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AN INTRINSIC EAGLETON?

What are we to make of Terry Eagleton's arguments, in the early years of the new millennium,[1] for the intrinsicness of a range of virtues and vices, such as evil, goodness, humility and sacrifice? The short answer is that this intrinsicness produces some tensions that point to his refusal to acknowledge in any substantive fashion his dim and distant past as a young theologian in the Catholic Left. As for the long answer, that is the substance of this essay. Let me then trace out his arguments for, and then the problems with, the intrinsic nature of evil, good, God, art, literature, humanity and indeed communism, before passing to that repressed past.

Evil and the Humble Virtues

To begin with, evil has become in Eagleton's more recent work a regular visitor, wearing the doormat down with its passing to and fro. For instance, Eagleton commends Noberto Bobbio for not being afraid to broach the question of evil, "demanded as it is by the monstrosities of the century through which he lived almost from one end to the other" (Eagleton 2003a: 118-19).[2] Neither the negation nor absence of good, as some forms of traditional theology would have it, nor even the instrumental and purposeful purges of a Stalin or Mao, the quintessence of evil lies in its intrinsic nature. It has no purpose or end apart from itself, is as non-functional as good, God, art, creation or humanity. Eagleton's favored examples are the Shoah, or Holocaust, and the devil (Eagleton 2003b: 254-6;2007: 216-17). Without motive or rational meaning, the Jews, gypsies, gays and others in the final solution were subjected to pointless torture and humiliation, transported at great expense across Europe only to be murdered *en masse*. Similarly, the devil performs evil for its own sake, an agent of motiveless pain and destruction.

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1 The more recent texts in question are *Sweet Violence* (Eagleton 2003b), *Figures of Dissent* (Eagleton 2003a), *The Gatekeeper* (Eagleton 2001) and *After Theory* (Eagleton 2003c). After this essay was written Eagleton also produced *Terry Eagleton Present Jesus Christ: The Gospels* (2007), which is a rehash of the same rather unoriginal points he has been making for the last few years.

2 I wonder at Eagleton's assertion that Noberto Bobbio is one of the few who dares to use the word "evil" itself. In fact, the move has become something of a commonplace: I think of the volume *Radical Evil*, edited by Joan Copjec, where Kant's own reflections on evil are revisited from the top of the last century's massive piles of corpses (Copjec 1996). Or Lacan's reflections on evil in his *Ethics of Psychoanalysis* (Lacan 1992), let alone the move from liberation theology to consider evil and sin in political and structural terms that has influenced so much theology in the West.

I have a few quibbles with this notion of intrinsic evil. To begin with, the central term that Eagleton himself does not seem to want to name is theodicy, the traditional three-way contradiction between God's goodness, justice and omnipotence. And the problem for theodicy is precisely the sort of gratuitous suffering, the absolutely purposeless evil that exists for its own sake. I can agree with Eagleton that the value of a figure like the devil is that he reminds us of the positive, palpable nature of evil, that it is not merely the absence of God or goodness; or even that when middle class values such as thrift, prudence, temperance and sexual repression dominate, the devil becomes much more enticing and alluring, the "flipside of suburbia" (Eagleton 2003a: 21). But I am not sure that meaningless evil is the end run of any theological consideration of evil itself. Is not the instrumental reason, charted so well by Horkheimer and Adorno, that he so quickly dismisses also inherently evil? I think here not of the calculated and malicious individual act, say running over your former spouse's cat or calling on Osama Bin Laden to assist with a personal enemy. There are a host of blood-soaked examples, such as the depredations of imperialism, both of an older colonial and neo-colonial age, or the necessary exploitation by which capitalism itself operates, or the long history of the oppression of and assault on women, let alone the Holocaust which is only the most widely known and commented upon of genocidal and racist acts. Is this not even more sinister than evil for its own sake? The devil himself in traditional Christian theology engages in his campaigns of mayhem and disruption precisely for the sake of world domination. He knows he can't win, but he will give it a damn good try all the same.

However, Eagleton gives the intrinsic notion of evil a curious psychoanalytic twist:

> The demonic are those who sense some frightful non-being at the root of their identity, and who find this sublime chaos embodied in a particular figure, whether Jew, woman, homosexual or foreigner. Exterminating this otherness then becomes the only way of convincing yourself that you exist. Only in the obscene enjoyment of dismembering others can you plug the gap in your own being, warding off the threat of non–being by creating even more of the stuff around you…. The damned cannot relinquish their torment because it is bound up with their *jouissance*, cannot escape the brutal sadism of the Law because this is just what they desire. And this is why they are in despair. But since we all desire the cruelty of the Law, at least if Freud is to be credited, evil of this kind is at once gratifyingly rare and exceedingly commonplace (Eagleton 2003a: 119-20; see Eagleton 2003b: 256-8).

