

A CONVERSATION WITH TERRY EAGLETON

José Manuel Barbeito Varela

Universidad de Santiago

ON LITERATURE

Literary Theory: An Introduction *was considered a death certificate for Literature, as you showed the impossibility of objectively defining it. But there seems to be an oscillation in your work between the rejection of an ontological notion of literature and the acknowledgement of the elaboration in the literary work of the question of how to write. Cultural Studies have crucially demystified literature, denying it the privilege that Scrutiny had awarded it when relating it to other kinds of writing that the Scrutineers were also interested in. Can literature still retain a certain kind of privilege on the basis of the elaboration have just mentioned?*

I would still want to defend the claim that literature has no ontological unity. However, I'd also make two qualifications to my argument in *Literary Theory*. First, I was trying to show that literature has no essence; but this is in fact true of many phenomena. There's nothing very unusual or distinctive about literature here. How, as Wittgenstein asks, do you define 'game'? And the fact that there's no essence, of 'game' or 'literature', doesn't necessarily mean that there are no significant interrelations between the various objects people group under these headings. Wittgenstein's idea of 'family resemblances' is precisely about grasping the connections of objects, but in a non-essentialist way. There are, I think, 'family resemblances' between the various pieces of writing we call literature. But there's still no essence, even though I have elsewhere, in *The Illusions of Postmodernism*, defended what I see as the more radical aspects of essentialism against its postmodern critics.

I think we need to shift from the idea of literature to the idea of writing—which doesn't for me involve abandoning value judgments, which are utterly inescapable, or abandoning Balzac and Tolstoy, just re-defining the field. A great deal of important writing after 1800—historiography, philosophy, etc—wasn't actually called 'literature'. Even so, though Literature may have no 'ontological' coherence, that doesn't mean that it can't have great practical and institutional power; and some critics of my book were right, I think, to point out that I rather too swiftly

swept this aside. Literature may be a philosophically doubtful concept, but it may still be a potent practical reality.

You have pointed out the contradiction between the market and values, the freedom—or rather anarchy—of the market, of which the individual is no more than a function, and a corresponding ethics and politics based on autonomous free subjects. You have argued that aesthetics has served ideology in its attempt to veil the breach between subject and object, abstract reason and sensibility, law and desire, social order and the individual. To what extent have singular works of art collaborated with the program of aesthetic education or have they resisted it? To what extent has the exposition of 'manners' in the novel resisted the aesthetic production of subjects? Can we speak of a specific intervention of Literature in the production of subjects? Supposing there is room for the subject to be produced in a way different from that in which commodities produce us, this may lead to a kind of personal private emancipation with little political relevance; even so can this emancipation carried out in privacy be ignored or considered simply false?

It's true that I've pointed to the ideological uses of the aesthetic, though it's sometimes forgotten that *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* is a rather more dialectical book than that, since it also tries to point to the sensuous, materialist emancipatory, utopian dimensions of the concept. I am suspicious of anyone for whom the aesthetic is either inherently positive or inherently negative. But even where the aesthetic is largely negative, individual works of art can resist it. 'Literature', for example, may have at times been deployed as an ideological category; but that doesn't mean that the individual items it contains are all politically oppressive. On the contrary, Homer was not a liberal humanist, Shakespeare spoke up for egalitarianism, Balzac and Flaubert detested the bourgeoisie, Tolstoy denounced private property and so on. They were all well to the left of the World Bank! And this fact is ignored by those for whom such writing is simply 'elitist'. Non-elitist art, like mass culture, can be a lot more reactionary than some *belles lettres*.

