

Terry Eagleton, *Trouble with Strangers: A Study of Ethics*
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Terry Eagleton, *Reason, Faith, and Revolution: Reflections on the God Debate*
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MR LOVE AND JUSTICE

Twenty-first century Eagleton at times resembles the Dionysian persona he presented in *Holy Terror*, published in 2005, as the very embodiment of the Lacanian Real—excessive, sulphurous, unstauntable. Revelling in the further release from polite dialogue that his ‘theological turn’ appears to bestow, the author of *Reason, Faith, and Revolution* plays Hamlet (a favourite Realist) to the Rosencrantz and Guildenstern of thin-blooded rationalism (‘Ditchkins’ for short). Momentarily indulging their seeming fellow-feeling, Eagleton ruthlessly exposes the nastiness beneath, resolving on final damage. He first mauled *The God Delusion* in a review entitled ‘Lunging, Flailing, Mis-punching’, but you would rather avoid Eagleton’s haymakers than Dawkins’s fisticuffs. The recent writings overlap heavily, such that *Trouble with Strangers* might be thought only to aggregate themes from the two books mentioned, plus those from two better ones—the bristlingly insightful *Sweet Violence* (2003), and the satisfactorily armchained *Meaning of Life* (2007). But more than the compilation effect, it is the internal agonistics of *Trouble with Strangers* that makes it both thoroughly absorbing and uneven in every sense. Organized by core Lacanian notions, which it clinically deconstructs, and alternating considered assessment with blasts of non-negotiable ‘Christian’ declaration, *Strangers* yields an amalgam that seems destined—perhaps designed—not to set. For all his formidable assuredness, Eagleton’s

reflections on the loops that bind metaphysics, ethics, religion and politics are still very much in process.

In process, but not exactly in progress. The ‘ethics of socialism’, specified in the preface as one of the two main sources and goals of the enquiry, occupies only a handful of cursory sentences, some of them questionable—is socialism really about ‘solidarity with failure’, for example? The intention may be there, but it cannot be developed until Eagleton’s particular version of post-secularism—he does not use this term—has been talked out. According to this, a certain kind of secularist Marxism has gone, leaving us with two completely gutless alternatives: liberal rationalism and culturalist postmodernism. This spells good news for global capitalism, which rapaciously both promotes and devours such untroubling sensibilities. Progressive politics must therefore be re-imagined in the shape of a truly redemptive radicalism, its prerequisite energy stemming chiefly from the Christian preparedness for loving collective and subjective transfiguration. In order to access this last hope and opportunity, we need to see, unflinchingly, that there is nothing essentially progressive or self-sufficient about human society; that just as recto stands to verso, so virtuous sociability surfaces a void of disappointment, lack and despair. Insofar as socialist thought remains in thrall to cerebral universalism, it cannot entertain so dire a predicament from which to re-build. So Eagleton explores instead the promise of distributing moral philosophies into the psychoanalytic categories of the Imaginary, the Symbolic and the Real.

Just heuristically, this is an illuminating strategy, Eagleton helpfully uncoiling that esoteric trinity in ‘characteristically lucid’ style (a phrase that, bafflingly, he twice uses to describe Lacan himself). The machinery swings into gear with an account of eighteenth-century doctrines of sentiment and sympathy, interspersed—as the other parts are—with snapshot variations effortlessly drawn from the literary figures of the time; here, the likes of Sterne, Steele, Goldsmith, Richardson. The Imaginary refers to the moment of the ‘mirror phase’, in which, supposedly, the infant comes hazily to consciousness, sensing that its own image, whilst remaining unthought, in-here, and still-as-one with the Mother, is also magically reproduced and recognized ‘out there’. Signifier and signified, self and world, are not yet traumatically prised apart according to the abstract demands of the Symbolic, through which subjectivities come into definition vis-à-vis the impersonal Other—society, language, thought systems, law.

In this light, Eagleton locates Francis Hutcheson’s good-hearted ethics, which required little more than a generous appreciation of our spontaneous divination of good and bad; our possession of an inner, upper moral ‘sense’, different in quality, but hardly in kind, from seeing and smelling. Also to be found in this meditative ‘comfort zone’ is David Hume’s rigorous refusal to

ground morality (as well as knowledge) in anything but sense impressions and the more or less vivacious ideas that derive from them. Our learned association of self-interest and companionate concern, for Eagleton's Hume, should be sufficient to glue the benevolent society together. Adam Smith's concepts took him beyond his predecessors' insistence on the immediacy of the moral sentiments. Smithian sympathy involves partial rather than complete identification with the passions of others, across a wider range of subjective states, and his 'imagination' incorporates the circumstances of judgement as well as in-your-shoes empathy. Nevertheless, Smith too holds that ethics is basically a matter of 'emotional transaction'. (Edmund Burke is then said to extend this problematic to politics, hegemony being achieved through 'imitation and mutual compliance, not precepts').

