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Before a return to metatheory
T. Eagleton's 'After theory'

Eagleton, Terry (2003) *After Theory*. London: Allen Lane: 222 pp. ISBN 0 71399 732 X.

Having read Terry Eagleton's *After Theory* – a book that has been predicted to send ripples throughout cultural theory – I am left with a number of unanswered questions. *After Theory* appears to have the primary objective of encouraging cultural theorists to overcome their inhibitions and to consider the metaphysical questions that often go ignored. On the surface this appears to be a worthy direction. However, the argument is not totally convincing.

The central argument of Eagleton's text is that cultural theorists should move toward a focus upon the bigger transcendental questions required by the transforming cultural environment. Or, rather, Eagleton's text is a challenge to cultural theorists to transfer their attention to questions of truth, morality, fundamentalism and death, in order to ensure the relevance and survival of cultural theory. For Eagleton, this can only be achieved by an overcoming of the fear caused by the sustained avoidance of these universal issues in favour of the minutia of everyday life. As a result of this focal shift cultural theory will re-separate itself from everyday life and will then be in a position better suited to its critique.

It is important to acknowledge that *After Theory* is not an attempt to undermine the achievements of cultural theory. This is something that Eagleton is very careful to clarify within the text. Rather, in the tradition of critical theory, *After Theory* represents

an attempt to encourage the reader to reconsider cultural theory through critique. It is an intimated attempt to overcome uncritical consensus within cultural studies.

Eagleton's text also contains a secondary argument. This argument also adopts the form of a critique of existing contemporary cultural theory. 'Culture only seems free-floating because we once thought we were riveted in something solid, like God or Nature or Reason. But that was an illusion.' (Eagleton, 2003: 57) Eagleton dismisses the understanding of culture as a free floating, liquid, fluid substance as a construct of discourse, a language game. This particular language game exists as an opposition to the previous discourse of the heavy, hard, solid culture of history. We understand culture in a particular way because we describe it using those particular metaphors, and, furthermore, these metaphors exist in opposition to the previous discourse (in the form of metaphors) used for describing culture. This is a useful and illuminating criticism of the dominant ideologies of cultural theory. This criticism can be used to transform not only the understanding of culture, but also to transform the understanding of the construct (or language game) that is cultural theory.

Does Eagleton really want a return to narrative forms of Knowledge? The answer must be yes. Does he accept the floored nature of scientific forms of knowledge? The answer again must be yes. A reading of the text actually reveals that although this is Eagleton's position he would like the reader to disregard these two guiding assumptions. Eagleton wants a form of scientific knowledge to emerge that evokes the spirit of narrative forms of knowledge. The focus then must switch to paralogy. Paralogy is a form of (or approach to) knowledge that incorporates, accepts, and celebrates paradox, inconsistency, undecidables, and incomplete information (Lyotard, 1999: 60). This form of (scientific) knowledge is brought about by the increase in the questioning of, and incredulity toward, established scientific knowledge that is based on rigid measurement, universal acceptance of the result, absolute truths, and the totality of consensus based opinion. Paralogy appears to be the direction that Eagleton is tacitly intimating. Paralogy must be considered to be a postmodern methodology. If this is the case then Eagleton's argument that postmodernism is coming to an end must be regarded as inaccurate, or at least premature. *After Theory* suggests that our concerns and parameters must stretch to

include metaphysical questions within a contemporary context. The answers to these questions must be free from narrative formulation while at the same time embracing its essence. This is a complex perspective. The complexity of which is partially masked by Eagleton's accessible writing style.

Eagleton writes in what can be described as streams of consciousness. The book is divided into eight chapters with no individual subsections to guide the reader. Instead Eagleton grabs onto threads of thoughts and draws them out into micro conclusions. These are the streams of consciousness. He allows these ideas the space to develop on the page. The writing feels like an imprint of the thought processes involved in reaching a conclusion. It appears that Eagleton is attempting to develop a style that supports the major arguments within the text. This approach makes the text eminently readable. Once you attach yourself to the Eagleton's unpicked threads it becomes difficult to let go until a conclusion is achieved. It is a book that should not be used for reference purposes but for cover-to-cover reading.

As I have mentioned, the text leaves a number of unanswered questions – this is not to devalue the importance or quality of the text – these questions bare testament to the value of *After Theory*. The book asks us to return to metaphysics, this is fraught with danger; it can mean that the theorist loses focus upon the microscopic (intertextual) details that are interwoven within everyday life. If we look at these big questions then it is possible that the smaller ones will remain unanswered or ignored. It is often these smaller questions that combine to create mosaics of the bigger answers. Moreover, if society itself becomes preoccupied with metaphysics then the risk is even greater. In this instance the possibility of mass narcissisms, detachment and dehumanisation may be a short journey away. This is a journey that has been previously mapped out by Theodor Adorno (2001).

The text suggests that we are coming to an end in terms of the cultural applications and analytical relevance of the postmodern condition. Crucially Eagleton acknowledges that this does not mean that we will return to a world without postmodern theory (or without cultural theory), rather we will enter a new epoch. If this is the case then why is this particular text so clearly influenced by Jean-François Lyotard's *The*

Postmodern Condition (1999). It appears that Eagleton's arguments are actually undermined by the presence of his own writing, as a result *After Theory* must be considered to be paradoxical. It argues an end to something of which it is a part. Conversely *After Theory* actually supports the rather unfashionable argument that the postmodern condition is analytically profound and culturally apparent.

If, as Eagleton suggests, we now shift our focus to larger questions and dispense with our analysis of pubic hair, pornography, or sit-coms then the fate of cultural theory looks to be a rocky path. These specific examples represent the types of micro-cultural artefacts that Eagleton identifies as forming the focal point of contemporary cultural studies, and they are therefore extended examples of the narratives of gender, class, and race that, according to Eagleton, cultural theory cannot continue to recount. If these bedrocks of cultural theory are removed will it be confronted with an identity crisis of sorts? Can cultural theory still be cultural theory if it deals in metaphysics? This is a question that will only be answerable once the implications of *After Theory* have been realised.

References

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