Let me exegete this passage for a moment or two. Eagleton has here enlisted Lacanian psychoanalysis as an astute description of the nature of evil, a thoroughly pessimistic view of life that he finds peddled with uncommon

enthusiasm in Žižek's work (Eagleton 2003a: 205-6). For Eagleton, however, the Lacanian Real is "a psychoanalytic version of Original Sin" (Eagleton 2003a: 205). Thus, the non-being, or gap or otherness – for Lacan the Real and *objet petit a* – that one wishes to exterminate or fill becomes what makes us who we are, ie., evil. This is another way of saying that Eagleton subscribes to a fairly conventional theological anthropology: human nature is by definition fallen nature. It is just that Lacan provides another way of describing, alongside Paul who becomes the first psychoanalyst, such a fallen humanity. Indeed, the Paul that Eagleton likes is the one in Romans, where he ponders the paradoxes of the law (Eagleton 2003b: 150). The law, for Paul, is not what cuts off sin and the desire to sin, what holds us from falling into the morass of sin. Rather, the law generates the knowledge and desire for sin in the first place (Eagleton quotes Romans 7:7[3]), which Eagleton then reads in Lacanian terms as the taboo on which the law is based, the excess that enables the law to be what it is. What he neglects to notice is that in Paul's argument this means that the Jews, those who have been recipients of the law, have a far greater responsibility since they are the ones who know what sin is. But in this distinctly Calvinist moment,[4] Eagleton suggests that there is no way out of this mess by our own devices, since we are trapped in the vicious circle of the law itself: *jouissance* is then the need to transgress the law, a transgression on which the law itself is based, in order to savour the punishment that follows. One's ultimate obedience is to transgress; the sadistic law demands this obedience and yet punishes us for that obedience.[5]

Again, there are some problems with this psychoanalytic argument. If psychoanalysis describes the status quo, the state of evil out of which we can in no way extract ourselves, then there is no room for a homeopathic approach. We can work out our own salvation about as much as a piece of wood. The earlier Eagleton, the Left theologian of more than three decades earlier, is not so sure: "Fallenness is the history of the linguistic animal, man; and the Christian belief is that it cannot be entirely overcome by his own power" (Eagleton 1970: 54). The "entirely" is the crucial qualifier, generating a Roman Catholic ambivalence which he would not relinquish – good works will get you part of the way but you need Christ's help to get you over the hump. In the text from 1970, *The Body as Language*, he argues that human beings can be only partially successful, since

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3 "If it had not been for the law, I should not have known sin. I should not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, 'You shall not covet'" (Romans 7:7).
4 "And before the infinite, as every good Protestant knows, we are always in the wrong" (Eagleton 2003b: 52).
5 "The Law is not in the least averse to our delight, so long as it is the pleasure we pluck from allowing its death-dealing force to shatter us erotically to pieces. It is tender for our fulfilment, ordering us to reap morbid gratification from destroying ourselves; and the more guilt this self-odium breeds in us, the more we clamour for the Law to chastise us and so deepen our pleasure. Like all effective authorities, the Law good-heartedly encourages the participation of its subjects. In admirably paternalist spirit, it wishes us to take a hand in the business of torturing ourselves, work all by ourselves, make it appear that our self-undoing is our own doing, so that it may accomplish its ends all the more successfully" (Eagleton 2003b: 269).

the conditions for such fallenness – language as the source of both human community and of the objectification and exploitation of those in that community – block the possibility of completely repairing the fault.

Even the later Eagleton isn't quite so happy with the bleak picture psychoanalysis provides. Just when we thought that the Law was a pit of quicksand from which we can't extract ourselves, Eagleton switches to a developmental model, in which the realm of Law is for the immature, children and the like, from which we then grow up into virtue and ethics, which are of course also intrinsic. Once we supersede the written law, kicking the ladder away when we have attained maturity, the Law itself is written on our hearts. Basing himself on his favored letter of Paul to the Romans – the one that will draw in Žižek and Badiou as well – Eagleton calls this the law of love, the move from the rulebook to the "spontaneous habit of virtue" (Eagleton 2003b: 166).[6] This shift is curious in a couple of counts: the move comes from within the Law, and all we need to do is grow up. Further, we progress from the Law to virtue in the same way that salvation moves from cultic observance to ethics. On both registers – the move from Law to virtue and the internal nature of this move – we are still in the end contained within the realm of the Law. This is hardly a Law in which we are trapped, from which we can't extract ourselves except by some external assistance. Theologically that assistance is covered by the term grace. What has happened, it seems to me, is that Eagleton has slipped from a Protestant to a Roman Catholic line on this question: William Blake and Lacan (in whose company I can also discern the silhouette of John Calvin) have given way to a characteristic Roman Catholic concern with ethics and the moral life, in which there is a glimmer of potential within each one of us.