Eagleton accepts that these thinkers were the first to develop a stringently social account of morality, and he knows too that the cloying sentimentalists—especially amongst the Scribblers—must be set apart from the larger Imaginary minds. But even the best of them are only 'bloodlessly admirable', because in the last instance they are 'drearly bourgeois'. Their natural habitat is the coffee house and gentleman's club, a mutual admiration society in which what is most keenly felt is the need to feel. Such 'parochial emotionalism' cannot handle the messiness and opacity of the human body, nor its underlying *telos* as 'self-transcending project'. In any case, 'morality is a matter of what you do, not what you feel', such that even considerate sympathy 'has no value in itself'. Contrary to the approbationary warmings of the Georgian philosophical breast, genuine, political love—*agape*, revolutionary solidarity—is 'unpleasant, exacting, thankless and ultimately lethal'. It is the distasteful state and plight of the stranger and outcast that constitute the scene of truly moral action, not familiar situations and persons who happen to be friends.

Under the 'sovereignty' of the Symbolic, the 'insistence' of the Imaginary is held at bay, and 'the closed sphere of the ego' opens out into the field of regulated moral inter-subjectivity. It is the job of symbolic thought to endow normative interaction with objectivity and legitimacy, setting its roles and reactions within some universal conditions of possibility and difference. Just about any 'modern' theory could be made to fit this bill, and liberalism and utilitarianism are named as major ethical variants; but Eagleton settles on Spinoza and Kant as the quintessential expressions. Then, with striking acuity, *Measure for Measure* is presented as an escalating set of dilemmas in which the valences of the Symbolic are fatally disturbed by the relentless undertow of the Real. This is because—to generalize across the work—the emancipation and distance that are indeed enabled by the Symbolic order, so that we leave behind Imaginary forms of the 'addiction to desire', are themselves conditional upon the repression of sentience, fantasy

and dependency. The Symbolic thus entails a profound estrangement of self, a ‘gash in our being’, a mortal contradiction between settled projects and untrammelled desire-for-itself.

Spinoza, Eagleton explains, is ‘the great exponent of rationalist disenchantment’. He positioned men and women unambiguously as part of nature, subject to forces they cannot understand, their sense of freedom illusory, their purposes and consolations finding no confirmation in the grandly ‘externalist’ scheme of things. Whether by way of anthropomorphic projection or by appeal to the will of God, the desperate human concern with values, whilst true to the necessity of our being (self-preserving, self-confirming), misrecognizes the character of being as a whole. To be sure, the point of view of the whole is strictly unattainable, but for Spinoza it can at least be approached through consistent ‘geometric’ reasoning, detaching constantly from the myopia of experience, arriving thereby at a lofty proposition: that the totality of nature’s necessity and the mind of God are one. In this understanding, we become virtuous by rising above the claims of emotional and physical egoism, our tainted moralism overcome by the love of intellect and the nurturing, in a commonwealth of equals, of generous neo-Stoical appreciation.

Kant, however, cannot subscribe to such a speculative dialectic and once again splits nature and morality apart, our essential freedom reassigned to the latter, our bodily appetites to the former. *Contra* the empiricists, duty and will for Kant take absolute priority, the residual pull of natural inclination kept firmly in its (non-moral) place. Eagleton praises Kant’s bold removal of value-relevance from the clasp of personal and physical wants, but the German’s ‘cardinal error’ is to rule out the possibility that we possess natural moral dispositions, capable of cultivation through ethical habit and example. Aquinas’s doctrine of will—and Aristotelianism generally—make no such mistake, allowing us to overturn Kant’s austere edict that the Moral Law requires complete withdrawal from material commitment to particular others. His sense of unconditional obligation, like his reverence for law itself, is admirable, but the bleached-out axiomatics of the categorical imperative can only prove compelling to ‘anally-fixated petty bourgeois of every epoch’. The remedy is to re-endow moral commitment with substantive content, the unstinting ‘service to others’ that is sustained through unlimited love of the God who quite gratuitously loves us back.

