‘Beyond the Confines’: An Interview with Terry Eagleton

The *antae* Editorial Board

antae, Vol. 3, No. 3 (Dec., 2016), 240-242

antae *is an international refereed postgraduate journal aimed at exploring current issues and debates within English Studies, with a particular interest in literature, criticism and their various contemporary interfaces. Set up in 2013 by postgraduate students in the Department of English at the University of Malta, it welcomes submissions situated across the interdisciplinary spaces provided by diverse forms and expressions within narrative, poetry, theatre, literary theory, cultural criticism, media studies, digital cultures, philosophy and language studies. Creative writing and book reviews are also accepted.*

‘Beyond the Confines’: An Interview with Terry Eagleton

The *antae* Editorial Board

ANTAE: Thank you for your time, Professor Eagleton. Quite often, when one tries to think of how texts can be transgressive, one looks beyond the hardcopy and to the myriad manifestations in the online world. Is this in some way pre-emptive of the direction that we are collectively moving in, that is, towards digital spaces rather than traditional ones?

TERRY EAGLETON: All over the planet, men and women are crouched reverently over their little oblong electronic gods, sealed in their closed digital spaces, silent, blind, and deaf. They probably wouldn’t notice a murder if one happened in their midst. It’s one of the most momentous and alarming social transformations for a very long time. If this is the future of humanity, I prefer to stick with old-fashioned libraries and those occasionally beautiful material objects known as books. There’s nothing beautiful about screens and keyboards. And if that’s a regressive viewpoint, so what? Sometimes the past is preferable to the present, sometimes not.

A: Speaking of writing and transformations, your own critical writing style is quite masterfully crafted as unique and accessible, being coloured with several instances of humour as well as a certain informality. Do you see this as a device that you have adopted for specific purposes, or is this a natural aspect of your voice which you cannot or do not want to supress?

TE: It took me a long time to gain the confidence to learn to write in a way which reflected my personality. When you’re older you can afford to relax a bit. I think of the humour in my writing as inherited in part from my Irish background. It’s not a device I’ve adopted, it’s just the way I am. I’m also a deep believer in popularising ideas beyond the confines of academia, and see this as an essential task for radical critics (though most of them ignore it and just write for each other). I would like to think that though my writing is *clear*, it isn’t *plain*. I invest a great deal of energy in style. The sound, shape, rhythm and texture of a sentence is almost as important to me as its content. I’m dismayed by the fact that so much academic writing seems deaf to these features. Writing involves a great deal more than just setting down ideas. It’s an art that needs to be acquired.

A: Throughout your career, you have written on a vast range of ideas about literature, culture, and theory, from Marxism to Postmodernism, from the tragic to theology. You are still, of course, actively involved to this day. For instance, in a seminar on Realism (October, 2015) which was very thought-provoking, you stated that ‘realism is anti-realist’, because it can never present you with the real (which can also be read in its Lacanian sense). Could you elaborate somewhat more on this statement?

TE: The Real in the Lacanian sense isn't the same thing as the real in the everyday sense of the word. For Lacan, it involves the death drive, the unconscious, the body and its drives and so on, all of which the real in the everyday sense serves to mask and displace. Since the Real in the psychoanalytical sense defeats language, it can never be articulated. It can be known only as a kind of eloquent silence at the heart of our speech. But then what we don't and can't say, and *how* we don't and can't say it, is often more important than what give voice to.

A: Echoing Fredric Jameson, Slavoj Žižek famously claimed that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of Capitalism. At which point in history do you think this became true (if you agree with the claim, of course), and was there anything specific that sealed this fate?

TE: In their earlier period, the middle classes dreamt of endless progress. This was a form of self-deception, to be sure, but at least it kept alive the idea of a future. At a later stage of capitalism, this belief in progress gives way to a conviction that the new is simply a recycling of the familiar, which is part of postmodern ideology. So history itself disappears. From the 1980s onwards, with the so-called death-of-history apologists, we become trapped in an eternal present, and the future will simply be what we have now with a few more gadgets and a few more options. Almost everything that has happened since 2000—9/11, the so-called war on terror, the capitalist crash, the Arab springs, the rise of ISIS and so on—disproves this complacent assumption. That doesn't mean that things are going to improve. They may well become a good deal worse. It's just that what's wildly unrealistic is the assumption that they will essentially stay the same.

A: Speaking no longer of history but of contemporary situations, how, do you think, is the crisis of immigration in the Mediterranean affecting the way in which systems of power are both regarded and controlled in the West? Is it even a "crisis", or does the word in this context denote the strictly economic realm?

TE: There's definitely a direct line from 9/11 to the refugees currently crowding on the borders of Europe. I think we need to reflect hard on the logic of this process.

A: To turn now towards your writings on religion: You have written extensively about the recent rise of what one might term a pugilistic atheism, such as the one espoused by Richard Dawkins. Works of yours, such as *Reason, Faith, and Revolution: Reflections on the God Debate,* seem to suggest, alongisde those of other writers informed by the Marxist tradition, a sort of a reformulatory vitality that can still be found in Christian texts and myths—as is for instance the case with Antonio Negri's take on the Book of Job. There seems to be in these readings, however, a telling soteriological undercurrent—there is still something that needs to be saved and that can be re-fashioned in a human world devoid of past dogmatic certainties and the blistering comforts of faith. Would you accept this characterisation; if so, would you find its religious residues at all worrying?

TE: One vital difference between the Left and the Right is that the Left believes that there is something to be redeemed and the Right doesn't. How anyone can take even a brief glance at the torture-chamber of human history and not conclude that we're in need of saving, whether

by politics or religion or both, is deeply mysterious to me. Christianity in my view acknowledges the terribleness of our condition (it names it original sin) but also believes that we have enough dignity and virtue to be capable of redemption. Such transformation is possible, however, only if we first submit to a radical breaking. Which means that this is a tragic process, as well as a hopeful one.

A: And finally, to conclude, should one be optimistic for the future of literature, criticism, and theory?

TE: I don't believe in terms like optimism and pessimism. What's important (but also, perhaps, ultimately impossible) is realism, which leads you sometimes to hope and sometimes not to. People will of course continue to use language inventively, whether they call it literature or not, and will continue to need complex theories because the truth is not transparent and because we're deeply self-deceiving creatures. True theory is in that sense a form of emancipation, not just a body of academic work.