goal of a Structuralist Marxist literary criticism is thus actively to seek out the rifts and discontinuities in the text for what these contradictions betray about the processes of its ideological production. The objective in so doing is to underline the function of ideology in naturalising and legitimating what is in fact socially constructed and humanly contrived. Eagleton puts it this way:

what ideology does to history the literary work raises to the second power, producing as 'natural' the significations by which history naturalises itself; but the work simultaneously reveals (to criticism . . .) how that naturalness is the effect of a particular production. If the text displays itself as 'natural', it manifests itself equally as constructed artifice; and it is in this duality that its relation to ideology can be discerned. (85)

The nature of the relationship between ideology and mode of aesthetic production varies between homology and contradiction. While some texts are relatively pure, ideologically-speaking, and so produce ideological discourses as to "'invert them back' into the categories which gave rise to them" (86), other texts display variable degrees of internal conflict and disorder. This disorder is

produced by those displacements and mutations of ideology enforced upon the text by the necessity to arrive, in accordance with the laws of its aesthetic production, at a solution to its problems. In such a text, the relatively coherence of ideological categories is revealed under the form of a concealment--revealed by the very *incoherence* of the text, by the significant disarray into which it is thrown in its efforts to operate its materials in the interests of a solution. (86)

The diachronic axis of the text must be seen as the index of the "'synchronic' resolution of certain persistent ideological conflicts" (87).

For Althusser's colleague Pierre Macherey (in Towards a Theory of Literary Production), it is accordingly not what a text openly says that links it to history but what it fails to or cannot say. The text is accordingly dividable into manifest and latent levels of meaning, a 'said' and a 'not-said,' as it were. The result is an analogy between the literary text and the dream, the censorship of ideology and the dream-censorship, that is particularly indebted to Freud. Like the dream, the literary text is an inherently ambiguous discourse whose meaning is in fact situated elsewhere, that is, in the ideological problematic by which it is informed. Its function being to occlude history, ideology cannot permit the text to think or to address certain questions which are accordingly relegated to the realm of what might be thought of as the text's unconscious. These 'surface,' as it were, at certain symptomatic moments of contradiction within the text which alert the informed critic to the ideological problematic which informs the text. The task of an ideologically-oriented criticism, like dream-analysis, is thus to "examine the distortion-mechanisms which produce that ruptured discourse" (Eagleton 91) and to reconstruct that "work-process whereby the text suffers an internal displacement by virtue of its relations to its conditions of possibility" (91).

Eagleton offers a most useful summary of Macherey's position on this which is worth quoting at length. The

literary text, far from constituting some unified plenitude of meaning, bears within it the marks of certain determinate absences which twist its various significations into conflict and contradiction. These absences--the '*not-said*' of the work--are precisely what bind it to its ideological problematic: ideology is present in the text in the form of its eloquent silences. The task

of criticism, then, is to . . . install itself in the very incompleteness of the work in order to *theorise* it--to explain the ideological necessity of those '*not-saids*' which constitute the very principle of its identity. Its object is the *unconsciousness* of the work--that of which it is not, and cannot be, aware. . . . An ideology exists because there are certain things which must not be spoken of. In so putting ideology to work, the text begins to illuminate the absences which are the foundations of its articulate discourse. (89-90)

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These symptomatic moments usually take the form of specific contradictions which the text cannot resolve. Eagleton argues that the task of an ideologically-oriented criticism, like dream-analysis, is thus to "examine the distortion-mechanisms which produce that ruptured discourse" (91) and to reconstruct that "work-process whereby the text suffers an internal displacement by virtue of its relations to its conditions of possibility" (91). Consequently, where earlier varieties of Marxist criticism tend to see the *work* as a synthetic whole in possession of a unified meaning, Structuralist Marxist critics by contrast conceive the *text* as split or riven by contradictions which turn out to be important clues as to the truth which the text is attempting to suppress.

Contradictions within the text are thus not the reflection of what Eagleton, gesturing evidently towards Lukács, calls "real historical contradictions" (95). Indeed, as Eagleton argues,

textual contradictions result precisely from the *absence* of such a reflection--from the contortive effect on the work of the ideology which interposes itself between the work and history. (95)

Nor are they the reflection of ideological contradictions: there can be no contradiction within ideology since its function precisely is to eradicate or disguise contradiction. Contradiction can only occur between ideology and what it seeks to occlude--history. By foregrounding such dissonances, therefore, the literary text provides some of the best insights into the workings of ideology. The literary text, in short, by putting the ideology in contradiction, "discloses the limits and absences which mark its relation to history" (95). The literary text, in short, by putting the ideology in contradiction, "discloses the limits and absences which mark its relation to history" (95). The literary text, in short, by putting the ideology in contradiction, "discloses the limits and absences which mark its relation to history" (95). Nor are they the reflection of ideological contradictions: there can be no contradiction within ideology since its function precisely is to eradicate or disguise contradiction. Contradiction can only occur between ideology and what it seeks to occlude--history. By foregrounding such dissonances, therefore, the literary text provides some of the best insights into the workings of ideology.

Eagleton is indebted in all this to Althusser. The latter's own focus (Structuralist that he was) in the relatively few pieces of literary criticism that he wrote, is on the specific difference of literature (rather than its derivation) from both other ideological forms and the other instances that comprise the social formation. The specificity of literature consists, he suggests, in its ability not to reflect history nor to express ideology but to 'distance' or to throw into relief the dominant categories of ideology as these function to obfuscate history. The literary text serves to highlight the way in which ideology functions to naturalise and to universalise what is in fact humanly contrived and

historical. Eagleton sums up Althusser's view of the 'distancing' effect of the literary with regard to ideology thus: literature is the

most revealing mode of experiential access to ideology that we possess. It is in literature, above all, that we observe in a peculiarly complex, coherent, intensive and immediate fashion the workings of ideology in the textures of lived experience of class-societies. It is a mode of access more immediate than that of science, and more coherent than that normally available in daily living itself. (101)

The literary work has the effect of prying open for our inspection the gulf between ideology and history that the former does its best to conceal. In other words, in

yielding up to criticism the ideologically determined conventionality of its modes of constructing sense, the text at the same time obliquely illuminates the relation of that ideology to real history. (101)

The function of criticism is thus to "refuse the spontaneous presence of the work--to deny that 'naturalness' in order to make its real determinants appear" (101).