

Sounding the Future: Marxism and the Plays of Terry Eagleton¹

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Terry Eagleton

Any sort of serious criticism of Terry Eagleton's plays, aside from casual rejection or abuse, has been rare. I hope, in this little essay, to go some way towards remedying this situation by setting out some profitable ways of beginning to read his plays and sketching some of the areas of thought that are important to any understanding of these works as pieces of drama and as contributions toward a wider debate around the place and project of Marxist criticism.

Eagleton's dramas make useful and worthwhile reading for three interrelated reasons. They offer us access to, and an opportunity to engage with, a series of themes and concerns that have occupied his writing for several decades. In this sense they form an admirable introduction to a body of work that is central to the debates in current critical theory. Eagleton's dramas are, in ways I hope to make obvious, meditations and reflections on a set of particular problems confronting materialist criticism. While they may not offer conclusive solutions to these problems, they pose these familiar problems in fresh and startling ways. Eagleton's dramas do not "congeal the spectator"; they are not based on "dramaturgies of abdication"² but are rather part of an *oeuvre* which is concerned to show its problematics and inadequacies as part of an active relationship and dialogue with its audience. Materialist criticism has -- and is itself -- a good deal of unfinished business, and Eagleton's plays work through this process, contributing towards the "practice of political listening and attention."³ By rewriting, or reworking, the concerns of his ongoing intellectual project in a form that is a "collective, open ended,

revisionary, practical process . . . like laboratory work,"⁴ Eagleton positions these concerns in new and illuminating ways.

Eagleton's plays are entertaining and pleasurable experiences. They are an attempt to inject some much-needed humour into the discourse of radical politics and make good reading. In an intellectual tradition where, according to Perry Anderson's now classic history, "the hidden hallmark . . . is that it is a product of *defeat*" and corresponding gloominess⁵ Eagleton's work stands out for its optimism, skill and beauty.

A note of caution on method is in order here. The three plays I discuss below -- *Saint Oscar*, *The White, the Gold and the Gangrene*; and *God's Locusts* -- have been selected for their usefulness in illustrating important points around Eagleton's work as a whole. My aims are *analytical* more than they are *evaluative*. Although I have a good deal of praise for aspects of the plays -- and a good deal of criticism for the aesthetic and political failures of *God's Locusts*, of which more below -- my main concerns are with what is at work in these texts and what they react against as opposed to whether this process "works" or not.

A question central to this approach is that of style. I try, in the following discussion, to trace elements of the plays back into Eagleton's earlier works and themes, to chase writers and sources out of their hiding places and into the centre of our observations. In relating the dramas to the rest of Eagleton's work, and in illuminating their recurrent concerns, I hope to produce readings rewarding for both sets of text. As Fredric Jameson, in a justly celebrated sentence, has written:

any concrete description of a literary or philosophical phenomenon -- if it is to be really complete -- has an ultimate obligation to come to terms with the shape of the individual sentences themselves, to give an account of their origin and formation.⁶

Although it would be absurd hubris to offer this little essay as a "really complete" account of Eagleton's drama, the point remains that the concrete analysis of individual style and its resonance, the "origin and formation" of sentences, seems like the most appropriate place to begin thinking through the Marxism of these plays. It seems in this respect I am in good company. As Steve Connor notes, "in almost all of Terry Eagleton's most significant critical engagements with other critics there tends to be a crucial episode in which he attempts a reading of the politics of his subject's style."⁷ My attempt here to give an account of the "origin and formation" of these sentences could, I suppose, be read as a parallel critique of Eagleton's *method*, a turning upon itself of two approaches -- dramatic and critical -- to the same themes, pressing his own interrogative approach to his very sentences.

I have claimed to be more analytic than evaluative. This is all well and good but "[l]iterary criticism is not book keeping"⁸ and it is dishonest, as well as rather pointless, to try to deny or hide partisanship. I am very sympathetic towards Eagleton's project, share his (historical materialist) analysis of the world and of literature and am committed to the same (revolutionary socialist) politics as he is. For Walter Benjamin "he who cannot take sides should keep silent,"⁹ and I hope that this essay is strengthened by being written with some sort of purpose and goal in mind. Again, following the idea of a parallel critique of method, the success or failure of this interested approach can act as a test for the success of Eagleton's own critical theories. "The role of criticism," he writes,

"is to make political interventions from its own particular angle"[10](#) and what follows can be its own evaluation of this approach.

Saint Oscar and *The White, the Gold and the Gangrene*, through their meditations on the tradition of the oppressed, Walter Benjamin, the place of Brecht's thought in Marxist criticism and the possibilities of articulating resistance, offer an opening into Eagleton's work as a whole. Using *Saint Oscar* as a guide, I begin this essay discussing the ongoing conversation Eagleton has had with the work of Bertolt Brecht, and with the idea of a "Brechtian" criticism, in the context of the development of these ideas in *Saint Oscar*. "Many of Brecht's pieces," Eagleton tells us, "lie at an oblique angle to their subject matter and are wary of tackling them head-on"[11](#) and, I argue, his approach to Wilde and his representation or reclamation of him as an "Irish Oxfordian socialist proto-deconstructionist"[12](#) is, in the context of Wilde's ongoing popularity, an oblique application of the tasks of Brechtian criticism that have been a constant concern of Eagleton's. By working in a new form -- drama against "critical" production -- and in approaching old concerns through new topics and themes, Eagleton is trying by indirections to find directions out, offering up a new set of constellations by which to view these recurrent concerns.

Walter Benjamin acts as a focal point, a reassurance and a challenge, in Eagleton's intellectual trajectory. Eagleton has written an entire book about and around him[13](#) and virtually every major work of his -- from *Criticism and Ideology* to the memoir *The Gatekeeper* -- makes direct or indirect reference and homage to this figure. In a stunning passage, Eagleton identifies Benjamin as a source and as a challenge:

Courteous myopic angel, how
you press upward in me
o light these humble bits
of you I cook the books with.[14](#)

I read *The White, the Gold and the Gangrene* as an introduction to and extension of Eagleton's engagement with Benjamin, in particular with the ideas sketched out in his "Theses on the Philosophy of History." I also use *The White, the Gold and the Gangrene* to draw out Eagleton's conversations with Marx's *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon*, with specific reference to the idea of the "poetry of the future" and the challenges facing a revolutionary rhetoric and imagination. I also use *God's Locusts* to suggest some of the weaknesses, aporias and silences that, at times, mark Eagleton's recent writings around Irish culture and literature. The presentation of the Famine and the relief effort surrounding the Famine in *God's Locusts* is at odds with the arguments of some of Eagleton's critical writing on Ireland and yet, in this inconsistency, usefully exposes the double-logic (or double illogic) operating in Eagleton's treatment of Ireland.

Writing in *Walter Benjamin*, Eagleton suggests a wide ranging and ambitious programme for the tasks of the Marxist critic:

[t]he primary task of the 'Marxist critic' is to actively participate in and help direct the cultural emancipation of the masses. The organising of the writers' workshops, artists' studios and popular theatre; the transformation of the cultural and educational apparatuses; the business of public design and architecture; a concern with the quality of quotidian life all the way from public discourse to domestic 'consumption'; in short, all of the projects on which Lenin, Trotsky, Krupskaya, Lunacharsky and others of

the Bolsheviks were intensively engaged remain, for all the differences of historical situation, the chief responsibilities of a revolutionary cultural theory that has refused, other than tactically and provisionally, that division of labour which gives birth to a 'Marxist literary criticism'.[15](#)

This is certainly an admirable set of goals and tasks and yet, just eleven pages later, Eagleton undermines the status of this very approach in a passage that describes his work as "intended as revolutionary rhetoric aimed at certain political effects, yet speak[ing] a tropical language far removed from those in whose name it intervenes . . . [it figures] at once as political act and as libidinal substitute for those more deep-seated actions that are in any full sense presently denied us."[16](#) This tension -- between practical, briskly and openly revolutionary criticism on the one hand and a "libidinal substitution" in the form of a more theoretical, academic writing on the other -- marks all of Eagleton's work and is symptomatic of Marxist aesthetic theory as a whole. Eagleton's plays can be read as an attempt, on the level of form, to resolve this tension. In an interview conducted just before the publication of *Saints and Scholars* and *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* Eagleton stated candidly:

I'm not sure in what direction I should go now. I think that's not only a personal hesitancy, but belongs to the wider question of where things should now be taken.[17](#)

Eagleton's plays offer a good opportunity to examine the problems facing a properly Marxist criticism and, even if they do not resolve the tensions between libidinal substitution and political intervention, they at least work through these contradictions and blockages in interesting and, crucially, *productive* ways.