The ‘reign of the Real’ takes more exploration and exemplification than the ‘sovereignty of the Symbolic’, partly due to its unavoidable obscurity, and partly to Eagleton’s patently greater interest in it. Out of sympathy with sympathy, he seemed especially keen not to dally with the philosophical low-life of the Imaginary. But this attitude has its costs, Eagleton’s raid on Smith in particular bordering on the unscholarly. Named in the title of a chapter,

but allotted only a few brief pages, examination of the political economist's explanatory reflections on morals—he was not proposing normative guidelines, primarily—proceeds without a single mention of their conceptual centrepiece, the 'impartial spectator'. Yet it is through this discursive figure that Smith provides precisely the sort of ethical quality check that Eagleton thinks is missing. Through repeat visits to the impartial spectator—who, like our therapist, is far from omniscient—we achieve just enough reflective distance from our own self-images to improve our judgements of others in their situation. This interesting sketch of how we do morality clearly breaches the confines of the Imaginary as Eagleton presents it.

The Real for its part refers, supposedly, to 'the subject that is more than the subject'; that which 'is most permanently awry with us, and is most truly of our essence'. The Real is the truth that cannot be totalized, the desire that cannot be satisfied, the drive that continues to desire despite our intuition that no particular object of desire will bring satisfaction. The Real therefore signals a convoluted, ardent longing that lies beyond any set of principles and all reasoned exchange. In such upturned terrain, the courage to confront and cope with the demands of the Real, for Eagleton—or at least the part of Eagleton that is trying to think with Lacan—constitutes the ethical *par excellence*. To act well in the shadow of dread and death; to grasp that no commitment to particular attractions, however elevated, will ever be enough; yet to do what one can, in some unwavering way; this is morals beyond the reach of the merely good, and therefore something potentially redemptive. We submit to our destiny—the impossibility of specific fulfilment—but we carry on regardless, and in so doing, touch upon transcendence. That the Real conceived along these lines is a slippery, tension-ridden syndrome is plain, with some doubt persisting as to whether ethical integrity is supposed to lie in and through the Real itself, regarded as a brutal, erotic, sublime wrecking of any codification and stability, or whether it is about living in uncomfortable awareness of the uncontrollable, and still trying somehow to cope.

Taking us through some good and bad surpassings of the Good, Eagleton finds Schopenhauer's implacable Will to be an impostor, its menace dissolved in a final scene in which destructive desire is serenely suspended, marking a retreat back into the aesthetic consolations of the Imaginary; something that was said of Spinoza too. Kierkegaard's bracing depiction of a subjecthood in cold pursuit of uncompromising authenticity, incommensurable with everything in the world and intolerant of mere existence, is judged too adolescent and anti-social (and he just doesn't get Christianity). Nietzsche scores better, his interlinked hatred of humanism and religion depicted not as a prelude to tyrannical misanthropy, but rather as a paean to species-enhancing dauntlessness and affirmation—if far too aristocratic, of course. The travails of the great fictional characters are once again brought to bear on the disquisition:

we enter the vortices of the unrepresentable in the company of Shylock, Ahab, Heathcliff, Wordsworth's exiles and Conrad's men, confirming that the Real sets the 'unthinkable limits' against which we must hurl our petty local values. Unliveable in itself, the Real nevertheless 'releases an uncanny power to inaugurate a new human order'.

But the striking of that gavel of the Symbolic, 'Order', indicates that despite following the Lacanian sequence for presentational purposes, no normative linearity is intended. The Real cannot be the last word, ethically speaking. The reader has to be tolerant here, because it was on account of their egregious neglect of the Real that Eagleton clubbed the advocates of the Imaginary and sought to relax the uptight Symbolics. But the Lacanian Real must now take a hit too, not least because, whatever truth it contains, Christianity got there first. So, if Lacan catches much of what churns us up in the 'tragic sense of life', his ethics of heroic failure finds no place for 'anything as commonplace as human needs, appetites and interests', or any role for loving faith in its amelioration. Eagleton still cannot quite bring himself to resist such nostrums as 'unconditional fidelity to the law of one's own being', and 'never give up on one's desire'. But he should, because while no doubt ethically relevant, there is nothing intrinsically moral about them. One wonders, for example, what guidance they could bring to Tiger Woods in his moment of Real crisis, beyond inciting his sense of alpha-male specialness.

