

analogy and

aberration

A CRITIQUE OF EAGLETON'S CRITICISM AND IDEOLOGY

"Unfortunately, however, it happens only too often that people think they have fully understood a new theory and can apply it without more ado from the moment they have mastered its main principles, and even those not always correctly. And I cannot exempt many of the more recent 'Marxists' from this reproach, for the most amazing rubbish has been produced in this quarter, too."
- Friedrich Engels

1

Terry Eagleton's new book (1) has already had a certain amount of influence in literary circles in South Africa. This work proposes a Marxist critical method capable of giving initial form to a 'literary science' with which critics can examine the ideological and social relations elaborated in and through various forms of literature, as well as the mode of operation governing the producing and disseminating of literary forms in different social formations and historical epochs. Implicitly, the book also poses questions about the 'scientific' potential of literary criticism.

However, as literary critics from our universities have been so indoctrinated by the 'prac. crit.' approach (which can deal in a meaningful way only with aesthetics, and even this reflected through a liberal ideology which refuses to see its own limitations and subjectivity) there has been little to prepare them for a 'scientific' discourse. Thus, it is perhaps necessary to subject Eagleton's book to closer scrutiny.

It is obvious immediately that this work contains a few interesting and provocative discussions. Particularly of interest are the critique of the Scrutiny school and of Raymond Williams, and the criticism of the Althusserian conception of the insertion of 'art' into a society's superstructure. But much of what is of value is hidden from us behind a smokescreen of terminological and conceptual confusions almost

dizzying in their ability to mystify. Moreover, the author is not above contradicting himself, often within the same page (2).

Eagleton, it would seem, has adopted an unfortunate approach to questions of 'literary science'; and his misunderstanding is set squarely in and around the chapter entitled 'Categories for a Materialist Criticism' (3). It is with these misunderstandings that I will briefly deal in what follows.

2

Central to Eagleton's hypothesis is the concept of literary 'production' and the 'literary mode of production' (sic). This refers to the structures of literary "production, distribution, exchange and consumption" (p.47) which may co-exist in a particular social formation, and change during history e.g. it is possible in South Africa to talk of the co-existence of certain oral traditions among indigenous peoples which have been changed (by newspapers, radio etc.) but not overcome by the growth of literacy. In a capitalist society, however, the major way literature is produced and distributed is via publishing houses, libraries and the commercial sector. Thus literature has specific ways of being produced, which may relate to social relationships at different stages of history, such as tribal bard-chieftain, medieval poet-patron, author-publisher relationships, and so on.

Nevertheless, the artist's individualised creative process cannot be seen as 'production' with regard to the structure of the economy of a society (4). In complex societies production is a collective process.

"In the social production of their life, men enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will, relations of production which correspond to a definite stage of development of their material productive forces. The sum total of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which rises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the social, political, and intellectual life generally."
(Marx, Preface to 'A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy', 1859)

As an example, within the capitalist mode of production the artist 'produces', say, a manuscript or a painting (which are commodities differing in use-value from each other and from other items) which is sold to his publisher or art dealer as a commodity (and these, **transformed** into exchange-values, **now differ only in quantity**)

after which the published manuscript or displayed work of art will enter into the production-consumption cycle as a commodity (5). The actual publishing process usually has little or nothing to do with the artist. While different types of commodity contain qualitatively different types of concrete labour and differ in use-value, they contain an equal amount of abstract labour and differ in exchange-value only in quantity:

"food which satisfies a biological need is qualitatively completely different from, say, musical instruments which can satisfy an aesthetic need. Both are use-values because they satisfy a need...items which have a different material form, like a piano and a car, and yet which are equal in exchange, must have something in common and have an equal amount of it. This common property of all commodities is human labour...if we think of labour from the point of view of the tasks it performs, that is, if we think in terms of concrete labour, it is obviously true that there are many different forms of labour varying according to the nature of the use-values they produce, and that these different forms are not directly comparable with each other. For example, the particular types of labour and skills used in car manufacturing are not those required to make pianos. But just as use-values that are materially different from each other and satisfy quite different needs, share the common property of being use-values, so the different forms of concrete labour share the common property of all being labour. This can be called abstract labour and all the different types of concrete labour, the different types that make pianos and cars for instance, are all different forms of abstract labour.

Abstract labour is the quality that all commodities have in common. Its crystallisation in the form of a commodity gives that commodity value. In other words value is abstract labour embodied in a commodity."

(Kay, 1975)

As the value of commodities has only a social reality, which they acquire insofar as they are expressions of a particular social substance viz. human labour, it follows as a matter of course that value can only manifest itself in the social relation of commodity to commodity. It is precisely the social nature of abstract labour that makes it invisible in the process of production, as Gerstein observes: while concrete labour can be seen directly, abstract labour appears only in its effects.

Consequently the writer can be said to be in the same relation to the publisher as, for example, an inventor to a large manufacturer. The creative process is entirely different from the economic production process, which gives books, pianos, cars, refrigerators, machines etc. an economic existence as commodities quantified in terms of their exchange-value.