In the age of 'manners' or Enlightenment, I think literature *could* play an important role in what you call the production of subjects, but this was largely because the tasks of literature and criticism were much more broadly conceived. As I try to show in *The Function of Criticism*, criticism at that point is nothing less than a whole new hegemonic programme of morals, manners, conduct, sensibility and so on, and the critic as a consequence has rather more scope, weight and authority than the modern-day critic. Think of Taine, Goethe, Johnson, Coleridge and the like. Once criticism becomes narrowed to literary criticism, which is quite a recent development, this authority tends to disappear. But it may well turn out that literary criticism was a mere transitional phase between the cultural and social criticism of the Enlightenment and early Romanticism, and the cultural and social criticism of today. In other words, it's the cultural critic today—the Fredric Jamesons and Edward Saïds—who inherit the mantle of traditional criticism, with its broadly political preoccupations. As usual, all the best radical ideas turn out to be thoroughly traditional ones. It is the formalists and aestheticians who are the historical upstarts, and the cultural critics who keep faith with the past.

But whether 'culture' can once again play a significant role in the production of subjects, oppositional subjects, can't, I think, be answered in the abstract. It all depends on the political conjunction. All one can say is that any power, to be successful, must entrench itself culturally, otherwise it stands very little hope of success. It must inscribe itself in the spontaneous life of social conduct, language, the body and so on, which is exactly what 'manners' meant for the early middle class. Brecht, I think, was interested in developing socialist equivalents to such everyday-life concepts: for example, some idea of 'courtesy', of pleasantness in everyday human contact which would neither be personal intimacy nor impersonal anonymity. He thought this existed in the East, but like most Western notions of the East he was probably mistaken...

Aristotle —and most poets would agree— thought that poetry had a special relationship to truth. You have approved of Brecht's idea that art can present political alternatives in a more attractive and acceptable way. Can the idea that art allows us to contemplate truths that are otherwise unbearable also be appropriated from a Marxist perspective, despite the fact that once art has lost its social function, catharsis must be personal to a large extent? Or, on the contrary, is the work of art to be thought of only as collaborating in the production of an imaginative 'bearable' reality?

I think one must avoid the old classical idea that art is a kind of crafty sugaring of the bitter pill of truth —a sort of more palatable propaganda, a way of seductively dressing up truths which the populace might otherwise find rebarbative. This, I think, is on the whole a conservative aesthetics, and so can't just be 'refunctioned' by the political left. At the same time, we have to resist the Romantic idea that art yields a special, privileged and peculiar truth, which no mere discursive or political language can grasp. This is just an opposite form of conservatism. I'd want to claim that art is indeed cognitive, that it's more that decoration, but that its cognitive discourse isn't, as the Romantics sometimes thought, an inexpressible or transcendent one. On the contrary, as Habermas has urged, the truths of art must be brought into dialogical contact with the insights of ethics, science, politics etc. Ethical philosophy has a great deal to learn from literature, as an American critic like Martha Nussbaum appreciates. If you're arguing with someone about, say, evil, you could either stay up all night getting rapidly nowhere, or you could give them a novel by Dostoevsky to read. If someone really did have smugly progressivist notions about modernity, it might be easier to get them to read, say, Primo Levi than the Frankfurt School.

Art can bring familiar truths home to us in vivid, graphic ways, which is part of its propaganda value for governing classes. But it also has a unique power to incarnate ideas sensuously, to flesh them out, which is part of the resistance of its forms to the abstractions of commodification. The particularism of the art-work is already a critique of the commodity, even before it has said or shown anything in particular. And if you want to explain something, whether it's the concept of jealousy or the Asiatic mode of production, you really have to tell a story. A lot of art has the virtue of being both complex, concrete and compressed, each in terms of

the other, which makes it a fine pedagogical instrument. But this isn't just a matter of art 'translating' or ornamenting truths we know already. That overlooks the innovative functions of art, what one might call its more avant-gardist aspects, its capacity to uncover truth rather than just reflect it. If one sees truth in positivist style as primarily propositional or informational, then it has no important relation to art; if one sees it in more hermeneutical spirit as disclosure, illumination, 'dawning', then it certainly does. I would certainly want to say that the history of the novel is one of the most important forms of moral philosophy we possess.