The liberal use of Lacanian terminology throughout the book is contestable more broadly. Eagleton continually translates specifically psychoanalytic propositions and assumptions into more familiar features of, and attitudes to, the human condition. As in:

Whenever we stumble . . . across a desire that starkly isolates a protagonist; renders him or her strange to themselves; expresses an ineluctable inner need; manifests an adamant refusal to compromise; invests itself in an object more precious than life itself; maroons a character between life and death, and finally bears him or her inexorably to the grave, we can be reasonably sure that we are in the presence of the Real.

The problem with this passage is not its hammy conclusion, which deliciously echoes the words of John Wayne's awed Roman centurion at the scene of the Crucifixion in *The Greatest Story Ever Told* ('Truly this man was the son of God'). Rather, it is over-inclusive, exhibiting the sort of indiscriminateness that Eagleton is often quick to upbraid. There is after all a pressing theoretical verdict to reach here. Provocatively: either—especially for a 'scientific' theory—Lacan's schemas are quite extraordinarily metaphorical, opaque and optional, in spite of their near-obligatory status in the current mode of critical thinking; or our every sensed moment of isolation, jolt by

inner needs, slippage into obsession, and bull-headed passage back to the soil from whence we came should be rigorously tied in to the fading prospect of maternal re-possession.

A more inclusively envisioned Lacan, however, also comes in for rough treatment, by proxy, when Eagleton turns to examine how intimations of the Real shape the work of three other theorists revered in some sections of the 'cultural left': Levinas, Badiou, Derrida. Eagleton's engagement with the first two is especially impressive, and severe, with the ethico-religious reflections of the third given shorter shrift, brushed off as an 'extended footnote to Levinas'.

Eagleton, we should re-emphasize, weighed in against the luminaries of the Imaginary in terms reminiscent of Levinas himself: it is not our friend who deserves our moral devotion, but the stranger and outcast, someone we do not have to like at all. But this only makes our effort on his behalf the more constant and total. Yet when he comes face-to-face with the sombre author of *Totality and Infinity*, Eagleton soon takes his distance, accusing Levinas of wheeling in the wrong aspect of the Symbolic in support of an ethics of the Real. In an abstractionist move that Eagleton thinks resembles Kant's, Levinas portrays our primal confrontation with the plight of the Other as devoid of personal and social specificity. Although it is the very face of the Other for which we are supposed to lay down our lives, the object of this unqualified self-giving, in the situation of unmediated co-presence, becomes a 'troublingly eternal' figure, someone mysteriously 'denuded of all definitive cultural markers'. For Eagleton, such featurelessness only renders Levinas's categorical imperative—'Be infinitely responsible!'—portentously empty. Against his 'curious out-abnegating' game, one in which 'I am always more responsible than they are', it is insisted that concrete reciprocity matters, that we cannot be infinitely hospitable to otherness. In the properly mundane context of ethical action, we are necessarily also locked into considerations of identity and sameness. All the more important, then, that justice strives towards what Derrida and Levinas say cannot even be contemplated: principled fairness in its 'comparison of the incomparable'.

The shining idea in Alain Badiou's view of ethics is subjective fidelity to the unique truth of an 'Event'. Badiou's point is not that we entertain the significance and value of an Event's occurrence in the light of some wider contextual canvass that alone makes sense of it. That would be the kind of reasoning—Symbolic thinking, of course—that, along with his French *confrères*, Badiou finds both inadequate and pusillanimous. In Badiou's alternative ontology, Events cannot be calibrated with the 'situations' that they puncture because they are not knowable generalities, or markers of emergent processes within a single stable world; rather they are singular eruptions that constitute and reconstitute worlds. The ethical purport of

Events is not decidable as such, either according to pre-existing reference points, or by dint of some postulated externality. Events confront and determine us, our ethical and epistemological subjectivity formed and defined in anticipatory commitment to their force.

