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# Good Old Reading

c r i t i c s :  
Terry Eagleton, *How to Read Literature*, New Heaven

Terry Eagleton's book *How to Read Literature* could not have come out at a better time. The sense of fatigue from the ethical and cultural studies discourse that has dominated in recent years, that minimized the value of literature itself and the art of being a good, attentive reader in favor of an emphasis on the pragmatic and social concerns of literary interpretation, called for some sort of reaction. Obviously, the proponents of those concerns will not greet the English critic and theorist's work with rapture. After all, he is proposing a return to "pure" literary studies, in which knowledge of internal artistic mechanisms, linguistic determinants, and hermeneutic and structural contexts, with a focus on the literary work itself, are crucial for understanding each work; in fact, he argues, to fail to take such an approach results in an unconscionable falsification of the literary text, which, deprived of its subjectivity, becomes merely a facade for use in the service of ideological struggle. It's important to note that this is not a simple, unreflective call for a return to the close readings or formalist analyses of bygone years. Eagleton is too sharp a thinker for that, and completely understands the current climate. One might say that his approach is post-ethical and post-cultural studies taking into account the achievements of theory in recent decades, he offers a new formulation of the question about the basics. It will therefore be gladly accepted by those who simply like literature as literature, and do not see reading as a political or ethical act, but rather, above all, an aesthetic and cognitive task. Moreover,

such readers see that the ethical paradigm is more and more clearly become a noble chase after one's own tail, where literature is overlooked. Eagleton offers precisely those readers (and, most importantly, young literature students; the book has great academic value) simple tools for redirecting the focus of literary studies toward the text. As one of the admirers (if not an uncritical one) of Eagleton's book, I should, with droll thoroughness, acknowledge other opinions. Why droll? Because the defenders of ethical theories, allegedly attacked in their ethical engagement, have unleashed numerous complaints against Eagleton's book, reading it carelessly or rather reading their own antipathy into it; which should underscore the importance of the principle, fundamental to understanding, of reading fairly and carefully. Surveying the internet, one finds evaluations that find the book "dull, repetitive", and "self-indulgent", with "no footnotes, no bibliography" and displaying "a general laziness."<sup>1</sup> Let us disregard those comments and concentrate on what Eagleton is trying to say in his analyses.

Eagleton divides the book into five chapters (plus a short preface), each of which tackles one topic: how novels begin, characters, narrative, interpretation, and evaluation. The preface begins in a minor key by asserting that the art of literary analysis is, like folk dancing, dying

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.goodreads.com/book/show/16073298-how-to-read-literature> (accessed: 02.02.2015)

out. The author of *Why Marx Was Right* here continues his specific poetics of paradoxical comparisons (for example, “Milton’s God speaks like a constipated civil servant” (p. 51); “Moby Dick is not a sociological treatise on the American whaling industry” (p. 120); “Virtue is not like knitting a sock” (p. 59), which either come across as charming or as rather (very?) pretentious. Whatever one’s response to them, they are, I believe, intended to overcome scholarly jargon by means of relaxing the narrative, provoking with contradictions, or telling a joke in order to attract a wider audience than the closed circle of specialists. This kind of performance, still quite foreign to Polish literary studies discourse, is, let us remember, typical for many critical and theoretical texts in the West. Saving the art of analyzing works of literature is the purpose Eagleton has set for himself, choosing here to prioritize his role of literary theorist above the other role he often plays as political analyst, and placing a special emphasis on the word literature.

In “Openings” (and in successive chapters), Eagleton opposes real-life stories to literary renderings, before performing a theoretical analysis that connects to an interpretation (often brilliant) of the literary passages he quotes, and finally confirming the relevance of the titled categories for grasping the meaning of the books discussed. His first point is the question of whether literature constitutes its own category. When we talk about literature, should we use formulations, assessments, and tools that underscore its separateness? Or can we rather assert that a book’s story is no different than the story of what happened at our birthday party or during our trip abroad? And here, Eagleton is quite radical – either we see the linguistic and contextual specificity of literature, or we exist outside its effects. By stating the problem this way, the English scholar marks his stance, in the now rather outworn debate on literature, as “anti-neo-pragmatic” we can read non-literary works as literature (though it will not bring them any closer to *King Lear*), but we cannot do the reverse (pp. 3-4), for it leads to the destruction of a text’s meaning and richness. The world of literature is consistently autonomous and fictitious, as artificial as theater; characters are not living beings, only textual figures, not possessing a real life or capable of having their textual life extended into an unwritten be-