Again, the issues of style and presentation, "the shape of the individual sentences themselves," are vital to any understanding of the problems of "Marxist literary criticism" as it works itself out in Eagleton's plays. In a harsh but fair appraisal of the first phase of Eagleton's career, Ian Birchall identifies a crucial problem when he writes of how

[f]or one employed to communicate the beauties of English literature, Eagleton writes English extraordinarily badly. His style is often condensed and overladen with an erudition which the readers are assumed to share. *Style is not a matter of accident or personal competence. Eagleton is writing like this because he is unsure what audience he is addressing, on what grounds he is fighting the class struggle.*[18](#)

The plays discussed below represent one sort of attempt to resolve these problems, of "where things should now be taken" and what audience to address. Eagleton has himself described the task of popularization as one of "political urgency"[19](#) and, in reading these plays, we have a chance to see how successful his project has been.

In writing on the continuities that exist in Eagleton's critical and dramatic works and in trying to link his plays into a discussion of the limits and possibilities of materialist criticism, I hope to question the idea that Eagleton is now into an "Irish" phase of his career. Willy Maley's comment that Eagleton, "having long employed a brusque, businesslike Englishness against the encroachment of continental theory, is now retreating into merry Ireland, with its Elizabethan richness and its marvelous atheoretical, non-philosophical humour,"[20](#) is wrong on all counts. Not only would it come as something of a surprise to Swift or Shaw to know that they dealt in "atheoretical, non-

philosophical humour," but any sustained reading of the breadth of Eagleton's work makes the claim that he is "now retreating" into a sort of faux-"Oirishness" untenable. As England's first colony and as the site of some of the worst horrors of English imperialism (which is saying something), Ireland *ought* to concern a Marxist critic working in England, and Eagleton has long made Ireland part of the focus of his studies.²¹ Furthermore, Eagleton is specific in his claim that his hope is to use Ireland and cultural theory as foils to develop one another, interrogating cultural theory with the experiences of Irish history and developing our understanding of Ireland through the insights of recent critical theory.²² This process fits with what Steve Connor calls "a distinctive sort of interference" between Eagleton's "critical and literary writing."²³ Maley's comment reveals more about his inability to confront or engage with a Marxism that does not assume his vulgarised and simplistic understanding of it as a theory than it does about Eagleton's own recent researches. Where once hostile writers attempted, moving under the sign of *The Death of Tragedy*, to dismiss Eagleton's Marxism as so much repressed Christianity²⁴ the same dismissive trend now shifts its focus and sarcasm towards Eagleton's interest in Ireland.

One critic who occupies this dismissive position and develops it systematically is Martin McQuillan. McQuillan, by writing on Eagleton's plays in an engaged and thoughtful way, has produced a very serious, stimulating and theoretically challenging essay. For this, and for encouraging proper debate around these plays, he deserves both respect and praise. For McQuillan, in a bold reading, Eagleton's "creative" works "return the privileged operators of Marxism against his [Eagleton's] theoretical texts which put them to work" and, in doing so, they "set to work the ethico-theoretical implications of a deconstruction which is repressed in the critical texts."²⁵ In setting his plays in Ireland Eagleton, for McQuillan, is carrying out a double logic of at once retreating from Marxism and substituting the Irish for "the lost working class dispersed by the neo-liberalism of Mrs Thatcher"²⁶ while, at the same time, incorporating Ireland and the Irish within a "familiar incorporative logic"²⁷ into the narrative of Marxism. The plays, for McQuillan, expose the "ontological imperialism" which is characteristic of the entire Marxist project.²⁸

McQuillan's approach, by subjecting Eagleton's drama to searching post-structuralist interrogation, is a welcome addition to the (slight) critical literature that exists on these plays. But, although I am grateful to him in this sense, it is important to quarrel with the fundamentally problematic thesis of McQuillan's article. In literary criticism, as in so much of life, you have to take the kicks with the ha'pennies.

McQuillan's argument is undermined by a reductive and inadequate understanding of the Marxist tradition that, at the very moment he seeks to enable critical opposition, disables his attacks on the logic of Eagleton's plays. McQuillan's discussion of Eagleton's drama acts as a stalking-horse for a wider project, which is an attack on the claims of Marxism for status as an emancipatory discourse. The familiar anti-Marxist tactic of half-quotation and quotation out of context McQuillan happily applies need not concern us here,²⁹ but his claim that Marxism has a "conceptualisation of History as an evolutionary narrative" which argues "[t]he Irish will only come into 'Revolutionary Being' when they are fully incorporated into the West by their national identity's absorption into the greater order of the history of class struggle"³⁰ is, as well as being a caricature of the Marxist position, exactly the kind of claim Eagleton's plays work against. McQuillan is blithely unperturbed by the fact that it is precisely *Marxist* historiography and theoretical enquiry that has done so much to undermine both the concept of history as a smoothly evolutionary narrative and -- in conjunction with practical political activism -- which has done so much to challenge the theoretical and political sway of the imperialist West.³¹

McQuillan chastises Eagleton's plays for a "disturbingly Eurocentric"³² logic in the name of a philosophy developed in the context of the Parisian West Bank. I do not wish to seem like the Marxist pot calling the deconstructionist kettle black, but it is somewhat ironic to see that, every time Eagleton's plays and the theoretical commitments which underpin them contradict McQuillan's reductive presentation of this commitment, he is forced to incorporate their logic into his own position. Eagleton's plays, as I discussed earlier, write out the problems of Marxist criticism; they do not evade these problems. This essay, then, is part of my conversation with McQuillan, and is, in part, written as an attempt to offer counter-readings and reasons for reading Eagleton's plays.

I will pass on any longer discussion of the question of the pleasures to be had from these plays as what follows, I hope, will provide proof and explanation enough. If I am a little reticent in drawing attention too closely to the passages in Eagleton's drama I consider especially beautiful it is because, with Roland Barthes, "between jargon and platitudes, I prefer jargon."³³ The three plays discussed below are all contributions to Marxist literary theory and development and I read them with a sense of extracting their uses both for the current struggle and for the broader project of socialist criticism and activism. They are each pieces of the poetry of the future.

Wilde's Paradoxes: Ireland and the Brechtian

The one duty we owe to history is to rewrite it.

-- Oscar Wilde³⁴

"We have grown out of Oscar Wilde and paradoxes"³⁵: Buck Mulligan has been proven wrong beyond any measure of a doubt, and Wilde has fascinated the English-speaking world almost continuously since his death. His life and works have obsessed biographers, authors, students, film goers, queer theorists, socialists, playwrights and poets for over one hundred years.³⁶ Wilde has been the subject of a vast number of plays, novels and poems, and a recent film adaptation of his *The Importance of Being Earnest* has been remarkably popular.³⁷ Quotations and epigrams from Wilde's plays appear almost constantly, being reprinted, recycled and decontextualised in diaries, pocket books, calendars and greeting cards. Through this process Wilde has become ubiquitous in the popular and academic cultural landscape.

It is precisely this familiarity which Terry Eagleton's first published play, *Saint Oscar*, attempts to disrupt and challenge. In *Saint Oscar* Eagleton uses Wilde to suggest other possibilities of reading that the current historical moment downplays or suppresses, to "turn his own dramatic parodies back on himself, finding some way of reinventing him."³⁸ Eagleton wields Oscar Wilde as a tool for foraging out lost legacies and current concerns, inserting him into current Irish history, cultural theory and, in the process, the ongoing project of reasserting and redefining the Brechtian. Because, as Eagleton has his Wilde say, "[t]he Irish have no history. It belongs entirely to the British" (25) and, for Eagleton, a rediscovery of this history is a politically urgent task.

Saint Oscar is, in Seamus Heaney's phrase, "full of a ventriloquistic inventiveness that enables the author not so much to sound Wilde's depths as to sound off his surfaces, tick him off by taking him off."³⁹ It is an attempt to rewrite Oscar Wilde in a way that allows the lost moments, the history that did and didn't happen, to play off against each other.

"Historical materialism," Eagleton has written in another context, "rewrites the past in order to redeem it in its revolutionary validity,"⁴⁰ and this sense of history turned on Wilde in *Saint Oscar* to offer something up for the present. This process is what Richard Pine has called "part of the new emancipation of Wilde,"⁴¹ freeing him from the constraints of his reception as an English comedian of manners and into a new realm of interpretive possibilities.