Now the problems start mounting, especially when we turn to the other great intrinsic item, goodness. On the one hand, goodness is as self-sufficient as evil, and the immediate reason for such an argument is to avoid some notion of recompense for goodness, some reward for virtue. Rather, in "a world as shabby as this, goodness doesn't get you anywhere" (Eagleton 2003a: 119). Fair enough, for too often in Christian thought more generally, goodness is attractive only if there is some trade-off. On the other hand, Eagleton's response is dualistic: evil has "some formidable opponents," namely "humility, modesty, meekness and other such virtues" (Eagleton 2003a: 120; see also 2007: 103-39) to which he adds elsewhere "[v]ision, courage, dedication, loyalty, selflessness and endurance" (Eagleton 2003b: 74). Above all there is love (he might have quoted 1 Corinthians 13 here): not the well-worn lurch of lust and a warm glow for another human being, but an indifferent, unconditional, impersonal and, especially, a public and political law of love that has its benchmark in the love for enemies and strangers (see Eagleton 2003b: 166-8). Ordinary virtues, no doubt, hardly a match for the sophistication and massed forces of evil. Yet implicit in the opposition is a

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6 The mention at this point in Eagleton's text of feeding the hungry, visiting the sick and those in prison depends not on Paul, but on the apocalyptic passage of Matthew 25:35–36.

dualism, a mutually exclusive opposition between good and evil that sits ill with their intrinsic natures.

The hint of a tension accelerates into a full–throttled contradiction before we know it. Just when we thought good and evil were sealed off from one another, existing for no purpose apart from themselves, Eagleton indulges in a rare moment of dialectics, this time in a discussion of the ambiguities of modernity. In this case he argues that over against the conservative nostalgia for a fabled golden era, liberal progressivism and postmodern amnesia (the usual three targets), only Marxism "insists that modernity has been a revolutionary advance in human welfare, and, with equal passion, that it has been one long nightmare of butchery and exploitation" (Eagleton 2003b: 241; 1970: 22). As he finds in his favored example of Thomas Mann's *Dr Faustus* (Eagleton 2003b: 246-7, 249-50, 260-1; 2007: 90), capitalism is full of promise and its denial, the offering of undreamed of opportunities only to whip them away again – from feminism to the anti-colonial movement. The only terms appropriate to such a political economic system are irony, ambivalence and oxymoron. In more specifically theological terms, what we have here is the dialectic of good and evil.

What is going on here? Eagleton risks being caught by a tension of his own making. If good and evil operate purely for their own sakes, without reference to anything beyond them, then how can they be in dialectical opposition? He equivocates, between an opposition between good and evil that is "positive as well as insidious" (Eagleton 2003b: 246) and an existence all for themselves, but what he wants to avoid is the theological position, often implicit in the various texts he discusses (Eagleton 2003b: 346-7), that virtue can only arise through vice, that the necessary condition of good is the free run of evil itself: "If good would not be good without evil, and if God's greatest glory lies in his bringing the former out of the latter, then the two states of being are mutually dependent" (Eagleton 2003b: 247). But such a dependence leads to the difficult position that we would never be rid of evil unless we dispensed with goodness as well, and for Eagleton this would leave no possibility for a change for the better. Hence the argument for the autotelism of evil and the demonic, as well as of the intrinsic nature of the good that I have outlined above and to which Eagleton devotes a large slab of text in *Sweet Violence* (Eagleton 2003b: 253-73). Yet, the neat sidestep that avoids the trap of a mutual dependence of good on evil only lands him in another snare equally problematic. For if good and evil are intrinsic, sufficient only to themselves – no matter how much ontological depth such a position might provide Marxism's dialectical reading of capitalism – then the possibility of lining up the modest virtues Eagleton espouses against evil falls by the wayside. One way out of this problem is to argue that any opposition to evil must be an accident, entirely outside the autotelism of goodness, done purely for the heck of it. In the same way that God's act of creation is entirely contingent to his nature, entirely unnecessary, that which is good might well not oppose evil, and the fact that it does is not necessary to the nature of goodness. It just

happens that it does so. But Eagleton does not make this move, preferring to court a curious dualism.

Another way over which he places a large "no road" sign is the radical monotheism of certain parts of the Hebrew Bible, such as Isaiah, Ezekiel and Job, in which God is the source of both good and evil. In this case autotelism is restricted to God alone, but such a position would lead Eagleton back into an unacceptable situation in which both were dependent on each other. What autotelism gives him with one hand – God's complete autonomy – it takes away with the other, and I suspect he is more interested in good and evil, that is, the question of ethics, than God.

This preference for ethics would explain the absence in Eagleton's theological reflections of a central feature of the notion of evil, namely the ontological point that evil is an affront to God. For Eagleton evil is an entity unto itself, a self-fulfilling and self-serving mode of being that requires no outside purpose or justification. But, as I argued above, there is a tension between the intrinsic nature of evil on the on hand, and a certain dualism, the unavoidable opposition of good and evil, on the other. I want to suggest that this tension is a mark of Eagleton's effort to sidestep the notion that evil is a fundamental offense before God, that God's own nature cannot abide evil and therefore constantly works for its eradication. This position of course follows a different line from that of radical monotheism, where God is the originator of both good and evil. By contrast, here evil is not part of God's nature, and it must therefore have an external cause, which is either human free will or the devil himself. The objection that immediately follows – are not human free will or the devil ultimately God's creations? – misses the point, for the paradox of free will is that God wants not automatons who will mechanically worship him (the reason why, it was often said in the West, sporting teams from the old Soviet block played so well), but free creatures who want to worship him. The catch is that they may very well not do so….