ON CRITICISM

In Criticism and Ideology you proposed a science of the text. Nevertheless, the possibility of explanation is different from that of appreciation. We may be affected by a text in a way which is different from the way in which people were affected by it at other moments in history; even so the possibility that we are affected in a similar way in certain aspects cannot be ruled out either. There is a tension in Marxism between defending that every social formation has different ways of appreciating art and saying that there are certain concerns that human beings share, which could explain the attraction of certain works of art throughout time. You have been described as a Marxist humanist for maintaining this tension. How do you react to this characterization? How to avoid the humanist tendency to essentialism in the consideration of universals? Can Ricoeur's version of hermeneutical phenomenology as the study of the formation of the Spirit in the works of culture help in this?

I think my approach in *Criticism and Ideology* was too 'objectivist', too focused on the structures of the text rather than on their interaction with a reader in the process of value and meaning. On the other hand, if there is a 'science of the text', there can't be as many of them as there are readers. There must be some shared structures here, but only the practice of reading can activate and define them. And I don't think a science of the text can account for the affective impact of artistic works, which is why a critical method based simply on this is insufficient. We have to combine explanation with description/interpretation, and give some account of what it feels like to be in the presence of a particular work. And there are no scientific procedures for that—it's a matter of what Aristotle would have called *phronesis* rather than *episteme*, a question of skill, knack and experience. I think my formulations in *Criticism and Ideology* unduly pass over this vital dimension of critical work.

I'm not particularly worried about being called a humanist essentialist, if by that one means that one believes in a shared human nature. I think Marx himself believed this, and was quite right to do so; it's just that his concept of human nature was materially based—'species being', as he calls it—rather than idealist or moralistic, which is more commonly the case. Marxists have sometimes been a little too frightened of such humanism, stressing instead the historically changing nature of human affairs. But persistence, repetition, endurance and immobility characterise human affairs just as much—if not sometimes more—as mutability, which is what

the new historicists and postmodernists tend to forget. Many of our political problems arise precisely from the fact that some things haven't changed all that much—that certain systems of oppression and exploitation continue to play themselves out over and over again. It would be fine if the new historicists were right and history was constantly changing, but, alas, it isn't. (The idea that we're continually self-fashioning, dreaming ourselves anew every moment, is also, incidentally, a very American idea—just as new historicism is. In so far as new historicism usually doesn't see this, it proves incapable of historicising itself. Indeed oneself is always the very last thing one can historicise, whereas it should by rights be the first thing.)

We should remember also that to historicise is by no means necessarily radical. Some of the greatest European historicisms have been firmly on the side of the political right. You don't radicalise a phenomenon simply by putting it back in its historical context. Anyhow, the question arises of which historical context, since there are always many of them.

There seems to me nothing inherently reactionary in saying that we share many features—not least the structure of our bodies—with, say, the ancient Greeks, and that therefore we can share many (though not all) aspects of their art. And from the structure of our bodies, much else can be deduced, not least labour, language, kinship, sexuality, sociality, human nurture, caring and so on. Only someone who overhistoricises—and that's just as possible as underhistoricising, in fact in some circles these days more fashionable—only such a person would find this a problem. Of course there's continuity as well as change in human affairs—think of the oppression of women, for example. It assumes different historical forms, but the essential conflict remains constant. So we can understand an ancient play like the *Medea* since such a history is not altogether alien to us. When we ask 'how can we possibly understand Calderon?', we forget that in some senses, though not in all senses, we and he belong to a shared history. If one's serious about materialism then it must include our human materiality—and that has changed little since Euripides. If there is cultural difference, there is also historical solidarity.

The revolutionary critic must always be ready to answer the question 'why are you doing this?' There is often a risk of understanding politics in a restrictive sense of professional politicians or of reducing it to strategies aimed at finding short-lived solutions to the demands of those with a voice to make them. What understanding of politics is needed so that it may become the axis of the plurality of answers to this question?