Saint Oscar starts with Wilde's announcement that nothing is going to happen; he has "set aside this evening" for himself and the "few other figures [who] stroll in and out of this little charade [are] purely to create the illusion of dramatic action" (17). Wilde travels from moment to moment, mother to trial to gaol to lover, in order to be able to *speak*, to explain, to suggest. He clearly sounds like Wilde and yet at the same time does not; only one of the lines in the play ("All women become like their mothers") is actually taken from Wilde's work, and there is something distinctly different about his speech at the very moment it mimics. Eagleton's is a mimicry that is self-aware, highlighting the act of its own imitations. We shall have some cause to discuss the implications of this for Eagleton's ongoing engagement with the thought of Brecht a little later on, but for now it is important to note the centrality of *Saint Oscar's* own artifice.

"The most important syntactic effect of Eagleton's writing," so Steve Connor tells us, "is the way it insistently registers duality, barely allowing any time for an idea to register before flipping it over to reveal its underside."⁴² In *Saint Oscar* the dreary continuum of history is discarded to throw up as much dramatic duality as possible. England or Ireland, serious art or trivial comedy, family and father or fame, socialism or society, truth or cunning: Wilde is thrown through a series of inescapable oppositions until the lights go down with his death. He is prosecuted by Edward Carson and turned into a symbol of the divide wrecking Ireland, offered a choice by his mother between his art and the poetry of nationalism, pressured by Richard Wallace and, finally, caught between his own rhetoric and the reality of a visit in prison by Alfred Douglas⁴³: "how," he asks, "can I practice Christlike forgiveness with shits like him around?" (53) Wilde works his way through to the end by refusing each either/or, by coming out the other side and offering himself up as "an image of the failure of the present. That's the only image of the future worth having." (57)

'The failure of the present' is not quite the poetry of the future, something we shall discuss a little later on with *The White, the Gold and the Gangrene*, but it is a way of formulating Wilde that leads to an unsettling of safer, more depoliticised readings of him without slipping into nationalist cliché. Eagleton positions his Wilde to draw out all the doubleness of his character. He writes:

everything about him was doubled, ambiguous, unstable. He was English and Irish, upper class and underdog, socialite and sodomite, bohemian and *bon viveur*, aesthete and republican, a respectable paterfamilias who sported with rent boys in cheap hotels. (5)

It is these very contradictions that enable Eagleton's Wilde to talk his way out of the binds his doubleness may become. He can resist English imperialism and Irish nationalism, reductive socialism and ineffectual aestheticism, turning the weak points of each term in on themselves. When Lady Wilde attempts to turn his loss into nationalism terms -- "it was you who maimed yourself when you broke with the body of your country" (24) -- Wilde deflates this instantly:

The body of my country! Countries have bogs and bridges, mother, not bodies. They're made up of the same people living in the same place -- in the case of Ireland the same people trying to get out of the same place. I detest all this mythology: all those seven-foot young heroes wedded to the bride of their land. All those bog-screwers and soil-shafters. Its shockingly decadent stuff. (24)

Wilde is refusing the rhetoric of a romantic nationalism and, in doing so, puts forward "this little charade" (62) as alternative tradition. And the idea of tradition, as Seamus Deane observes,

is one with which we are familiar with in Irish writing. In a culture like ours, 'tradition' is not easily taken to be an established reality. We are conscious that it is and invention, a narrative which ingeniously finds a way of connecting a selected series of historical figures or themes in such a way that the pattern of plot revealed to us becomes a conditioning factor.⁴⁴

Eagleton, as an outsider, proposes in Wilde a solution that at once defies tradition and attempts to construct it. *Saint Oscar* is brazenly Irish at the very moment at which it defies the term. Wilde declaims in his speech to the court "I object to this trial on the grounds that no Irishman can receive a fair hearing in an English court, because the Irish are figments of the English imagination. I am not really here; I am just one of your racial fantasies" (46 -- 47). In an astonishingly bold piece of rhetoric Wilde enacts and demolishes Deane's problem in a stroke: he constructs a tradition out of non-tradition. "It can happen this way, but it can also happen quite a different way," Walter Benjamin assures us. "[T]hat is the fundamental attitude of one who writes for epic theatre."⁴⁵ And Wilde, a character in a latter-day epic drama, presses this attitude further by enacting both ways at once. He *cannot* be tried because he is Irish, and yet at the same time he *cannot* be Irish because "the Irish are figments of the English imagination." As Wilde tells his mother, he is "true to the sham of [his] country. You can't be traitor to an illusion" (25). Eagleton's drama walks a kind of dialectical tight-rope of essence and non-essence, duality and resolution, dramatising Deane's marvellous lines:

it is about time we put aside the idea of essence . . . [e]verything, including our politics and our literature, has to be rewritten, i.e. re-read. That will enable new writing, new politics, unblemished by Irishness but securely Irish.⁴⁶

In having the audacity to enact a kind of mimicry of mimicry -- and yet just avoiding making a Mickery out the whole thing -- Eagleton offers up his rewriting of Wilde to emphasise Irishness and yet at the same time uses this moment to examine and reassert his socialism, and to rethink the rhetoric of socialism around sexuality and individuality.

It is not the case, as Martin McQuillan would have it, that Eagleton is using a familiar "incorporative logic" exploring "Wilde's sexuality in terms of the class struggle" and suggesting "Wilde is gay because he was unhappy being Irish".⁴⁷ Rather, it is in the tensions between these three potential identities -- as Irish, a queer icon and as socialist -- that Eagleton locates Wilde. If he renews and nourishes the moment when Irish thinkers might "put aside essence," Wilde offers also an opportunity for Marxist critics to re-examine their socialism through the politics of sexuality and identity. "It never hurts to understand the theoretical background," as Vic in Churchill's *Cloud Nine* points out. "You

can't separate fucking and economics"⁴⁸ and Wilde's encounter with Richard Wallace plays on the importance of both terms. Wallace may be full of bluster and confidence, reporting a "new alliance forming between the intellectuals and the working class" (29), but it is Wilde with his extravagance and wit who realises the full importance of their discussions:

I'm a socialist *because* I'm an individualist. How can anyone be an individual in this cesspit of a society? In my saintly devotion to my own ego I'm prefiguring the New Jerusalem, in which everyone will be able to be purely themselves. That's why I'm so bone idle: to bear witness to a time when nobody will need to work. (31)

By the end of the play we see Wallace transformed in to a businessman, caught up in reformism and cynicism. It is Wilde, "an image of the failure of the present" (57), who holds to the vision of something better. When Wallace tells him "the most we can hope for is a rather more humane form of capitalism" (56) Wilde replies, "[d]on't be absurd, Richard: that's not worth hoping for at all. That's like saying the most you can hope for is to get the pox in one ball only. If you're going to hope, do it on a grand scale" (56).

It is the very Irishness of Wilde that Eagleton uses to restate the ongoing salience of his socialist project. "If the left has been steadily in retreat," he writes, "it isn't because the system has eased up, but for exactly the opposite reasons -- because it's currently too hard to beat. But the reasons which thus make people abandon the struggle are then, ironically, precisely the reasons why it's more relevant than ever."⁴⁹ In these circumstances, then, it is obvious why the figure of a success-in-failure, the idea of an unlikely ally in Oscar Wilde, is so appealing to Eagleton and is presented as useful to the left.

The politics of *Saint Oscar* are written into the play's very form. In *Saint Oscar* Eagleton attempts to write out in drama form some of the issues around radical cultural theory that have been concerning him for over thirty years, namely, how are modern radical theorists and artists to make use of the legacy of Bertolt Brecht? Brecht's models and methodology pose a number of problems for playwrights and theorists. Peter Brooker poses the problem well:

For many, the ideas of gestic acting, music and staging have proved particularly frustrating. Not only do the forms, and dramaturgical and political effects of *Gestus* appear to be unknowable outside their realisation in the theatre, their only guaranteed example, in practice as in theory, appears to be Brecht himself . . . a common result is that modern theatres aspire to no more than archival productions. Unable to stage authentically "Brechtian" productions, they 'put on Brecht.'⁵⁰