fore or after: “it is important not to confuse fiction with reality,” if it is to have substantial meaning for that reality (p. 6). The text is completely self-contained; introducing outside elements into it destroys its value. This argument now seems truly tired; the obvious truth of the above pronouncements should be universally acknowledged, but they are increasingly in need of being reasserted, as Eagleton shows convincingly, because various critics with political and ethical agendas simply keep stubbornly forgetting these pillars of the study of literature, thereby sliding into incompetent ignorance. What is more, strictly literary analyses not only are far from dull, but can be a perfect form of cognitive play, he claims. Above all, the profession of literary critic requires certain skills, and the Oxford scholar is determined to reclaim their value.

One such skill is detecting the role of a work’s opening in the creation of its meaning (Eagleton does not use footnotes in his essay, as it is not that kind of work, but he is clearly indebted in this section to Amos Oz’s *The Story Begins*). An opening is deeply paradoxical; it establishes something new and nonexistent, but also situates the work in relation to earlier works, building an intertextual context. This Bakhtinesque thesis is demonstrated in a splendid microanalysis of Forster’s *A Passage to India* (p. 14). (For the Polish reader, the examples, drawn primarily from Anglophone literature, are not always persuasively illuminated by linguistic analysis; hence the translator often leaves in the English next to the Polish, in order to show the phonetic effects, important in prose as in poetry.) Eagleton shows how particles of language or barely perceptible syntactic nuances undermine the “obvious” surface layer of the narration. “This ambiguity are the Caves really out of the ordinary or not? lies at the heart of *A Passage to India*. In a shadowy way, the very core of the book is distilled in its opening words.” This last observation is simultaneously an encouragement to read more closely, to engage with the details that work, Eagleton argues, is necessary, in order to understand what a text is really about. Do questions or answers dominate the work? Rhythm or parallelisms? Allusions or invention? Despite such concentrated attention, the text will nonetheless remain cleverer than the reader, becoming the source of endlessly inexhaustible reading. Each element in connection with the other

this is the essential insight of reception theory creates “a paradox of difference and identity. In the beginning was the paradox, the unthinkable, that which defeats language” (p. 20) this passage reveals the other layer of Eagleton’s use of paradoxes in his writing, as he thus embodies in his critical practice the most important aspect of the work being analyzed (“The first line of this is extraordinarily mouth-filling. To read it out loud, with its harsh vowels and stabbing consonants, is rather like chewing a piece of steak.” (p. 29)). Aside from the explicable paradox, Eagleton’s work also features a strong subjectivity, the most difficult thing to achieve in scholarly discourse— for how can one tell if lines in a poem are really gloomy, if a name has a melancholy sound, or a picture is exceptionally powerful? Yet therein lies the appeal of every confidently made theoretical claim, and that is the charm of Eagleton’s argumentation. It is not possible here to list all of the fascinating interpretations that fill the book, but I would like to cite his astonishing and suggestive analysis of the beginning of *Waiting for Godot*. The play, he notes, begins with the words “Nothing to be done” addressed to a character named Vladimir. “The most celebrated figure of that name in the twentieth century was Vladimir Lenin, who wrote a revolutionary tract entitled What is to be Done?” (p. 35).

The next chapter, “Character,” is supposed to convince us not to treat characters in literature like living persons, not to lose track of their fictional nature. This psychologically demanding text is required in order to avoid flattening the meaning of works of literature by turning them into illustrations of life, “true-life reports.” “Literary figures have no pre-history. It is said that a theatre director who was staging one of Harold Pinter’s plays asked the playwright for some hints as to what his characters were up to before they came on stage. Pinter’s reply was ‘Mind your own fucking business’” (p. 46). For the same reason, ethical assessments of the characters are a vain and usually meaningless endeavor. On the other hand, an analysis of a character’s development in the context of the development of literary forms can yield meaning, as it enables us to examine such fundamental anthropological questions as the formation of contemporary individualism, the interdependence of epistemological uncertainty and the surplus of information (the more

facts we have access to, the more indefinite and unclear existence becomes), the correlation between private and public life, and the modernist category of the crisis.