So Eagleton avoids two traditional theological positions in his discussion of evil (either it originates with God or it is an affront to him), preferring instead to play the intrinsicness of evil and good off against their reliance on each other. In the next section I want to track these tensions down to his repressed past with the Catholic Left.

Art, Religion and Ethics

Thus far I have gathered a reasonable list of intrinsic items: apart from evil and goodness, he also draws into the fray the devil, humility, modesty, meekness, vision, courage, dedication, loyalty, selflessness and endurance. All of these, from humility to endurance at least, really are variations on the good, the humble virtues. The list soon grows, reigning in creation, God, art, literature and humanity. And if I add Eagleton's reflections in a public lecture given at Monash University on 14 September 2000 entitled "God, the Universe and

Communism,"[7] communism itself could avail itself of such a notion of autonomy and autotelism in order to think about an alternative process by which it might emerge.

The more obvious point to make here, and it is one that Eagleton himself trots out on various occasions, is that under a mode of production in which everything must have a function and a purpose, where what is useless becomes waste or subject to some form of absorption into the vast program of instrumentality, to insist on the uselessness and purposelessness of something is itself a significant political move. Thus, Spinoza, who argued for the autotelism of God, Nature and the human mind, calling for the use of reason and science in a totalizing and universalist metaphysics – all taken as objectionable features of modernity – was also a revolutionary humanist who affirmed to value of humanity and participatory democracy (Eagleton 2003b: 204). Similarly, I recall arguing, in response to the questions of incredulous friends, that the reason I studied Classics for my undergraduate degree was its sheer pointlessness.

Yet, a number of objections come easily to mind. To begin with, the strategy of following avenues of resistance to capitalism in Eagleton's fashion conjures up the image in the early part of Adorno's study of Kierkegaard (Adorno 1989). In his relentless pursuit of Kierkegaard's attempt to banish history from his philosophical system by means of an absolute retreat into inwardness, Adorno famously shows how history haunts Kierkegaard at every turn, until we come upon the autonomous *rentiér* living on his own. Now Eagleton is hardly Kierkegaard, but his effort to recover Christian theology in terms of the self-sufficient autonomy of God, creation, art, literature and so on, runs a little too close to Kierkegaard's effort to seal himself off from the emergent capitalism that he regarded with horror. At least Eagleton resolutely refuses to follow a dialectical line that Kierkegaard was to seek out and which Adorno gleefully explicated as rattling to pieces under its own contradictions. The deeper danger, it seems to me, of Eagleton's fondness for purposeless activity, done for the heck of it, is that this particular feature drawn from the long tradition of theology has become nothing but a leitmotif of the deeper logic of the liberalism he everywhere seeks to demolish. In a fashion reminiscent of the wholesale recasting of the role of money, or for what passed as private property before capitalism, so also liberalism has taken up to a whole new level the idea of the individual creative being, autonomous and beholden to no-one but himself. The difference is that such activity used to be by and large restricted to God.

Indeed, in what follows I would like to pick up Adorno's approach to Kierkegaard: in the same way that he finds history at every turn in Kierkegaard's resolute effort to banish it, I want to ask what is being excluded in Eagleton's espousal of autotelism. And in the same way that Adorno stayed with Kierkegaard's texts, rather than bringing in history from outside, so also will I

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7 Part of the content of this lecture made its way into the chapter "Revolution, Foundations and Fundamentalists" in *After Theory* (2007: 174-207).

stay with Eagleton. Thus, there is his well-known argument that art replaces religion. From there I move on to ethics, theology and Eagleton himself.

As for art and religion, in an argument that mutates a little over time, Eagleton argues that art itself has come to take on many of the functions of religion as the latter declined in the West. Or at least some of art's major proponents felt that it should and could become the religion of a secular age. Thus reverence for the aesthetic replaces a religious transcendence lost in the bleary, disenchanted post-Enlightenment world. Both religion and art "are symbolic forms; both distill some of the fundamental meanings of a community; both work by sign, ritual and sensuous evocation. Both aim to edify, inspire and console, as well as to confront a depth of human despair or depravity which they can nonetheless redeem by form or grace. Each requires a certain suspension of disbelief, and each links the most intense inwardness to the most unabashedly cosmic of questions" (Eagleton 2003a: 96-7). I am not so much interested in the multiplication of parallels – such as that between artistic inspiration and that of the Holy Spirit, or that there is a corporate dimension to art that is as hierarchical and code-governed as the Church – nor even in the argument that literary interpretation or the modern social and physical sciences have their enabling possibility within theology and biblical interpretation. It is not just that art derives in various ways from religious art, argues Eagleton, but that art is in a strong sense the replacement for religion.