Saint Oscar can be read as a strategic response to this problem. Not only does Wilde constantly draw attention to the written, fictional, rhetorical nature of his own act, commenting at one stage, "I reject the accusation but admire the alliteration" (42), but the entire moment of the play draws our attention to this. *Saint Oscar* is a play about the reception of a playwright; it is an attempted at carrying out for political ends *Verfremdungseffekte* on our very attitudes and assumptions around Wilde. Putting aside the idea of an essence, Eagleton is trying to act out a truly Brechtian theatre, one that, in Peter Brooker's words, seeks "to historicise and negate the commonplace and taken-for-granted, to prise open the social and ideological contradictions, and so both demonstrate

and provoke an awareness of the individual's place in a concrete social narrative."⁵¹ This is, if you like, something in the manner of running Stephen Rea up against Stephen Fry,⁵² overemphasising an overlooked Irishness for strategic purposes and inserting it in to the current situation. Eagleton claims:

nobody can write now of Britain and Ireland in Wilde's day without bringing to mind the tragic events that have afflicted Ireland in the past two decades. Reflections on the past are always at some level meditations on the present . . . I try in this play [*Saint Oscar*], then, to summon the shade of Oscar Wilde back to our side when we are in urgent need of him.⁵³

It is in this sense of history, the rearranging of events in Wilde's life to "convey a sense of the (potentially contradictory) meanings it excludes,"⁵⁴ that *Saint Oscar* is an example of Brechtian theatre. Wilde himself hints at the connections in a line to his mother that has echoes of Brecht in it: "I'll answer the charge in my own way, with wit and cunning." (25)

Saint Oscar is a text that flaunts its own fictitious nature as Wilde flows from moment to scene as his need to monologue dictates and as the details of his biography are rearranged around him. *Saint Oscar* is "fragmented, device-baring, non-hierarchical, shock-producing, [it is] theatre as dispersed, great-switching and dialectical, ostentatious and arbitrary yet densely encoded,"⁵⁵ in other words, it is all the theoretical and theatrical tactics Eagleton has learnt from Brecht.

In the final scenes of the play Wilde offers a utopian vision to the disenchanted Wallace:

you surely don't imagine that in a hundred years from now homosexuals in England will still be hounded? It's too absurd. There'll be an end to this long stupidity; we don't still burn witches, do we? In a century from now everyone will be androgynous, the workers will run society . . . [n]obody will remember the Empire . . . and everyone will just lie around all day in loose garments reciting Dante to each other. That'll just be the working day; I won't begin to describe the leisure activities. (57)

A hundred years on -- in what is the present for the audience but on the stage remains the future -- none of these dreams is reality. Some are partial truth -- homosexuality is legal, albeit in a discriminatory way, and the Empire has collapsed -- and some are obvious flights of fancy. In jumbling them together, and in the wild flights of fancy the chorus launch into over the slumped figure of a dying Wilde, *Saint Oscar* draws a startling contrast between the present, the imagined future, and the moments in between. We are given an image of the past imagining us, in the process politicising both places.

Oscar Wilde in *Saint Oscar* mimics Oscar Wilde without, excluding the single line mentioned above, actually ever quoting from him. Eagleton achieves a double distancing effect, a recognition written into the very form of the play that stubbornly refuses to cancel itself in the act of trying to become transparent. This moment is described well in an article on Brecht and rhetoric that Eagleton wrote in the mid-80s:

the whole point of [Brechtian] acting was that it should be in a peculiar sense hollow or void. Alienated acting hollows out the imaginary

plenitude of everyday actions, deconstructing them into their social determinants and inscribing within them the condition of their making.[56](#)

The Wilde of *Saint Oscar* is "hollowed out" in the very act of being filled. As he is filled with a whole series of, hitherto unexpected, significances -- Irish, socialist, proto-Brechtian -- he is revealed as the construction that he in fact is. For all "Wildes" we have received have hidden their social determinants and conditions of making. In gesturing towards his new emphasis, making both moves simultaneously, Eagleton is deconstructing the established figures of Oscar Wilde in an attempt to reclaim -- or perhaps simply claim -- him for a socialist cultural project.

History for Walter Benjamin was the story of the oppressors, linear and homogenous time as opposed to the tradition of the oppressed. *Saint Oscar* reasserts certain aspects of history by messing with it, changing it, defying it. Eagleton grasps history and the Wilde of history as an "image of the failure of the past." This image is the "only image of the future worth having" (57) and, in the process, arrives at a newly engaged reading of Wilde, one that receives him, in Walter Benjamin's grisly phrase, as

an abortion sprung from compulsion and need . . . at best comparable to a beautiful statue which has had all its limbs knocked off in transit, and now yields nothing but the precious block out of which the image of one's own future must be hewn.[57](#)

What Eagleton has taken with this Wilde "sprung from compulsion and need" is the precious block with which to carve out the image of the future. He has attempted, in other words, to blast Wilde out of the dreary continuum of history and to insert him into tradition. It is with these two terms in mind that we can now turn to *The White, the Gold and the Gangrene*.

Tradition of the oppressed, poetry of the future: James Connolly

For Walter Benjamin one of the most terrifying aspects of the struggle against reaction is that "*even the dead* will not be safe from the enemy if he wins."[58](#) History, in this sense, is no mere collection of past events, movements and people but rather the lived and fought over terrain of the class war. "[E]very image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably"[59](#) either by being destroyed -- the attempts by Nazism to remove even the traces of an entire people from Europe and to rewrite all *Kultur* in their own barbarous image -- or through appropriation by the ruling class. In this sense, the dead are not safe from an enemy that can claim them for its own. The moments of the past -- its artifacts, leaders, battles and products -- are terrains where the conflict of rulers and oppressed is recognized and fought out. What something is made to mean is a question of who has won it, or who still holds it. In its ongoing attempts to assert hegemony the ruling class must appropriate the products and traditions of the oppressed, subjecting them to what Edward Thompson called "the vast condescension of posterity."[60](#)

The implications of this for an oppositional criticism are surely obvious. History is something the Marxist critic must preserve in her own ways and, in the process, try either to regain or protect from appropriation and dispersal by the ruling class.

In Benjamin's terms:

[we must] seize hold of a memory as it flashes up in a moment of danger. Historical materialism wishes to retain that image of the past which unexpectedly appears to a man singled out by history at a moment of danger. The danger affects both the content of the tradition and its receivers. The same threat hangs over both: that of becoming a tool of the ruling classes. In every era the attempt must be made anew to wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it . . . [o]nly that historian will have the gift of fanning the spark of hope in the past who is convinced that *even the dead* will not be safe from the enemy if he wins. And this enemy has not ceased to be victorious.[61](#)

A materialist critic must "brush history against the grain"[62](#) in order to retrieve from it those aspects of the tradition that can be turned to progressive uses, to wrest tradition away from the greedily appropriative hands of the ruling class.

In Ireland this struggle for tradition was always going to be at its most ferocious around the site of James Connolly. As a historical figure, Connolly is peculiarly constituted by a combination of contradictory and complementary insertions -- nationalist hero and socialist theorist, Irish martyr and Scot, Marxist and Catholic -- that make him a central figure in debates around Irish history and culture. As P. Berresford Ellis writes, "every Irish politician, of no matter what political philosophy, finds it necessary to pay lip service to him. It is largely because of the multitude of differing Irish political philosophies that have conjured his ghost to their banners that the thoughts and teachings of Connolly have, through the years, often been distorted and lost."[63](#)

"James Connolly" has fallen victim to the danger Benjamin identified, overpowered by a ruling class conformism, inflated and at a stroke reduced to a piece of empty signification in the rhetoric of ruling class Irish politics, so prevalent and called upon that he is, ideologically and politically, left nowhere in particular. Connolly has been won from the tradition of the oppressed by the ruling class and suffered at the hands of a critical metamorphosis described by Lenin in a celebrated passage on Marx:

[d]uring the lifetime of great revolutionaries, the oppressing classes constantly hounded them, received their theories with the most savage malice, the most furious hatred and the most unscrupulous campaigns of lies and slander. After their death, attempts are made to convert them into harmless icons, to canonize them, so to say, and to hallow their *names* . . . while at the same time robbing the revolutionary theory of its *substance*, blunting its revolutionary edge and vulgarizing it.[64](#)

In Eagleton's hands, Connolly is fashioned as both a meditation on and an intervention in this process. He refracts Connolly through prismatic fragments of Walter Benjamin, inserting both thinkers back into the "matrix of tradition"[65](#) and pressing them upon the political moment of the present, bringing them out of a history that, in Benjamin's words "is the subject of a structure whose site is not homogenous, empty time, but time filled by the presence of the now."[66](#)

Connolly -- kept alive in a novel and mysteriously whisked from the executioner's chair in a play -- is conjured as a cipher or artistic and political double for Benjamin. In turn, Benjamin provides a framework through which Eagleton can use Connolly for his own ends. In *Saints and Scholars*, a novel that is in many ways a sourcebook for the later plays, Eagleton makes this coupling explicit:

[h]istory records that on 12 May 1916, James Connolly, Commandant-General of the insurgent republican forces of the Irish Volunteers and the Irish Citizen Army, and vice-president of the provisional republican government of Ireland, was shot strapped to a chair in Kilmainham gaol.