Literature is constructed on conventions. That is why we do not argue with the narrator, when he tells us he knows something (this is explained in the chapter on “Narrative”). We do not argue because in accordance with a tacit agreement we know that nothing in literature happens for real, that we have quite simply arranged to believe in an illusion. We do not accuse him of ill will or immorality, nor do we attribute to him any particular ideology. For Eagleton, various accusations directed at narrators of fictional texts are absurd. That is another important fact misunderstood by ethical critics, who fail to see the importance of illusion. “As Oscar Wilde remarked, art is a place where one thing can be true, but also its opposite. One thinks of the final sentences of Samuel Beckett’s novel *Molloy*: “It is midnight. The rain is beating on the window. It was not midnight. It was not raining” (p. 83). Narration is a sort of metalanguage, the voice of a novel, impossible to question or to criticize. For that very reason, all narration is, in the final analysis, ironic, and combines knowledge with the limitations of knowledge. Whatever those limitations, however, the novel stands as its own authority and confirmation.

“Interpretation” and “Value” take up roughly the second half of Eagleton’s book. If the previous chapters defined what the literary work of art is, these show what the reader, guided by the text, does. The process of interpretation, Eagleton insists, is grounded in awareness of history. “Some works of literature are more resistant to interpretation than others. As civilisation grows more complex and fragmentary, so does human experience, and so too does its literary medium, which is language” (p. 124). If that is true, then interpretation should be guided by something more than our subjective reactions to the text; subjective criticism, recording our sensitivities, is of little use, Eagleton asserts. The meaning of literature is not primarily personal and subjective. “In this sense, a fictional sentence is a bit like a scientific hypothesis” (p. 147). It is concerned with the human condition, civilization and its development, the anthropological importance of aesthetics... But are there good and bad

works of art? Categories like originality, innovation, or readability and enjoyment are, in Eagleton's view, governed by a historically changing, ephemeral perspective and are not objective. "No work of literature is literally timeless" (p. 187) nevertheless, Eagleton is confident that the worth of a work of literature, nebulous, elusive, and historical, is real. Graphomania is also real, and the example given here is that of the Scottish poet William McGonagall. The Polish equivalent could be Fr. Józef Baka, and the changing status of Baka's poetry indeed challenges any notion of fixed value. "Is it entirely out of the question that one day McGonagall might be hailed as a major poet?" (p.274.). With that highly charged sentence, Eagleton's book comes to an end.

*How to read literature?* Slowly, with precision, with due reverence... but is there a method? Each text demands a method particularly suited to it, and thus Eagleton in lieu of an answer offers only general strategies for how to approach the process of reading.

The author of *The Illusions of Postmodernism* has long been known for stirring up various controversies.

Biographical materials on Eagleton tend to stress his engagement with contradictions religious Marxist and anti-postmodern postmodernist are two epithets commonly applied to the unconventional, sarcastic Oxford scholar and intellectual. Is the book reviewed here controversial? Unquestionably. The more widely it will be read among contemporary humanities students and scholars, the more profound reflection it will inspire. Andrzej Kuśniewicz once wrote of the importance of choosing carefully which books to shelf next to each other in one's library, since they often don't get along and when shelved too close together, one book can infect its neighbor with poisonous mold. In Eagleton's case, critics have been too hasty in placing his work alongside the writings of Slavoj Žižek. In my book collection, *How to Read Literature* stands quite far apart from the psychoanalytical section, next to such works as Bruno Snell's *The Discovery of the Mind*, the work of Richard Rorty, and books devoted to the category of the imagination. It is certainly worth having in one's library. Each reader will place it with those works he or she finds to be similar... acknowledging the risk of mold, but unfazed.