However, what does draw my eye as it glides easily over Eagleton's endless written pages, are some crucial slippages and assumptions, but ultimately the defense of religion against art. "Religion" is, of course, a code word for Christianity, which for Eagleton really means Roman Catholicism – an easy point to make by now but one that is worth reiterating given the inveterate tendency for "religion" to return. As for art itself, Eagleton slips literature in through a trapdoor at various points without drawing undue attention to its arrival. At one level, literature can hardly be separated from the realm of art, but when his examples include Matthew Arnold, F.R. Leavis, Coleridge, Joyce, D.H. Lawrence, I.A. Richards, Henry James and Iris Murdoch then we can't help but feel that he is in fact speaking about a very specific English tradition that stands in not only for literature in general, but also art. What we get by the end of these slippages is not so much an argument that art replaces religion, or at least that some people have tried to do so, but that English literature replaces Christianity.

With this in mind, let me return to the Eagleton's infatuation with autonomy: "The metaphor of artistic 'creation' has always been latently theological, a reenactment of God's fashioning of the world ex nihilo. And just as the world is autonomous of its creator (which is part of what is meant by calling him 'transcendent'), so the work of art is mysteriously self-generating and self-dependent, conjuring itself up miraculously out of sheer nothingness, obedient to no law but that of its own unique being" (Eagleton 2003a: 97). Art replaces religion, taking on the mantle of autonomy: one intrinsic self-generating system takes the place of another. Or is that English replacing Christianity? The whole

equation loses altitude when the lofty universals of art and religion crash down to the peculiar and parochial concerns of one religion and one tradition of literature. The problem here is not merely that the emperor finds his flabby body on ludicrous display, but that the slippage itself, from English and Christianity to art and religion, is part of a deeper universalizing logic that best goes under the name of "catholicity." And of course both English and Christianity have been at the heart of a global empire on which the sun set not so long ago, the most audacious effort to universalize some curious particulars.

What Eagleton misses in this very English discussion is that the burning issue in 18th and 19th century debates that circled around the questions of Christianity, society and culture was that of morality. With the noticeable decline in Christian observance, marked as Gramsci noted so astutely, by the fact that Christianity was no longer the untranscendable horizon of culture (Gramsci 1995: 29; 1992: 223-4), commentators struggled to find something that would provide the moral undergirding for society. For some, without "religion" chaos would ensue, since there would be no moral codes; for others, a substitute was needed, and one of those suggested was literature, or English. And it was not so much rampant copulation in the streets, theft, arson and murder of which they were afraid, but the newly conscious masses of the working class. The issue was then rather more crowd control, the coercion and persuasion of what Gramsci would call hegemony.

These deep debates over morality are a far cry from the autonomous and purposeless nature of both Christianity and English (or even religion and art) on which Eagleton is so keen. But his own defense of "religion," which we have come to expect, over against art, literature and cultural studies, invokes not the inherent uselessness of Christianity but the opposite. For Eagleton, history, mass appeal, ecclesiology and the robustness of theology put it furlongs beyond art or literature, which turns out to be "too delicate, and too impalpable, to be bent to such ambitious ideological ends" (Eagleton 2003a: 99). Which ends? The rendering of art into a political program, finding an alternative mythology, or even a philosophical anthropology: it is simply not up to the task, being not even half as tough as Christianity, which has been and can be all of these things. In the end, Christianity is a mass phenomenon over against an elitist and marginal one, linking high and low culture, an intelligentsia and the people, a symbolic and arcane system with the daily lives of millions. One would have to a dupe to miss Eagleton unequivocal defense, from "history's most astonishingly successful solution" (Eagleton 2003a: 99), through "no secular cultural project has come even remotely close to matching this extraordinary achievement" (Eagleton 2003a: 99), to "in terms of compass, appeal and longevity, it is far and away the most important symbolic form which humanity has ever known" (Eagleton 2003b: xvi-xvii).

Eagleton comes close to the concern with morality and ethics that taxed intellectuals and commentators a century or two ago. Indeed, Eagleton has been intensely concerned with ethics from his earliest writings. When he argues that

salvation depends on how we create community in the world and not our private love for God (in Cunningham et al. 1966: 6), and when he invokes the values of self-sacrifice and martyrdom as a life of service to others, the shift from law to an ethics of the heart, or the values of humility, modesty, meekness, altruism, vision, courage, love and so forth – all coming under the umbrella of the good – in opposition to the powers of evil, and especially his profoundly ethical christology of the executed political criminal, then everywhere we look we see yet more virtues. As far as Eagleton is concerned, Christian theology, especially the brand with which he is familiar, provides by far the best resources for what can only be described as a moral or ethical politics.