But history does not always get the facts in the most significant order, or arrange them in the most aesthetically pleasing pattern Seven bullets flew towards Connolly's chest, but they did not reach it, at least not here they didn't. Let us arrest those bullets in mid air, prize open a space in these close-packed events through which Jimmy may scamper, blast him out of the dreary continuum of history into a different place altogether.⁶⁷

In *The White, the Gold and the Gangrene* Connolly is introduced to us as a wounded, gangrenous figure, kept prisoner waiting to be executed for his part in the Rising. His wardens, McDaid and Mather, are surreal figures, bursting with banalities, historical revisionism, liberal platitudes and parodic renditions of poststructuralist epistemological skepticism. The forces of overpowering conformism speak through them, bending and shaping the broken body of Connolly to the demands of their rhetoric. Very quickly they highlight his connections with Benjamin, with McDaid observing "[y]ou shot at the clocks and blasted yourself out of time. Why fumble for a future?" (80). The reference here is again to the "Theses on the Philosophy of History," where Benjamin observes "[o]n the first evening of fighting [in the French revolution] it turned out that the clocks in towers were being fired on simultaneously and independently from several places in Paris."⁶⁸

McDaid and Mather burlesque the skeptical, pessimistic readings of history that go against the struggling spirit of Benjamin, ruthlessly mocking, deflating and mimicking in ironic fashion the language of heroism and rebellion. McDaid and Mather act as a vital counterweight to the potential sentimentality and nationalism of Connolly's commitment, constantly sending up his Ireland and his Struggle -- "[t]his little rising of yours, was it *intended* to be a balls up? . . . did you set out to make the most almighty fucking cock-up of the whole affair?" (79) -- and subjecting it to a mixture of humour and farce that prevents *The White, the Gold and the Gangrene* from slipping into nationalist cliché. As Mather tells Connolly, "[w]e're just trying to help you make some non-meaning out of this." (81) McDaid and Mather's antics act as a reminder of the constant potential for failure, and the dreary and bewildering array of historical reminders we have of this, that for any serious Marxism is indispensable. For, without an adequate awareness of failure, and an accommodation of this awareness into our very strategies, how can an oppositional rhetoric hope to survive in any sort of meaningful or useful sense?

The alternatives for a radical politics that does not acknowledge its previous failures and defeats are bleak indeed, dooming it to remain enclosed within either a shrill, brittle and increasingly empty hyper-optimism or to sink into Idealist gloom. McDaid and Mather, through their very excess of deflating speech, make Connolly's few utterances all the more powerful. When he ends the play with as much Benjaminian resilience as he started it, the constant barrage of skepticism we have heard strengthens this position. Even after the cynicism of McDaid and Mather, for Connolly revolutionary minded resistance is still "the only way to move. It's not dreams of liberated grandchildren which stir men and women to revolt, but memories of enslaved ancestors" (114).⁶⁹ The ironic distancing that the wardens subject Connolly's (silent) rhetoric to has itself the paradoxical effect of reinforcing his claims.

McDaid and Mather's comedy is of the double-edged variety, parodying the very skepticism and detachment it represents. The two wardens end the play collapsed into their own expansive cynicism, unable to speak or move, exhausted of speech and, by implication, revealing the political redundancy of the sort of skeptical non-position they take. Connolly has escaped their reductive grasp, risking it to offer "himself up to the fortunes and misfortunes of a history he couldn't foresee, as a kind of blank text which would be endlessly rewritten by the future according to its own traditions." (7) He has, in some sense at least, managed to slot himself in as "a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past [and] . . . as a result of this . . . the lifework is preserved in this work and at the same time cancelled; in the lifework, the era; and in the era, the entire course of history."⁷⁰ James Connolly, through *The White, the Gold and the Gangrene*, has been reinserted into the matrix of tradition.

If *The White, the Gold and the Gangrene* is an extended reflection on and exposition of Benjamin's *Theses on the Philosophy of History* it is also, in a more oblique and indirect way, part of an ongoing engagement Eagleton has had with Marx's *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon*. Eagleton has returned to the *Brumaire* time and time again to work through the tensions between the tradition of the oppressed and the demand on revolutionary critics made by Marx; that they take their poetry from the future. It is a problem, as he has Connolly describe it, of the "sound way beyond the present" which we can "only speak of . . . in the tongue we have" (113).

Indeed this meditation, which spans almost thirty years of literary production,⁷¹ revolves around a question that is still salient for Marxism today: how is the radical critic to write her resistance? This question is of obvious importance, as a Marxist criticism sets itself the task of trying to act as a "weapon of criticism" in the struggle for socialism. "Like any emancipatory theory," as Eagleton himself has argued, "Marxism is concerned with putting itself progressively out of business. It exists to bring about the material conditions that will spell its own demise"⁷² for it is inconceivable that, in a truly democratic, free and socialist society, men and women would really want to discuss things as dull -- and, by that stage, irrelevant -- as the forces of production, ideology and exchange-value of now defunct class society. The whole point of the Marxist critique is to understand class society in order to get rid of it, to move on to something better and altogether more interesting.

Within this aim are the seeds of a problematic that has been inscribed in Marxist criticism from its inception. For socialism, in an eminently dialectical move, is a qualitative and quantitative break with capitalism, a revolutionary rupture from the existing order that is made out of the very fabric of social and productive relations central to this very order itself. Socialism and the construction of socialism are inconceivable without capitalism. This is, in Hegelian parlance, called the negation of the negation.

If socialism is a break that is written into capitalism itself, another problem awaits the Marxist critic. For this break will be by its very nature *radically democratic* and, unlike the schemes advanced in the Utopian socialists' blueprints, it cannot be known in advance what this break will look like.⁷³ Marxist critics must pass over thoughts of the liberated future in silence, observing a compact with the present in keeping with the ancient Jewish *Bilderverbot*, and turn their rhetoric elsewhere.⁷⁴ This move is carried out, however, at great risk. For how is the Marxist critic to construct a useful radical politics that refuses to name in any meaningful sense the object it strives for? And, in the same sense, how are they to rescue the traditions of the oppressed from the exploitative conditions that produced them? How can the Marxist critic speak of an event that goes beyond the content of what shall produce it? As McDaid tells Connolly, "If you speak with their

tongue then you fight with their weapons. That means you're complicit" (113). Yet to accept that being involved with an oppression makes one complicit with it and thus unable to resist, a common enough argument still, is to indulge in the politics of despair. For what is the tradition of the oppressed but something forged within oppression's furnace? It is this, and yet it is more than this at the same time. As Alex Callinicos has argued; "[t]he preservation of the memory of past struggles is not, however, an end in itself . . . the 'tradition of the oppressed' provides the impetus for revolutionary action . . . [it is]the sedimented experience of class struggle."⁷⁵ While it is memories of enslaved ancestors that propel the struggle, they cannot be its results.

For Marx one of the differences between the socialist revolution and its bourgeois predecessors lies in the socialist revolution's refusal to drape itself in any imagery but the imagery of the future that it anticipates. Whereas in bourgeois revolutions, the "resurrection of the dead served to exalt the new struggles . . . to exaggerate the given task in the imagination . . . and to recover the spirit of the revolution," the socialist revolution

can only create its poetry from the future, not from the past. It cannot begin its own work until it has sloughed off all superstitious regard for the past. . . . In order to arrive at its content the revolution of the nineteenth century [i.e., the socialist revolution] must let the dead bury the dead. Previously the phrase transcended the content; here the content transcends the phrase.⁷⁶

The tension between this sort of thinking and the idea of the tradition of the oppressed is what a Marxist criticism must attempt to resolve. In *The White, the Gold and the Gangrene* this tension finds its correspondence with a sound, a noise that Connolly uses to describe the process of socialist rhetoric, to speak the poetry of the future with the damaged and compromised language lent to the Marxist by the tradition of the oppressed. He calls this sound "eerie, unblemished, utterly inhuman" (112). It appears, in thinking "in a configuration pregnant with tensions"⁷⁷ and, at the same instance he hears it, Connolly grasps the problem of its expression:

[it was] a momentary wailing, like the bleat of some fabulous beast, so pure and unfractured that the blood stood still. I knew then that I'd strive to imitate that sound -- cup the words in my palms and let it resonate through them. But it's all a poor sort of ventriloquism. The noise of your life gets in the way, all that garbled blood and breathing. To utter that sound we'd have to pare away all this (*indicates around him*), and that's not easy. Our language drags all this in its wake like a ball and chain. (112)

What we have here is the sound of revolution, the poetry of the future. It is "way beyond the present" but "we can only speak of it in the tongue we have" (113). To this McDaid replies "[w]hich is why it can never come" (113). For how can language beyond language possibly exist? For Connolly there is no simple answer to this problem, but we must rather "use language as a kind of trampoline, to bounce yourself beyond it" (113).