Eagleton expresses unease about a concept of truth that is so notably more performative than propositional. It is a pity that this issue is addressed in shorthand only, because it is key to any prospect of *rapprochement* between ‘analytical’ and ‘continental’ philosophy. But Eagleton has other important things to query: Badiou’s Platonic disdain for all naturalism and creatureliness; his axiomatic rather than deliberative understanding of the work of ideas; the *canard* that all heterodoxy is to be applauded just as all truth is oppositional; the elitist proclamation that ethics begins only with unre-served fidelity to the truth of an Event; and the related ‘scathing dismissal’ of everyday estimations of right and wrong. One could probably quibble with some of this, and Badiou has at least returned to philosophical universalism its proper grandeur, tasking us to leap beyond the apologetics of identity-politics. Indeed, Badiou’s recent *Logics of Worlds* markedly tones down the ethical and explanatory exceptionalism that Eagleton questions. But Eagleton holds steadfast to his purpose, extending the argument by drawing out the affinities between the French post-structuralists and the tradition of *Kulturkritik*. Though ‘richly resourceful’, both currents are ‘politically disastrous’, the visions of ‘tragic inhumanity’ and ‘irrational absurdity’ in someone like George Steiner convergent with the Lacanians’ contempt for the ordinary. If their conjoint ‘exultation in intensity’ helps for intuiting such things as the fearsome inexplicability of evil, the case against worldly Symbolic ethics, duly considered, is ‘remarkably feeble’. Overall, Eagleton’s engagement with the *doyens* of the Real is a commanding episode of cultural-materialist appraisal.

What about Eagleton’s putative synthesis between the three Lacanian modes, and especially the role of Christian faith in that project? This turns out to be drastically ambiguous, as I read it. One relatively low-key story of reintegration starts with the observation, registered above, that although the repressed, the exhilarating and the terrifying form the context and limits of morality, the Real cannot yield a workable or caring ethics. Its profound but *unhinged* insight must be rolled back, without apology, into solid appreciation of the ‘banality of goodness’, commitment to which is shared by Christianity and socialism. The quest for ‘transformed humanity’, therefore, involves nothing much, necessarily, beyond vigorous prosecution of the mundane struggles of ‘actually existing men and women’. Morality is still demanding; it has to be militant; and it involves due reverence for exemplary sacrificial martyrdom—whether that of Christ or the ‘guerrilla fighters’. Yet we are not obliged, precisely, to become martyrs ourselves just

for the sake of it, or to forsake our genuine nearside attachments. In the appropriate culture of the virtuous society, we can become progressively better at being human, to the point where goodness is almost spontaneous. Law would remain the proper scaffold of this mutualist form of life, but it stays in the background as associationist institutions come to the fore. We are not talking here about staunch republican responsibility, however commendable, because allegiance to the prospect of reciprocal fulfilment and collective self-realization is the dictate of love. Eagleton imagines some radical philosophers being suspicious of the altruistic overspill in this solution, preferring stern justice; others will want to push ethics to the maximum. But for him, politics and ethics, love and justice, are inseparable. On this reading, Christianity, though irreducible in its way, is best taken as an exemplary expression of more encompassing humanist values.

However, an altogether higher-octane rumour is also in circulation. According to this, even egalitarian virtue ethics is too 'gentrified', and the ethics of love is decidedly surplus to all normal requirements. Moreover, the move towards psycho-social replenishment can never be secure, because the 'disfiguring Real at the core of identity' cannot be extinguished. The Real, in fact, forms a duality, simultaneously cursed and sacred. The Christian mission is part of the Real, and not just its appreciative corrective, because God's intense personal love, which somehow carries the impersonal force of law, is both absolutely necessary and yet also impossible. The ethical ordeal is thus to pull the Good Real away from the brink of the Lacanian danger zone in the mad trust that 'love is stronger than death'; and everyone enlisted in that cause must be prepared to be done to death, because our relentless labour on behalf of the poor and the scapegoat can expect nothing less in this world. If this feels tough, the radiant knowledge that the proper object of desire, God, is also its singular source, allows us to rejoice in the infinity of Christian charity and to swim in '*the jouissance of eternal life*'.

These are two very different takes on the relationship between religion and ethics, awkwardly tangled right to the end. On the first account, there is 'no conflict between immanence and transcendence, as there is for the Realists', but the cranked-up version says exactly the opposite. Eagleton adds to the confusion when, in closing, he plays a bizarre get-out card: nothing in his study, he states, depends upon the truth of either psychoanalysis or Christianity. Having just heard about the inextinguishability of the Real within Christian ethical identity itself, and having endured some florid homilies to the effect that the Creation, 'as pure, unmotivated gift and grace has absolutely no point beyond God's supreme self-delight', this admission cannot but strike a note of self-serving casuistry. Actually, we should not be surprised, because the same conundrums emerged from Eagleton's encounter with Dawkins and Hitchens. On the one hand, the

latter were comprehensively lambasted for being ignorant about theology and unaware of the subtlety of its practitioners. The critics' sneering at perfectly well-intentioned, not-stupid religious people was found despicable, and directly attributed to their tediously safe middle-class *habitus*. And their baseline contrast between mystified religion and rational progressivism was grotesquely overdrawn, firstly because 'non-rational' (but not thereby unreasonable) elements cannot be eliminated from any of our theoretical schemes, and secondly because 'many secular myths are degutted versions of sacred ones'.