Yet such an ethical position clanks loudly against his liking for autotelism and the intrinsic nature of God, good, evil and whatnot. Given his liking for the implicitly anti-capitalist position of the uselessness of certain activities, done purely for themselves with no ultimate purpose in mind, his concern with a political ethics constitutes an almost unworkable contradiction. The whole problem comes crashing together in an important discussion of Milton, whose *Samson Agonistes* is a sustained denunciation of God's justice: "On a Catholic view, God wills what is good; on a certain Protestant view, things are good because God wills them" (Eagleton 2003b: 211). Of course, the latter position is the end run of autotelism, although characterizing it as Protestant is a little too easy. Pure autotelism removes God from any obligation or relation with anything outside himself. And Eagleton clearly does not like the implications: way beyond our sense of justice and love, God's justice would then be like a tarantula that "had some notion of elegance but one light years removed from our own" (Eagleton 2003b: 210-11). In fact, it produces an entirely arbitrary and capricious God given to a vacuous and tyrannical freedom, one who is beyond rationality and justice since he created it, and, we might add, love, humility, hope and the other virtues. Hence Eagleton's preference for the so-called Roman Catholic position, which is itself as much a caricature as that of the Protestant position. It boils down to the point that there are various autotelic items, from evil to art, among which justice and love must be included. These, it seems, exist apart from God and to them he is beholden. Is God's freedom constrained, then? You can't have your autotelic cake and eat it too. A compromised autotelism is no autotelism at all. Either God is completely self-sufficient or he is dependent on something else. The response to this impasse is surprisingly straightforward and comes from theology itself (Anselm for instance, but also Calvin): what is good or just is so because God decrees it to be so; but they can be nothing other than the goodness or justice we know since it is in God's nature to be just and good in precisely these fashions. Even if, to invoke an old distinction, love, justice, goodness and so on are attributes of God, they cannot be in contradiction with his nature.

Eagleton's holding back at the last minute, his unwillingness to pursue autotelism to its logical conclusion, is but a signal of another direction for theology in his work. For, contrary to his assertions, theology does seem to have a distinct usefulness and purpose, from providing life-giving meaning to

collective integration. As his own unannounced shuffle from theology to ecclesiology indicates, theology is not as self-generating or autonomous as it would like to think (or, at least, the God upon which it bases its reflections, and then the universe he created are not self-sufficient). Apart from existing to explicate and direct the beliefs and practices of the faithful – faith seeking understanding, as Anselm would have it – theology is inescapably an ecclesiological activity, its efforts ideally directed towards the benefit of the Church, outside of which it would asphyxiate before too long.

The Question of Ecclesiology

As with theology, so also with Eagleton: if theology is not as purposeless as he would like to think, operating in the institutional matrix of the Church, riven as it is with political conflicts, then Eagleton's theological concerns do not emerge ex nihilo. At this point the intrinsic rubber hits the ecclesiastical road. Here all the tensions I have been tracing begin to make some sense – tensions between his assertion of the intrinsic nature of good and evil and their obvious dependence on each other, between the intrinsic nature of God, art, religion and so on, and the emergence of ethics as a distinctly beneficial category. Indeed, Eagleton's inability to make the argument for self-sufficiency and intrinsicness stick, allowing each of the various categories he invokes to gain a purpose, is the signal of his barely repressed background in the Roman Catholic Church.

He is of course no stranger to the institution, having been deeply involved in the Catholic Left of the 1960s and 70s. In the mix of the sixties, from Vatican Two through the Prague Spring and the Civil Rights movement to May '68, the circle around the journal *Slant* generated a heated and very public controversy within and without the Roman Catholic Church. Indeed, much of Eagleton's early theological book, *The Body as Language*, first appeared in earlier versions in that journal. At the same time that liberation theology in Latin America and black theology in the United States was emerging, *Slant* was causing its own quite deliberate disturbances in the restricted space of England (Cunningham et al. 1966: 14, 51-2). As for Eagleton's own involvement, he was a founding and then senior editor of *Slant*, organizer of discussion groups, demonstrations and a conference or two in the Catholic Left, as well as a major contributor to the *Slant Manifesto*. Indeed, his exploration of the connections between Roman Catholicism and Marxism, along with the political activism of the Catholic Left was part of an explicit agenda to a radical reform of Church itself. But what I find intriguing about the Catholic Left and *Slant* is the depth of Eagleton's involvement *and* his studied and resolute refusal to comment on or recognize that involvement in his later work, especially when many of the same ideas recur.

What do we find if we turn to Eagleton's early theological writings? Here we find Eagleton's explicit engagement with ecclesiology, when he still felt it necessary to argue why he remained in the Church (Eagleton 1967a). By and large I have operated with the assumption that theology may be understood as the ideology, in all its multifarious manifestations, of a particular institution, namely the Church; in other words, Eagleton's various theological interventions

bear with them an implicit ecclesiology. However, if we dig deeply enough then an Eagleton vitally concerned with the institution emerges in a number of places, especially in *The New Left Church*, the last chapter of *The Body as Language* (which first appeared as "Priesthood and Leninism" in *Slant* 5:3 (Eagleton 1969)) and one of his contributions to the *Slant Manifesto*, the essay "The Roots of the Christian Crisis" (Eagleton 1966b). Along with his love for the mystery of the Eucharist, his desire to see the Roman Catholic Church transformed from within dissipates like the mist in his later recovery of theology, apart from the odd relic.

