Review: Against the Grain
Author(s): Ronald Strickland
Reviewed work(s): Against the Grain: Essays, 1975-1985 by Terry Eagleton
Published by: Duke University Press
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/1772908
Accessed: 24/06/2008 16:12

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at http://www.jstor.org/action/showPublisher?publisherCode=duke.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit organization founded in 1995 to build trusted digital archives for scholarship. We work with the scholarly community to preserve their work and the materials they rely upon, and to build a common research platform that promotes the discovery and use of these resources. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.
Review: Against the Grain

Ronald Strickland
English, Illinois State


In an essay on Fredric Jameson, Terry Eagleton observes that his subject’s work is devoid of satire and polemic, which, Eagleton asserts, are “essential modes . . . for a political revolutionary” (p. 71). By contrast, most of Eagleton’s own essays are quite polemical and satirical. He describes these qualities as part of a conscious project, influenced by the examples of Benjamin, Brecht, and Bakhtin, among others, to bring theoretical discourse into contact with class struggle—more specifically, to “broach questions of cultural politics and to recover in both style and theme a pleasure and playfulness which could not be deferred until theory had done its work” (p. 6). Thus, a key strength of Eagleton’s method is that he does not attempt to engage other critics and theorists on the generally accepted terms of academic discourse. The themes he returns to most often reveal his overriding concern with the political consequences of literary theory; he repeatedly criticizes the pluralistic “idealism of American criticism” and the apolitical tendencies in American deconstruction.

Eagleton’s essays usually offer an exposition of the theoretical positions of one or more writers, followed by a brief critique emphasizing the political implications and/or consequences of these positions. He appropriates elements from theories he finds useful, building a theoretical position and methodology of his own as he critiques the positions of others. For example, in an essay on Pierre Macherey’s extension of Louis Althusser’s work, Eagleton discusses the adversarial force of Macherey’s “scientific criticism” (closely related to Althusser’s concept of “symptomatic reading,” though Macherey doesn’t use the
term). While the close reading situates itself in the same epistemological frame as the text it reads, filling in the text's gaps with faithful interpretation, Macherey's "scientific criticism" takes up a marginal position in relation to the text, establishing a "decisive rupture" between itself and the text in order to theorize the text's "incompleteness" or "lack of plenitude," to explain the "ideological necessity" of the text's "constitutive silences." "It is these silences," Eagleton writes, "which the critic must make speak; it is the 'unconsciousness' of the work which he interrogates, an unconsciousness which is nothing less than the play of history itself on the work's margins" (p. 15).

Althusserian-Machereyan symptomatic reading, with its underlying emphasis on "the play of history," appeals to Eagleton as a more directly political way of disrupting textual hierarchies than that offered by either mainstream American deconstruction or deconstructive Marxism. In Eagleton the play of history is equated with class struggle, and properly Marxist theory lays claim to both history and class struggle (p. 83). Thus, in his discussion of Michael Ryan's *Marxism and Deconstruction*, Eagleton asserts that there are three distinguishing claims of Marxism: first, "that material production is the ultimately determinant factor of social existence"; second, "that the class struggle is the central dynamic of historical development"; and third, tentatively, "that Marxism is a theory and practice of political *insurrection*" (pp. 81–82). Ryan is uneasy about such claims, Eagleton suggests, and his discomfort is symptomatic of the pervasive influence of idealist, Hegelian Marxism in the United States, where the absence of a militant working-class movement and a tradition of class struggle insulates intellectuals from the real world (p. 81).

Eagleton's points of contention with Ryan actually seem minimal, in theoretical terms, and their force is all but lost in his caricatures of Ryan's positions. For example, Eagleton criticizes Ryan for placing too little emphasis on class struggle: "As for class struggle, Ryan certainly allots this a central role, but it usually crops up in his text as one component of the contemporary Holy Trinity of 'class, race and gender'. Once again, with the most gracious kind of theoretical good manners, he seems anxious to exclude nothing or nobody, reluctant to privilege anything or anybody over anything else" (p. 82). In another example, Eagleton tempers his acknowledgment that Ryan's "criticisms of the centralist, authoritarian facets of Leninism" are "entirely appropriate" with the observation that the critique "would come more acceptably from one who did not speak so distastefully of 'disciplinarian' political organizations." "This," Eagleton concludes, "may be stirring stuff in the University of Virginia, but it has something of a hollow ring in the jungles of Vietnam or Guatemala" (p. 84). Here, it seems to me,
Eagleton’s satire has something of a hollow ring. It tends to obscure the fact that he really has no theoretical argument with Ryan.

Frequently, however, Eagleton scores telling points with his playful, satirical style. In an essay on Paul de Man’s reading of William Empson’s reading of Marvell’s “Garden,” for example, Eagleton approvingly contrasts “the jokiness of both Brecht and Empson—the one self-consciously plebian, the other iconoclastically English” to “the high European seriousness of a de Man” (p. 162), whose reading of pastoral as a grimly ironic recognition of the “eternal separation” between the human intellect and the natural world (p. 156) has the elitist effect of affirming the supposedly “uncrossable gulf” between intellectual and manual labor (p. 158). Eagleton dismisses this view of pastoral with a characteristically satirical flourish:

Few words have rung more ominously in Marxist ears than natural, and we have all long since learnt to rehearse the proper objections to it with Pavlovian precision. Having learnt that lesson, however, it is surely time to move on, rather than remaining like de Man fixated in the moment of bleak recognition that aardvarks are not people, and then repeating that traumatic moment compulsively. (P. 158)

Often, as in this case, satire seems to be a way for Eagleton to tap into a collective, implicitly proletarian wisdom. Yet one problem with such humor is that it too easily becomes a way to dismiss an opposing argument or a potentially valid critique out of hand. Thus, some may object that Eagleton sets up his theoretical opponents as straw men, or that, as he winks at the reader, Eagleton constructs a dismissive, elitist consensus. But a rhetorical consensus produced in this way is no more desirable than the authoritarian high seriousness Eagleton criticizes in de Man.

To my satisfaction, however, Eagleton almost always supports his satire with rigorous, conscientious argument. As a result, the book stands as a highly successful example of what Eagleton has termed “revolutionary criticism.” More often and more publicly than any other literary scholar, Terry Eagleton has sought connections between traditional Marxist thought and poststructural theory, and these essays provide an interesting and instructive record of his exploration.