I don't think there's ever just one answer to why one is doing it. If a student says, 'I want to study culture or literature because, even though I know I'll probably end up unemployed, I want to do something more personally fulfilling than studying dentistry', that's in its own way just as political a response as saying 'I want to study culture in order to know how political power constructs subjectivity, and thus to resist it'. Indeed, we'll know that the revolution has arrived when we know longer

have to use forbidding Kantian words like 'justification', and can enjoy our activities, intellectual or otherwise, as ends in themselves.

Certainly we must oppose too narrowly restrictive notions of politics. Indeed, as Raymond Williams used sometimes to say, 'tell me your definition of politics, and I will tell you your politics'. These withered, bloodless conceptions of politics themselves serve certain political interests they aren't just 'technical'. On the other hand, it doesn't help in my view to widen the meaning of politics so much that it comes to include more or less everything, as the political left has sometimes done by way of overreaction. This then deprives the concept of all cutting edge, all practical specificity. Politics is not, to my mind, the same as culture, or everyday life, or sociality, or economics, or the aesthetic. It denotes the specific processes by which power is reproduced or contested. Culture, today, is 'political' because it can't avoid playing a part in those processes. But we should look to the day when culture will no longer be political because it won't have to be —because, for example, certain artefacts will no longer be used to mediate oppressive political views. Like any good radical politics, left cultural politics is in this sense seeking to put itself out of business. Today in New York, an African-American art exhibition is 'political'. We will know that emancipation has arrived on the day when it ceases to be.

In the introduction to your second edition of Myths of power you acknowledged a mystifying use of 'imagination' in that book, which a consideration of psychoanalysis would have prevented. Could imagination also be understood as the capacity to put oneself in the place of the other, which would lead us to deal with it in relation to questions of intersubjectivity and alterity?

I'm a little sceptical of the idea of the imagination exactly because nobody ever seems to criticise it. It's one of those concepts like 'community' or 'compassion' which everyone reveres, and this inspires the perverse side of me (some would say, the Irish side of me) to question it. The creative imagination, with the Romantics, is among other things a politically transformative force; but a few decades later it had come to *substitute* itself for that political change. There's an Idealism, philosophically, about the conception of the imagination, which in different historical circumstances can go either left or right. In the 18th century, it's certainly deeply tied up with a progressive humanitarianism —a kind of 'decentering' of the egoistic self of possessive individualism, which allows one to project oneself empathetically into another's situation and experience emotional solidarity with them. Indeed, the imagination is all along an ethical category, and represents one of the points where the ethical and the aesthetic blur and merge together.

On the other hand, 'becoming Napoleon' won't necessarily tell you much about Napoleon. Napoleon would have to have understood himself for that to work, and there are good Freudian reasons to suspect that he didn't. Also, there's no assurance that feeling what it's like to be something or someone will spur you to change the situation. On the contrary, it may actually stand in for real change. Literature comes to be important partly because it allows us a vicarious textual access to the lives of others, cut off as we are from them in actuality by the divisions and fragmentations

of modernity. You can find out what it feels like to be Argentinean by reading certain novels, since you're never going to have enough money or leisure to find out by going there in person! The richness of the imagination, then, may paradoxically conceal a certain lack or poverty. It's very often a form of psychic compensation.

The same goes for the Romantic idea that the imagination is the power by which one understands others' situations from the inside. It represents no position in itself. It is just the endless capacity to enter into and appropriate the positions of others, transcending them in the very act of possessing them. What Keats calls 'negative capability'. For all its undoubted value, I think this concept is historically tied up with the emergence of colonialism. The coloniser has no position or identity in himself —his position and identity lie simply in the act of entering into all other people's identities, indeed knowing them better than they know themselves. So this most selfless, generous-spirited of all aesthetic notions also perhaps carries with it the traces of a certain submerged history of violence.