If anything, Eagleton is more intense than Althusser in his desire for an alliance between radical Roman Catholics and the New Left more generally (see especially, Eagleton in Cunningham et al. 1966: 46-51). If Althusser called on the various fringe groups of the French Roman Catholic church to join with the communists (Althusser 1997: 21-35), Eagleton and the *Slant* group want to remould the church itself. The *Slant* symposium of 7–11 September 1967, subsequently published as *From Culture to Revolution* (Eagleton 1968a) had as its explicit agenda the bringing together of those within and outside the Church (Eagleton 1967b). Ecclesiologically, however, Eagleton had two strategies, one an effort to recast the whole notion of priesthood in terms of the Leninist revolutionary vanguard, and the other a historical analysis of the churches (moving beyond the Roman Catholic Church) and revolutionary movements.

As far as the latter is concerned, I am intrigued by the pattern of the argument itself, namely that there is no authentic radical past upon which the Catholic Left may draw. As far as the argument itself is concerned, Eagleton falls into the pattern of so many literary critics seeking to write history: like Raymond Williams, he draws evidence from literature such as that of Dickens, and the references to historical materials are desperately thin, quoting a little too often from one text, K.S. Inglis's *Churches and the Working Class in England* (Inglis 1963). What he tries to do is characterize the history of the churches (for once he does seek to deal with most of the Christian churches) and social movements in England in terms of three patterns: the liberal contradiction of seeking to connect with the working classes for their own "good" on the on hand, and to ensure the churches' survival on the other; the anti-institutionalism of so-called Christian socialism, where "socialism" meant primarily morality, relationships and the inner life over against structural change; and the problem of conservative radicalism, in which opposition to capitalism was cast in reactionary terms. All of these then become past mistakes from which the Catholic Left must learn in order to become "authentic radicals" (Eagleton in Cunningham et al. 1966: 82). It turns out, then, that the Catholic Left and the work of *Slant* is decidedly new, without precedent (if he had pushed back a little further he might have come across Gerard Winstanley and the Levellers at least, if not Thomas Münzer in Germany (cf. Boer 2007)). Whether this is true, and it seems not, there is an early glimmer here of what would become Eagleton's infatuation with autotelism, with the Catholic Left emerging *ex nihilo*, without any connection to what had gone before it. Indeed, this emergence from nothing is a feature that recurs in his

arguments for the benefit of theology for the Left many years later, without a whisper of his earlier work.

What of the other ecclesiological fragment, the argument that the priesthood should be understood in terms of Lenin's vanguard? I must confess that even with Eagleton's caveat – the effort "to meet the alarmed or simply amused incredulity likely to be raised" (Eagleton 1970: 76; 1969: 12) – it does not count as one of his better arguments, even if we go back to his earlier argument that the priesthood must become democratic (Eagleton 1966c). Certainly, it flows from the argument that if the notion of the poor (the Hebrew *anawim*) and of christology itself is one of historical and political death and resurrection, and that if the Church is to become a revolutionary body pointing to a socialist future, then the priesthood may be understood in Lenin's terms. Further, Eagleton is influenced by at least one of the revolutionary priests in Latin America, as the one and only allusion in all of Eagleton's writings to liberation theology in the person of Camilo Torres indicates (Eagleton 1970: 93; 1969: 17). In the swirl of the sixties anything seemed possible, from anti-medicine and an anti-hospital in which patients would be able, "under democratic-participatory controls, to infect one another with germs in order to experience the transcendentally liberating effects of serious disease" (Eagleton 1968e: 32) to the priesthood as a Leninist vanguard. In the confidence of those years, Marxism was after all "the most elaborated revolutionary theory of our time" (Eagleton 1970: 76; 1969: 12).

There are two parts to Eagleton's argument: the three-way dialectic between revolutionary vanguard or party, working class rank and file and society at large is analogous to that between priesthood, laity and society; the priesthood in all its dimensions is a sacrament, a signifier of the Church's engagement with history. He will even valorise the discipline and hierarchy of vanguard and priesthood, "welded together by obedience and authority" (Eagleton 1970: 85; 1969: 15) as a necessary feature, although always on guard against becoming a self-serving elite rather than a movement at the service of the people. When we get to this point, what he calls the "sacrament of order" (Eagleton 1970: 85, 86; 1969: 15), a hierarchical vanguard that is incongruously necessary for a future "freedom-in-brotherhood" (Eagleton 1970: 85; 1969: 15), his argument begins to break down. The last phrase I quoted betrays all of the problems with such a hierarchical and disciplined body such as the priesthood: celibate, male, self-perpetuating, inherently conservative, not to mention indelibly Roman Catholic. Try as he might, stressing incongruity, fallenness, friction, paradox and withering away, he can't get around the road-block of a hierarchical institution that he recognized a few years earlier (see Cunningham et al. 1966: 44). Eagleton would once have argued that in this respect the priesthood has failed to live up to his expectations; now, the fact that he has avoided recycling this argument, preferring to torch any remaining copy of the book as a whole, says enough.