That Eagleton conflates the individualized creative process and

the production of books etc. as commodities is beyond doubt: he specifically situates literature (as a blanket term) within both base and superstructure of society, and claims it figures at once within material production and ideological formation (6). Indeed, his understanding of commodity production in various historical epochs is scanty, to say the least:

"In the case of literary production, the materials and instruments employed normally perform a common function within the GMP (by this he means the dominant mode of production - ks) itself. This is less true of certain other modes of artistic production, many of whose materials and instruments, though of course produced by the GMP, perform no significant function within it. (Trombones and greasepaint play no world-historical part within general production)"
(p.49)

But trombones, greasepaint and books are all commodities, and the 'world-historical' role the author ascribes to literature is misnamed. What I presume he is attempting to isolate here is the important role literature can play in the ideological reproduction of the social formation.

The weakness and misconceptions inherent in Eagleton's 'scientific' categories are amply demonstrated by the fact that he cannot even logically complete the analogies he has drawn to economic production. The theory of value, vital to an understanding of Marxist economics, can have no consequent application to his discourse apart from a nonsensical attempt to rename aesthetics 'literary value' (7).

3

What has been discussed above ties up with his concept of a supposed 'literary mode of production' which he claims to be a "unity of certain forces and social relations of literary production in a particular social formation" (p.45). The 'literary mode of production' is seen by Eagleton as a particular substructure of the 'general mode of production', presumably meaning the dominant mode of production in the economic sense (such as, for example, the feudal mode of production or capitalist mode of production) (8).

Now societies vary in the way their productive processes utilize means of production and labour. The production of books as commodities is therefore part of the economy of a literate society (and this should not be fudged into saying that oral literature plays a part in the economy of its society, as Eagleton tries to do - it rather serves an ideologically reproductive role, as mentioned). The concept 'mode of production' schematizes the production process in such a

way as to define the basic relations according to which it functions. It keys itself upon the materialist premise that economic factors are crucial in the determinance of a social formation:

"My view that each special mode of production and the social relations corresponding to it, in short, that the economic structure of society is the real basis on which the juridical and political superstructure is raised, and to which definite social forms of thought correspond; that the mode of production determines the character of the social, political and intellectual life generally.." (Marx, Capital Vol. 1)

In any production process surplus is produced, but the way this surplus is appropriated by different social groups varies: this is the crucial way in which modes of production differ from one another. The nature of the manner in which they differ is the mode of appropriation of surplus-labour. In capitalist society, for instance, the direct producers (workers) have their surplus-labour appropriated by non-producers (owners of the means of production, capitalists) in the specific form of surplus-value: for the capitalist, the purpose of production in the CMP is the accumulation of capital and the profit-motive. In such a society the economic aspect of art which exists as commodity production/distribution for the market has substance only as interlinked in the wider capitalist mode of production.

Indeed, the debate raging at the moment on 'modes of production' centres around whether the term is applicable to a whole social formation or to the economic level of the social formation. It is a concept which is broad in scope (the argument is to how broad it is): contrary to this, the production of literature is here a tiny sector of the economy. It is impermissible to categorise modes of production in terms of the different commodities produced, or by the geographical areas in which they take place.

I do not intend to follow Eagleton's 'modes of production' confusion any further, but simply to point out that the 'forces of literary production' (p.47) and 'social relations of literary production' (pp.50-53) are based on a 'literary production' model which is entirely incorrect.

4

It should by now be clear what Eagleton is really doing by means of his 'scientific theory' (9). He is drawing superficial analogies and using these as models. In formulating his 'materialist approach to the problem of value' (sic) in literature, he says:

"...such a method must re-enact the founding gesture of Marxist political economy and re-consider the

question of value on the site of literary production ...Literary value is a phenomenon which is produced in that ideological appropriation of the text, that 'consumptional production' of the work, which is the act of reading. It is always relational value: 'exchange-value'. The histories of 'value' are always a sub-sector of the histories of literary-ideological receptive practices..." (pp. 166-7).

The use of 'value' in such a context, which refers to ideological relations and effects, is obfuscatory, as any Marxist will know: it is changing this concept to nebulous, pseudo-scientific jargon (10). In addition to such model-building, he indulges often in what seems to be a simple renaming process. Some readers might be titillated, perhaps, to have aesthetics designated a 'science of value', reading referred to as 'literary consumption' (p.42) or the transmutation of dramatic text to stage production as 'theatrical practice' (p.66) but such imprecise glorifying of language is in essence superficial.

The point is that literature has its most important effects at the level of the social and ideological superstructure of society. Thus, to conflate by means of analogy the concept of mode of production (a general theory of economic structure) into ideological and aesthetic terms is far from making a theory of literature 'scientific'. Marx notes the necessity for

"the distinction...between the material transformation of the economic conditions of production, which can be determined with the precision of natural science, and the legal, political, religious, aesthetic or philosophic - in short, ideological forms in which men become conscious of this conflict and fight it out."
(Preface, op.cit.)