At the same time, we should recognise that the imagination, as well as being a somewhat sublime idea, is also an integral part of everyday social life —not, as the Romantics sometimes thought, something necessarily opposed to it. The simplest social action involves imagination. When I lift a cup to my lips, I do so because my imagination can foresee, drawing on previous experience, what the result will be. When I hear the sound of a diesel engine, the imagination tells me that the bus I'm waiting for is just about to arrive. Without such imagination, which really means making the absent present, we couldn't operate for a single day. There's this phenomenological sense of the imagination, which, among others, Maurice Merleau-Ponty explored, which is part of our *Lebenswelt*, not just a specialised aesthetic category.

For Marxism, human relationships take place in material conditions, and any consideration of alterity should take this into account. Nevertheless, Phenomenology (for instance, Husserl's intersubjective reduction, which you did not take into account in Literary Theory. An Introduction) establishes intersubjectivity as a basic structure of the human and correlatively the lifeworld as a non private property. Is this universalism of phenomenology useful for Marxist analysis at all? In your Walter Benjamin or Towards a Revolutionary Criticism, you seemed to point in this direction when you stated the correlation between one's realization and that of the other.

I'm not convinced that transcendental phenomenology is greatly relevant to Marxism, but hermeneutical phenomenology, of the kind practised from Heidegger to Sartre and Merleau-Ponty, certainly is. Not least because, with Merleau-Ponty, it's a thoroughly *corporeal* way of thinking, and thus of obvious interest to a materialist. In fact it's anticipated by the very early Marx of the Paris Manuscripts, who has learned his phenomenology from the horse's mouth —Hegel— and speaks of subjects and objects and subjects-for-objects and objects-for-subjects in ways which the modern phenomenological tradition will later develop. Anyway, what is literature but a phenomenology, in the broad sense of the term?

As you imply, the phenomenological heritage has been extremely valuable in demystifying a certain private-property model of lived experience, the assumption that I am somehow the private owner of my joys and pains, which I possess rather as I possess a pair of suede shoes or a toothbrush. The later Wittgenstein has great fun in demolishing this Cartesian model—as when he suggests, mischievously, that there may be a pain in the room somewhere but it's not clear which of us is having it. It's only our deceptive grammar which tricks us into thinking that 'I have a pain' is the same thing as 'I have a donkey'. I don't have any special or privileged access to my own 'private' experience, as I might have privileged access to my own bank account, and the way I know myself is roughly the way that I know you. Phenomenology of this kind—though not, I think, the Husserlian kind—has helped us to understand that our bodies are not things we are 'in', as ink may be in a bottle, but projects, centres of relation, practical orientations, ways of being bound up with a world. And this is certainly a dimension which historical materialism needs. It also, of course, needs the psychoanalytic insight that the true 'alterity', the real other, is myself. And phenomenology has found some difficulty in accounting for the unconscious.

Let me add, on the other hand, that I don't think that 'intersubjectivity' is the final answer to, say, Cartesian subjectivity, and this is one point where phenomenology falls short. Truth is not just what I think, but it isn't just what we think either. What underlies intersubjectivity is what Wittgenstein calls 'forms of life', which are not what anybody 'thinks'.

In contrast with the organicist immanentism of hermeneutic or structuralist criticism, the Marxist critic must account for the traces of its own production that the text bears, for its incorporation of heterogeneity. In the case of texts from the past, this demands recognition of alterity and warns against a narcissistic projection of our own ideology into the text. But apart from the alterity caused by other conditions of production there is the alterity of the literary text itself both in relation to its own time and to ours. You criticised Goldman's expressiveness notion of literature for ignoring this alterity. But the current theoretical emphasis tends to fall on the text's unconscious as a source of alterity. Traditional criticism has dealt with the complexity of the work of art at a conscious level; poststructuralism has made this complexity radical by tracing its sources to the unconscious. Perhaps intention and communication have been excessively played down. Should the opposition conscious/unconscious be revised in order to better deal with textual politics?