The objections of McDaid and Mather -- "you can't pre-calculate where you'll come out" (113) -- rest on false assumptions about revolutionary change that Connolly defies. "Whoever expects a 'pure' revolution will never live to see it,"⁷⁸ Lenin wrote of the Easter Rising, and in this line we see the central claim of Connolly's response. "To be ourselves, we have to risk turning into the image of them," Connolly claims; "it's speech

that's our undoing, but we have to plough on with it -- go all the way through it and come out somewhere on the other side" (113). The socialist's vision of liberation comes *through* her engagement with a potentially fatal and compromising system. There is, alas, no way she can go around it. The tradition of the oppressed, the language Connolly seizes onto and uses, these are tools that will become redundant with their users' victory. The sound Connolly speaks of "was the murmuring of a world where we might speak otherwise; that's bound to seem inhuman to use now." (113)

Connolly disappears as he is supposed to be shot moments after making this speech, and the burlesque preparations for the execution by Mather and McDaid further comment on the tensions between the tradition of the oppressed and the *Eighteenth Brumaire*. As Marx writes

[p]roletarian revolutions . . . constantly engage in self-criticism, and in repeated interruptions of their own course. They return to what has apparently already been accomplished in order to begin the task again; with merciless thoroughness they mock the inadequate, wretched aspects of their first attempts.⁷⁹

This description, rich with textual suggestiveness, is played out in *The White, the Gold and the Gangrene* not so much in Connolly's statements as in his circumstances. He is kept by two blithering idiots, his revolt and its aims constantly deflated, mocked and criticized. He is shown as a wretched, broken man, "dead already" (113) with "no blood left in him" (113), crawling and lying throughout his performance. This setting of his speech allows Eagleton to keep to the socialist equivalent of the *Bilderverbot*, to argue for the poetry of the future but to avoid any attempt to show it. If we are to be won to Connolly's case then it will be -- in appropriately Brechtian terms -- because we are convinced of it. The stage setting and the constant barrage of comic/burlesque deflation from McDaid and Mather mean we cannot be moved to this sympathy; it must win us intellectually.⁸⁰

The White, the Gold and the Gangrene is a play where one of the most important characters (Walter Benjamin) doesn't appear at all, where the main performer speaks the least of anyone and where a national hero and a ventriloquist's dummy share the stage. This is, on first reading, hardly what we would expect a meditation on the role of truth, beauty and tradition for materialist criticism to be made of. Yet this task is in many ways the focus of *The White, the Gold and the Gangrene*.

Through this epic theatre presentation of the last moments of a rebel touched by the lightning finger of revolution Eagleton is pursuing a number of the strands of thought that have concerned him throughout his works: the place for the tradition of the oppressed in a revolutionary criticism, the implications, contradictions and suggestions of the *Eighteenth Brumaire* and the potential resources we have bequeathed to us in the aesthetic for use in the class war. And it is here, in the blitherings of Mather and McDaid as much as in Connolly's few, tortured speeches, "in the provisional, strategic silence of those who refuse to speak 'morally' and 'aesthetically' that something of the true meaning of both terms is articulated."⁸¹

III The Famine and *God's Locusts*

"Historical materialism," Eagleton writes in *Walter Benjamin*, "rewrites the past in order to redeem it in its revolutionary validity."⁸² *God's Locusts* is a spectacular failure to act on this instruction. It is an aesthetic and political failure, a rewriting of the past that adds little to current debates and, far from redeeming the awful facts of the Famine and British imperialism's negligence in its revolutionary validity, does little to strengthen the socialist argument or cause. One imagines that, when the Prime Minister of Great Britain is freely making a claim, it is hardly the most pressing of tasks for a self-proclaimed revolutionary critic to make more of the same admissions. *God's Locusts* topples under the pressure of the problem of audience Ian Birchall has identified, and the confusion over for *whom* and *why* Eagleton has written about the Famine mark every aspect of this play. It is not so much that Eagleton's anger at the facts of "the astounding shambles and callous inhumanity of key aspects of the British relief"⁸³ are what need to be called into question. This sense of "callous inhumanity" is borne out by the best of recent historical research.⁸⁴ The problem with *God's Locusts* is, rather, that the text seems to be unable to decide what to *do* with this evidence. Eagleton, in writing on the Famine, veers between the claim that "it would seem appropriate for the British, who after all had a little to do with the event, to start the labour of remembrance"⁸⁵ and the rather more dubious one that,

a nation, like an individual, has to be able to recount a reasonable story of itself, one without either despair or presumption. As long as it veers between idealization on the one hand and disavowal on the other, it will behave exactly like Freud's neurotic patient, afflicted with reminiscences.⁸⁶

God's Locusts achieves neither of these aims, scarred as it is by precisely "idealization on the one hand and disavowal on the other," and by a deeply confused sense of its own purpose. It is worth examining, in passing, some examples of and explanations for this failure.

God's Locusts opens to a set that has the contradictory impulses of the play clearly displayed. Queen Victoria's portrait is on the wall, and yet it is "slightly surreal" while we see one actor dressed "in Victorian style with frock-coat and side whiskers" while the other is "like a snappy modern-day young stock-broker" (173). This mingling of the past and present in the play's presentation is for a purpose that never becomes clear or convincing. If it is to "rewrite the past in order to redeem it in its revolutionary validity" it is hard to see quite how this happens. In his introduction to the plays Eagleton claims to be trying to give an "imaginatively intensified" account of "one major dimension of that tragedy [the Famine] . . . as is actually happened" (9) but the irregularities of style work against this aim. The administrators Creighton and Bracken speak a sort of modern public school slang -- "I tell you, you are so dead, you are so fucking *dead*" (173) -- and parade their callousness and inhumanity in ham-fisted and overwritten displays of brutality: "how many snuffed it since the end of August?" (174). John Mitchel's costume -- he is dressed "like a Victorian version of a modern-day left-wing intellectual" (202) -- is, as well as being a nightmare for any wardrobe assistant, symptomatic of these confused aims.

If the point of these contemporary images and phrases is allow us to see the Famine in a new light, it is hard to fathom how the intrusion of modern day imagery and language contributes to this process. Far from "free[ing] socially conditioned phenomenon from that stamp of familiarity which protects them against our grasp today,"⁸⁷ these flourishes add only to the sense of Irish history as cliché that weighs so heavily on any investigation

of that tragic past.⁸⁸ Eagleton's writing of this, as when he has Creighton describe Jane Elgee as

the very lass. Said it was destroyed she was to miss you begob and
begorrah but would call back later wearing nothing but a sprig of
shamrock if you fancied a bit of how's-your-father. (177)

serves to reinforce the very perceptions of oppositional Irish history as "idealisation"⁸⁹ and "sectarianism" (9) Eagleton claims to be working against. In another context Eagleton admits that revisionist, non-nationalist "work represents a valuable intellectual advance as the formulaic rhetoric of Irish history textbooks yields to a properly nuanced study of tension, difference and complexity"⁹⁰ and yet nowhere in *God's Locusts* is any sort of nuance allowed as much as a look-in. The administrators are two callous fools and one tortured idealist led by a mean and (of course) Scots religious fanatic while the Irish are all indignation, justice, passion and outrage. When Jane Elgee appeared as Speranza in *Saint Oscar*, Eagleton happily debunked some of her excesses; here she is allowed no such complexities to mar her character. She is "a poet, and an activist, and a tribune of the people" (199).