This is not to deny that the parameters within which various forms of literature are 'produced' (i.e. actualized) have important effects on the quality and manner of ideological dissemination within a society: the study of the ideological effects of literature has as a necessary constituent, in other words, an examination of the structures whereby it is formed and disseminated, and should not only regard 'effects on the reader'.

Now, you may ask, is this not what Eagleton appears to be striving towards, despite his misconceptions? Granted he makes a few basic mistakes, but at times he seems to be prey merely to a semantic confusion, and he does point his attention in an important direction. Does it not all boil down to a carping on words?

But problems exist in the Marxist paradigm precisely because some of its formulations are still of a very general abstract nature - in particular, its literary criticism is not yet generally impressive: and

that is why, beyond any question of words (which are usually indecisive in theoretical matters) Eagleton's models are parodies of the theory he pretends to ascribe to. He does not encompass the idea of a complex and open-ended social theory, rather seeking a basic recipe to enable him to understand everything from economics to art. Use of his model will, I believe, lead to a 'science' which is both structuralist in its execution and static in its possibilities (11).

Explicit in Criticism and Ideology is the search for a 'literary science'. Now, while the whole idea of literary science is an interesting one where much further debate is possible (a debate which partly will centre around the meaning of 'science'), dialectical materialism can claim to be scientific precisely because it is a dynamic theory, applicable to concrete analysis and yet modifiable due to its dialectical relationship with the 'real'. Eagleton's analogies are, finally, in opposition to such a theory. In the study of South African literature, some literary critics are becoming aware of the enormous importance of a criticism which takes account of contextual considerations, the study of class struggle on an ideological level, the manner in which oral and written literature have interacted historically among black people, and so on. For a critic wishing to construct tools with which to approach so many new and difficult areas, Eagleton clearly demonstrates what not to do. His 'scientific' approach is facile, haphazard and misconceived. Thus, following his example, a few ill-understood concepts would be enough to start with. The rest would depend on the vividness of the critic's imagination and the height of his or her ivory tower.

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Footnotes

1. Eagleton T. - Criticism and Ideology (NLB, London, 1976). All unacknowledged page references hereafter will be to this work.
2. "...in capitalist formations above all literature belongs at once to 'base' and 'superstructure' - figures at once within material production and ideological formation" (p.41), is followed by "All literary production, in fact, belongs to that ideological apparatus which can be termed the 'cultural'" (p.56).
And again: "With the growth of printing, however, extensive speculative book production and marketing finally integrate the dominant LMP into the GMP as a specific branch of general commodity production... Only with a certain stage of development of the GMP is the relatively autonomous existence of an LMP possible. Literary production and consumption presuppose certain levels of literacy.."

(p.49)

3. For a similar mistaken approach to the problem nearer home see M. Nupen - 'The Idea of a Critical Sociology of Music' Bolt 11,1974.

4. While Eagleton at one point makes this distinction (see p.51), the major thrust of his work is to deny it. It can easily be seen how, in his terms, artists become 'proletarians'. (Moreover, I feel the problem relates to the weakness of the Althusserian concept of 'theoretical practice': but will not take it further here).

5. The woolly and confused nature of Eagleton's formulations is evinced in the manner in which he describes this process:

"The literary producer stands in a certain social relation to his consumers which is mediated by his social relations to his patrons, publishers, and distributors of his product. These social relations are themselves materially embodied in the character of the product itself" (p.50). See also p.47.

6. In a slightly different context: "It is only by the materialist concept of productive labour, as the definitive relation between text and production, that such a notion can be demystified... The relation between text and production is a relation of labour: the theatrical instruments (staging, acting skills and so on) transform the 'raw materials' of the text into a specific product..." (p.65).

7. "If, then, a 'science of literary value' is an element of the science of ideologies, is value to be abandoned to some mere ideological relativism?... It is at this point that we need to re-open the question of textual production in relation to the problem of value. For if there can be a science of the ideologies of value, there may also be a science of the ideological conditions of the production of value. Such a science would not reinsert value 'within' the product, but would rather reinsert the conditions of textual production within the 'exchange relation' of value" (pp. 168-9).

8. However: "A distinct mode of production thus determines the specific mode of consumption, distribution, exchange and the specific relations of these different phases to one another." (Marx, Contribution op.cit.). Marx is talking in the broad economic sense. For Eagleton's view of the articulation between LMP and GMP, see p.49.

9. The author says that Trotsky affirms the "relative autonomy of art" in his literary criticism, but "struggles painfully towards the categories in which it might be theorised" (p.171). But Trotsky is talking about the autonomy of art on the ideological level, and **not** (as Eagleton does) of the 'relative autonomy' of the 'literary mode of production' from the 'general mode of production'.

10. By 'consumptional production' I presume he refers to "the text's own proffered modes of producibility" which are "naturally constructed by the ideological act of reading" (p.167), by which he is in fact saying nothing more remarkable than that reader and product (book) ideologically reaffirm each other within certain parameters.

11. His notion of articulation of 'literary modes of production' is, as an example, essentially structuralist. See p.45.