All well said, let's agree. On the other hand, Eagleton's riposte implies nothing whatever concerning the truth of Christianity, or God as our moral source, or even His very existence. Indeed, Eagleton confesses, again somewhat alarmingly, that when it comes to the indefensible side of religious thinking, 'the bellicose ravings of Ditchkins are, if anything, too muted'. So the default position is that Christian theology, even if it 'may well be false', still certainly 'deserves respect', not least because it 'may still serve as an allegory of our political and historical condition'. Sensing perhaps that a defence of religion *qua* allegory might impress its enemies more than its supporters, Eagleton seeks out some further metaphysical content, if not a literal truth, that could be said to be distinctive of his faith. To that end, he extends the 'negative' critique of the rationalists: their blunder is to treat religion as a type of (failed) explanation of what exists in the world and what we are doing here, when really it is nothing of the sort. Through a series of adventurous similes—there are eight of them in five pages of *Reason, Faith, and Revolution*—the absurdity of this mis-identification is exposed. In one comparison, to fancy that religion is a (second-rate) description of the world 'is like seeing ballet as a botched attempt to run for a bus'. In another, to depict Christianity as a system 'whose participants avow belief in a supernatural agent or agents, whose approval is to be sought' is rather like 'beginning a history of the potato by defining it as a rare species of rattlesnake'.

There is no accounting for literary taste, perhaps, but for me these tropes are strained; and symptomatic of a larger problem. This resides in the fact that whereas his treatment of the philosophers of the Real abounds with shrewd and stepwise argumentation, in which debilitating contradictions are quickly spotted, Eagleton's conceptual rigour is granted leave of absence when it comes to what it is that God's being consists in. We are asked to mark Ditchkins's bone-headed misunderstanding—one that happens to be shared, of course, by many sincere religious people—that believers imagine God to be a 'mega-manufacturer', and a pushy 'Nobodaddy', all curiously moulded in human form. Then we are given the ostensibly superior conception: God is what sustains all things in being with his love, and the reason that there is something rather than nothing; God is an artist, conjuring up the world for

no particular purpose, demanding nothing from us other than that he should be allowed to love us in all our moral squalor. The presumption seems to be that the better articulation, in which God trades his toolbox for a palette in order to paint himself into the misty background, puts an end to the whole ridiculous God 'debate'. But of course it does nothing of the kind. Not only does the constitution of His universe, however aesthetically motivated, have to be materially explicable in terms of His actual causal powers; His demand that we allow Him to love the miserable likes of us, as well as the love itself, are just as anthropomorphically interventionist and guilt-tripping as in the defective scenario. The whole discussion, moreover, rests on what is becoming an uncritical dogma in contemporary post-secularism: that recurrent metaphysical puzzlement signals the timeless irrepressibility and primacy of religion rather than our continuous cognitive and imaginative activity, of which religion is but one (variable) expression.

It is sometimes remarked that with Eagleton's latest 'coming out' he is merely returning to his original youthful inspiration in liberation theology. This is not quite right. Not only has his thinking and politics stretched here, consolidated there, in the course of his ascent to theoretical pre-eminence; Eagleton has also evolved a more varied set of aesthetic resources and intellectual responses. The current post-secular wave, for its part, constitutes a notable shift of context, one that demands fresh articulations of the philosophical ideas of the left. It is a situation that cannot properly be summated by counterposing one static slogan (*God is Back*) against another (*God is Dead*). And if claims about the existence, nature and influence of particular deities remain thoroughly implausible, conventional humanism/materialism seems unable to fuel the kind of emotional and political energies that religious belief and even 'belief in belief' are held uniquely to generate. In his inimitable way, Eagleton is helping to develop this intriguing scene, and further framings of his thought are keenly anticipated. Meanwhile, the present authorized version is dogged with some intractable difficulties.