"Ah yes, the victims," McClintock says at one point, "[h]ow else have the Irish ever imagined themselves?" (195) It is precisely this problem, the problem of trying to represent Irish history as more than one of passive victimization, that cripples *God's Locusts*. The banality of the administrators' cruelty -- "what do you say to a game of noughts and crosses?" (225) -- and the one-dimensional indignation of the Irish activists defuse any sort of anger or tragedy that the play might hope to arouse. It is precisely in failing to identify *why*, beyond fairly innocuous liberal platitudes around "recount[ing] a reasonable story" of a nation, we should still be thinking about the Famine that *God's Locusts* fails. There may very well be good reasons to think about the Famine, and I can think of a few myself, but the play doesn't provide us with either the critical distance, the sense of tragedy or the polemical or satirical energy (what Eagleton has described as "essential modes . . . for a political revolutionary"⁹¹) to stimulate any examination of this question. In a recent work on tragedy, Eagleton observes:

[t]here is . . . a tragedy of demystification, denunciation, violent unmasking; but there is also the more tortuous, tragic experience of clinging to one's delusions because in a false situation this is the only way to preserve, in however mystified a guise, a few shriveled seeds of truth.⁹²

and, unfortunately, neither of these moments of tragedy are apparent in *God's Locusts*. The "more tortuous . . . clinging to one's delusions" is nowhere in sight with the play set entirely in a London office and away from the day to day realities of survival while, by having his villains speak an overwritten modern-day crass slang -- "[w]hat's a Kerryman's foreplay?" (177) -- the sense of "denunciation" and "violent unmasking" is lost in its overdoing.

In *God's Locusts* Eagleton over-eggs the pudding of political drama, failing to hold to epic theatre's injunction for critical distance. Eagleton overwhelms the spectator with a hypnotic array of decontextualised modern language and imagery, and by the time McClintock announces the "distress is over" (222) we have neither the energy nor the inclination to either care or be outraged. A critical attitude is impossible as the relief effort is portrayed as a callous and quite self-conscious implementation of economic

policy -- "[w]e are not state interventionists, Mr O'Brian" (205) -- without any shades of disagreement or dissent⁹³ to open up a space for the spectator to reflect.

God's Locusts reveals the dangers that face any political criticism that wishes to be effective. The shrill, empty rhetoric and straw-target denunciations of this play are a counterweight to the success of *The White, the Gold and the Gangrene* and *Saint Oscar* and show that, if Marxism is to develop and progress, it must set about interrogating its own clichés and easy mythologies as much as those of its opponents.⁹⁴ It is a loss and a shame that Eagleton does not achieve this with *God's Locusts*.

Crisis, as Walter Benjamin realised, is for the oppressed the norm and not the exception. It is this state of affairs that Marxism sets itself the task of helping to overcome. Terry Eagleton's plays are an attempt at contributing towards an understanding of how that moment of crisis could be forced towards profitable, liberatory ends. Through their explorations of those concerns, long dominant in his work, of the tradition of the oppressed, the place of memory and the personal in broader struggle, our relation to the past and the poetry of the future, Eagleton's plays add to a body of writing already extraordinary in its range of interests and commitments. They are an attempt to write out the questions and problems of how to produce a revolutionary theory necessary for any revolutionary movement into the language and form of the stage.

Eagleton, in his introduction to the plays, writes about trying to "transgress the jealously patrolled frontiers between 'art' and 'ideas'" (2) and, in the process, he has given something to both terms. By taking the indirections of theatre to task as a way of finding directions out of some of the problems facing Marxist literary theory, Eagleton has developed potentially new ways of reading both moments of the past -- Oscar Wilde and James Connolly -- and approaches to the present which enable old problems to be posed in starkly new ways. If, as I indicated in my introduction to this little essay, he does not always come up with solutions to these problems, this is surely rather beside the point.

It is precisely because of his engagement with the ideas of the tradition of the oppressed and the poetry of the future, because he has the courage to attempt to write that "sound way beyond the present" and to "plough on with it" (113) that, as in rhetorical question of Brecht's great poem, Eagleton's name should be mentioned. It is in these provisional, strained and, sometimes, failed offerings of answers that Terry Eagleton adds to that body of materialist theory and literature which works to prevent the moment when

History to the defeated
May say alas but cannot help nor pardon.⁹⁵

It for this, and for producing works we can critically appropriate, steal, reject, learn from and adapt, that we should be grateful to him.

Notes

¹ I wish to thank Rose Cook, Terry Eagleton, Linda Hardy, Rebecca Stringer and Shomi Yoon for comments on an earlier draft of this essay.

- [2](#) Roland Barthes, *Critical Essays*, trans. R. Howard (Northwestern University Press: Evanston, 1972), p. 35.
- [3](#) Roland Barthes, *The Grain of the Voice*, trans L. Coverdale (New York: Hill and Wang, 1985), p. 268.
- [4](#) Terry Eagleton, personal correspondence, 8/6/02.
- [5](#) Perry Anderson, *Considerations on Western Marxism* (London: NLB, 1976), p. 42.
- [6](#) *Marxism and Form* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), p. xii.
- [7](#) "The Poetry of the Meantime: Terry Eagleton and the Politics of Style," *Year's Work in Critical and Cultural Theory*, vol. 1, no. 1, 1991, p. 243.
- [8](#) Samuel Beckett et al., *Our Exagmination Round his Factification for Incamination of Work in Progress* (London: Faber, 1961), p. 4.
- [9](#) *One Way Street*, p. 66.
- [10](#) "The Tasks of the Cultural Critic," *Meanjin*, vol. 42, no. 4, 1983, p. 448.
- [11](#) "Hitler the Hood," *Times Literary Supplement*, 16th August 1991, p. 19.
- [12](#) Terry Eagleton, "Introduction" to *Saint Oscar and Other Plays* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), p. 3.
- [13](#) *Walter Benjamin, or, towards a revolutionary criticism* (London: Verso, 1981).
- [14](#) "Homage to Walter Benjamin" in *Walter Benjamin*, p. 184.
- [15](#) *Walter Benjamin*, pp. 97-98.
- [16](#) *Ibid.* p. 109.
- [17](#) Interview with Michael Payne and M.A.R Habib in Terry Eagleton, *The Significance of Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), p.86.
- [18](#) "Terry Eagleton and Marxist Literary Criticism," *International Socialism* 2:16, 1982, p. 117. My emphasis.
- [19](#) *The Significance of Theory*, p. 79.
- [20](#) "Brother Tel: The Politics of Eagletonism," *The Year's Work in Critical and Cultural Theory*, vol. 1, no. 1, 1991, p. 283.
- [21](#) See, amongst others, Terry Eagleton, "The Poetry of Radical Republicanism," *New Left Review* 158, July/August 1986, and his "Nationalism, Irony and Commitment" reprinted in Steven Regan (ed.), *The Eagleton Reader*.

[22](#) Terry Eagleton, *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger* (London: Verso, 1995), p. x.

[23](#) "The Poetry of the Meantime," p. 261.

[24](#) See Jonathan Bate's grumpy "Saint Terence," *London Review of Books*, 23 May 1991.

[25](#) Martin McQuillan, "Irish Eagleton: of Ontological Imperialism and Colonial Mimicry," *Irish Studies Review*, vol. 10, no. 1, 2002, p. 31.

[26](#) Ibid, p. 34. This comment, for one of McQuillan's obvious erudition, shows an incredibly vulgar understanding of the Marxist conception of class as well as a hair-raisingly ignorant lack of acquaintance with some rather basic empirical evidence. See Alex Callinicos and Chris Harman, *The Changing Working Class* (London: Bookmarks, 1987) and Lindsey German, *A Question of Class* (London: Bookmarks, 1996) for a refutation of the argument McQuillan implicitly asserts.

[27](#) Martin McQuillan, "Irish Eagleton," p. 36.

[28](#) "Ontological imperialism" draws our attention, of course, to the theoretical foundation of McQuillan's article, Robert Young's *White Mythologies* (London: Routledge, 1990), esp. p. 13. See, in response to the claim of Marxism's "ontological imperialism" and Eurocentricism -- both of which would have come as a surprise to C.L.R. James -- Alex Callinicos, *Race and Class* (London: Bookmarks, 1993) esp. pp. 12-16.

[29](#) His essay starts with a comment made by Engels in a pre-Marxist book and gleefully includes a familiar chestnut, some comments by Marx on India for an American newspaper. This way of presenting the "Marxist account" of colonialism is as dishonest as it is unhelpful, and has been convincingly dealt with by Aijaz Ahmad in his *In Theory* (London: Verso, 1992).

[30](#) "Irish Eagleton," p. 30.

[31](#) See, amongst many others, James Connolly, *Selected Writings* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), Ellen Meikisins Wood, *Democracy Against Capitalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) and George Novack, *America's Revolutionary Heritage* (New York: Pathfinder, 1976), pp. 23-45. For a philosophical treatment of the question, Terry Eagleton, *Marx* (New York: Routledge, 1999) is an excellent introduction. Although it falls outside of the scope of this essay, it is worth noting the central role Marxism has played in twentieth century national liberation struggles all the way from Beijing to Belfast, Chile to Cork. McQuillan's superficial philosophical radicalism, to steal a line from Eagleton, "may be stirring stuff in the University of Virginia, but it has something of a hollow ring in the jungles of Vietnam or Guatemala," *Against the Grain* (London: Verso, 1986), p. 84.