Not the most stunning of ecclesiological reflections, no matter how innovative they might have seemed at the time. It is not so strange, then, that his heavy investment in *Slant* and in the Roman Catholic Church itself should receive such

scant mention in his memoir, *The Gatekeeper*, or that the elaboration in *Sweet Violence* of the same argument from the sixth chapter of *The Body as Language* on the political implications of Christ's death and resurrection should give no reference to that earlier text.

All we find are the slightest of allusions in his later work to his involvement in the Catholic Left and *Slant*. They were clearly important for Eagleton, going by the appearance in almost every issue of the journal of one piece or another by him, his role as general editor before it folded, and the listing of his own address at Jesus College, Cambridge, for correspondence concerning editorial matters. In the memoir there is much on his role as "gatekeeper" in the convent for enclosed Carmelite nuns, or the liberated sisters in the early hey-day of post-Vatican II, his Roman Catholic grammar school or the brief spell at a seminary at the mature age of 13, and especially on the dissonant value of minority Roman Catholics in a Protestant England. On this last matter, he points to the suspicion of the inner glow of private experience and subjectivism, along with the aversion to outward emotion and the Irish passion for the tribe, to the combination of sensuous symbolism and rigorous thought, to the incongruous combination of a deep pessimism about the way things are and a profound hope that they could be immeasurably better. And, like Althusser, he points to the astonishingly easy move from Roman Catholicism to Marxism without the halfway house of liberalism (see Eagleton 2001: 30-7).

In light of all of this, the dismissive and passing mention of *Slant* looks odd indeed. He devotes more attention to Lawrence Bright, at whose suggestion *Slant* was established and who was on the editorial committee. As for his complete absorption in the Catholic Left and *Slant* itself, this is all I could find: "The name of the journal, indeed the very same design, was finally adopted by a porno magazine, which Lawrence spotted one day in a Soho shop-window and gleefully circulated to the former editors. Nowadays people write the odd doctoral thesis on the Catholic left, which I suppose is one up from oblivion" (Eagleton 2001: 28). Not a bad dismissal, really, along with, "Years later, when I had some reputation as a leftist theologian…" (Eagleton 2001: 7). I am less interested in the motives for Eagleton's drawing of the curtain across this crucial element of his past, for favoring his involvement with a far-left political group in the 1980s over the Catholic Left, than in the effect it has on his theological reflections that appear also in the memoir. As I have argued above, there is much that the later Eagleton recycles from his earlier theological writings with nary a whisper of reference to those earlier works: they appear as it were out of nothing, fresh and new, a defense of a political or left theology that emerges only late in his work. The almost complete erasure of that past, the blacking out of the politically charged Catholic Left that provided the substance of his theological thought, is expressed most clearly in the one significant new interest of these later reflections, namely the intrinsic nature of key theological concepts. Autotelism may then be read as a symptom of this repressed past.
Epilogue

Even if the Catholic Left and the Roman Catholic Church itself in the turmoil of the sixties was the context of most of Eagleton's theological positions, generated out of a desire to reform the church from within by means of Marxism (see Eagleton 1970: 95-115), this is hardly the context of Eagleton's return to theology at the turn of the millennium. By that time he had long since left that circumscribed institutional location to become one of the leading Marxist literary and cultural critics. In contrast to his earlier desire to bring Marxism into the Roman Catholic Church, along with the insights of contemporary linguistic theory (especially Barthes, Merleau–Ponty and Wittgenstein) that characterizes *The Body as Language*, the scourge of the establishment seeks to bring theology into the debates within the Left. Hence the curiously idealistic image of the Church and theology that appears in these works. Hence the almost complete absence of references to theological works, especially liberation and political theology, except for one to Herbert McCabe's *God Matters* (McCabe 1987) and the dedication of *Sweet Violence* to McCabe, a comrade from the old Catholic Left. One hardly gains the impression of a flawed and often brutal institution from Eagleton's later theological writings. Or rather, when he does recognize the less than idyllic nature of the Church itself, he is keen to move beyond that which stops so many short at the gates. His polemical targets are now liberals and conservatives of any ilk rather than those within the Church (Eagleton 1970: 94-100), the odd postmodernist every now and then, as well as the theologically ill-informed fellow travellers on the Left, rather than positions he opposes within the Church. In this context it becomes easier to present theology as an autonomous discipline, concerned with itself and in some curious way immune from being implicated in the less than illustrious past of capitalism.

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