[32](#) "Irish Eagleton," p. 30.

[33](#) *The Grain of the Voice*, trans. Linda Covendale (New York: Hill and Wang, 1985), p. 41.

[34](#) Quoted in Richard Pine, *The Thief of Reason: Oscar Wilde and Modern Ireland* (New York: St Martin's, 1995), p. 27.

[35](#) James Joyce, *Ulysses* (London: The Bodley Head, 1960), p. 21.

[36](#) Richard Ellman's *Oscar Wilde* (London: Hamilton, 1987) is generally considered the best treatment of Wilde's life. But see Merlin Holland, "The Resurgence of Lying," in *The Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 3-17.

[37](#) See Robert Tanitch, *Oscar Wilde on stage and screen* (London: Methuen, 1999).

[38](#) Terry Eagleton, "Introduction" to *Saint Oscar and other plays* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), p. 3. All subsequent references to this text are given in the body of the essay.

[39](#) Seamus Heaney, "Speranza in Reading" in *The Redress of Poetry* (London: Faber, 1995), p. 86.

[40](#) Terry Eagleton, *Walter Benjamin*, (London: Verso, 1981), p. 51.

[41](#) Richard Pine, *The Thief of Reason*, p. xi.

[42](#) Steve Connor, "The poetry of the meantime: Terry Eagleton and the politics of style," in *The Year's Work in Critical and Cultural Theory* vol. 1, 1991, p. 246.

[43](#) Compare this account with Ellman's *Oscar Wilde*, esp. pp. 409-474.

[44](#) Seamus Deane, "Heroic styles: the tradition of an idea" in *Ireland's Field Day* (London: Hutchinson, 1985), p. 46.

[45](#) Walter Benjamin, *Understanding Brecht*, (London: New Left Books, 1973), p. 8.

[46](#) "Heroic style," p. 58.

[47](#) Martin McQuillan, "Irish Eagleton," p. 36.

[48](#) Caryl Churchill, *Cloud Nine* (London: Pluto, 1979), p. 56.

[49](#) Terry Eagleton, personal correspondence, 8/6/2002.

[50](#) Peter Brooker, *Bertolt Brecht: dialectics, poetry, politics* (London: Croom Helm, 1988), p. 52.

[51](#) *Ibid.* p. 186.

[52](#) Stephen Rea played Wilde in the first season of *Saint Oscar*, Fry in the popular 1998 film *Wilde*.

[53](#) Terry Eagleton, "Saint Oscar" in Steven Regan (ed.), *The Eagleton Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), p. 373.

[54](#) Terry Eagleton, *Against the Grain* (London: Verso, 1986), p. 163.

[55](#) Terry Eagleton, *Walter Benjamin*, p. 23.

[56](#) Terry Eagleton, "Brecht and Rhetoric," *New Literary History*, vol. 16, no. 3 (1984-85), p. 633.

[57](#) Walter Benjamin, *One Way Street*, (London: Verso, 1997), p. 76.

[58](#) Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History" in Hannah Arendt (ed.), *Illuminations* (London: Fontana, 1973), p. 247.

[59](#) Benjamin, *Illuminations*, p. 247.

[60](#) E.P Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (Harmondsworth: Pelican, 1968) p.13.

[61](#) *Illuminations*, p. 247.

[62](#) *Ibid*, p. 248.

[63](#) "Introduction" to James Connolly, *Selected Writings*, p. 8. Berresford Ellis is not always a reliable guide to Connolly's thought, and is rarely sufficiently critical of his subject. Kieran Allen, *The Politics of James Connolly* (London : Pluto, 1990), and Chris Bambery, *Ireland's Permanent Revolution* (London: Bookmarks, 1986), pp. 49-54, provide a useful background to *The White, the Gold and the Gangrene*.

[64](#) V.I Lenin, "The State and Revolution" in *Selected Works*, vol. 2, (Moscow: Progress, 1977), p. 240.

[65](#) Terry Eagleton, *Walter Benjamin*, p. 126.

[66](#) Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, pp. 252-253.

[67](#) Terry Eagleton, *Saints and Scholars* (London: Verso, 1987), p.10. See also his *Walter Benjamin*, p. 1. Eagleton is echoing Benjamin's XVIth thesis from "Theses on the Philosophy of History." See *Illuminations*, p. 254.

[68](#) *Illuminations*, p. 254.

[69](#) Connolly is paraphrasing Benjamin's Thesis XII. See *Illuminations* p. 252. He makes the same claim in *Saints and Scholars*, p. 128.

[70](#) Benjamin, *Illuminations*, p. 254. "Cancelled" is here a translation of the German *Aufheben* in its grandly Hegelian sense: to preserve, to elevate and to cancel. For a fuller discussion of the implications of this see John Rees, *The Algebra of Revolution* (London: Routledge, 1998), esp. pp. 13-54.

[71](#) See Terry Eagleton, *Criticism and Ideology* (London: New Left Books, 1976), pp. 182-184; *Walter Benjamin*, p. 162-170, *Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), pp. 213-217; "Marxism and the Past," *Salmagundi* (Fall 1985 - Winter 1986); and his "The God that Failed" in Mary Nyquist and Margaret F. Ferguson (eds.), *Remembering Milton* (London: Methuen, 1988).

[72](#) *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, p. 216.

[73](#) A point developed by John Molyneux in his stimulating little pamphlet *The Future Socialist Society* (London: Bookmarks, 1997).

[74](#) Cf. Walter Benjamin, "[w]e know that the Jews were prohibited from investigating the future. The Torah and the prayers instruct them in remembrance, however. This stripped the future of its magic, to which all those succumb who turn to soothsayers for enlightenment," *Illuminations*, p. 255.

[75](#) Alex Callinicos, *Making History* (Oxford: Polity, 1987), p. 222.

[76](#) Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon*, in *Surveys from Exile* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), pp. 148, 149.

[77](#) Benjamin, *Illuminations*, p. 254.

[78](#) Lenin, quoted in Connolly, *Selected Writings*, p. 36.

[79](#) *Surveys from Exile*, p. 150.

[80](#) In his discussion of the *Eighteenth Brumaire* in *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, Eagleton makes this suggestive observation: "socialist revolution . . . is excessive of all form, out in advance of its own rhetoric. It is unrepresentable by anything but itself, signified only in its 'absolute moment of becoming', and thus a kind of sublimity. . . . [I]t is less a matter of discovering expressive forms adequate to the substance of socialism than of rethinking the whole opposition -- of grasping the form no longer as the symbolic mould into which that substance is poured, but as the 'form of the content', as the structure of a ceaseless self-production," pp. 214-215.

[81](#) Terry Eagleton, *Criticism and Ideology*, p. 187.

[82](#) *Walter Benjamin*, p. 51.

[83](#) Terry Eagleton, "Introduction," *Saint Oscar and Other Plays*, p. 9.

[84](#) See Cormac Ó Gráda's magnificent *Black '47 and Beyond: the Great Irish Famine in History, Economy and Memory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999) esp. in relation to *God's Locusts*, pp. 70-77. See also Tim P. O'Neill, "Famine Evictions" in Carla King (ed.), *Famine, Land and Culture in Ireland* (Dublin: University College Press, 2000), pp. 29-71.

[85](#) Terry Eagleton, "Indigestible Truths," *New Statesman and Society*, 2nd June 1995, p. 23.

[86](#) *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger*, p. ix.

[87](#) *Ibid*, p. 192.

[88](#) The essays contained in Colin Graham and Richard Kirkland (eds.), *Ireland and Cultural Theory: the mechanics of authority* (Houndmills: Macmillan, 1999), although, in

the main, rather tame and bland politically, attempt to think through the challenges of avoiding this.

[89](#) *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger*, p. ix.

[90](#) "Indigestible Truths," p. 22.

[91](#) *Against the Grain*, p. 71.

[92](#) *Sweet Violence: the idea of the tragic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), p. 99.

[93](#) There was, of course, a good deal of disagreement amongst the Empire's rulers as to how the Famine relief should be managed, and it does Eagleton's cause a disservice to create such straw-target Aunt Sallys as McClintock and Creighton. See Cormac Ó Gráda, *Black '47* for a discussion of the various relief programmes and arguments.

[94](#) Eagleton begins something of this process in his "Nationalism and the case of Ireland," *New Left Review*, 234, 11/12 1999.

[95](#) W.H Auden, "Spain," *Selected Poems* (New York: Vintage, 1989), p. 55.