I think one can speak of the 'unconscious' subtext of the conscious text, as long as one is alive to the perils of 'anthropomorphising' the work in this way. And I don't think the unconscious subtext is that of the author, which isn't to say that authors don't have unconscious as well as conscious intentions. Intentionality for Freud is by no means always conscious. The text 'has' an unconscious because, like any piece of language or any human subject, it is inevitably, by virtue of its performative statements, caught up in a network of significations which exceeds and sometimes subverts that performance, and which it can't control. And this 'unconscious' is not just some more-than-text which is beyond the work's control, but a lack of control, a

way in which the text evades itself and is non-identical with itself, which is inscribed within the text itself, and without which it would be able to say nothing at all.

The unconscious is nothing personal. It simply denotes the way in which desire and discourse continually overshoot their mark, pass through the object they 'intend' and out on the other side. We are subjects, able to speak, act and write, in so far as we're constituted by this profound anonymity or strangeness at the very core of the self. We are human subjects in so far as we are all the monstrous Oedipus who comes to recognise that the terrible Other he seeks is himself. Desire is one psychoanalytic name for this monstrosity, and as soon as one has language one has desire. It's in this sense, I think, that one can —one must— speak of literature and the unconscious, not in the first place because there are so-called phallic symbols in fiction. That would be rather like saying that one must speak of literature and class struggle because there are factories in novels...

ON TRADITION

Common to Hermeneutical Phenomenology and Marxism is the interest in giving temporal depth to the present. The former receives its inspiration from the past, the latter from the future. Even so there is a meeting point in this, for human achievements must be kept alive. Marxism is a bit ambiguous about this: on the one hand, those moments of future inspired crisis which took place in the past are precious, on the other, those elements which are not revolutionary tend to be taken as ideological. The Marxist is very suspicious of tradition as his 'home', and therefore of the hermeneutic circle that describes a path that both takes one out of and safely back home. Nonetheless, even if to see everyday life in the light of great works of the past may not be relevant for radical politics, it may help to oppose ideology. Is this of any value from a Marxist perspective, or is this activity so easily contained that it has more conservative than emancipatory effects?

It was Leon Trotsky who remarked in *Literature and Revolution* that 'we Marxists have always lived in tradition'. This is a vital reminder today, when a certain postmodern left seems to dismiss tradition as so much bunk. Of course socialist traditions are not the same as T.S. Eliot's Tradition: there is no one tradition, as Eliot seems to imagine. But we honour our own traditions as they revere theirs. Any society which only has its contemporary experience to live by is poor indeed. And since the culture of advanced capitalism is a peculiarly amnesiac one, as dedicated to instant oblivion as it is to instant consumption (indeed the two go hand-in-hand), we ought to re-discover the power of remembrance, as Walter Benjamin did when socialist traditions were threatened with being thrust into oblivion by fascism. Benjamin, like Freud, knew that remembrance can be revolutionary, even if few things are more painful and laborious. His aim was to summon the shades of the unjustly killed of the past to fill with their redemptive blood the pit of the present.

Even so, there is, as you suggest, an ambivalence about this in the Marxist tradition, and indeed in Marx himself. Sometimes Marx mourns the dead in this Judaic way; at other times —in *The 8th Brumaire*, for example— he's a brisk

modernist who believes that the past is simply an intolerably burdensome nightmare to be awakened from, and that the dead, as he puts it, should be allowed to bury their dead. And one is bound to note that whereas *tradition* may be creative for socialists, the *past*, by and large is not —Marx is quite right to characterise it as mostly a nightmare, which is why radical politics are in business. And of course the nightmare is one from which we haven't yet struggled awake, as a quick look round the world will confirm. The worse sort of nightmare is thinking that you've woken up and then finding that you haven't, which I suppose is what the 'End of History' people are suffering from! I think radicals must hold in tension the power of tradition and the need to recognise that it's a construct —a continual selection and re-selection of ancestors which is governed ultimately by the needs of the present. That way, we neither make a fetish of tradition like the conservatives, nor see it as mere raw material for the present like the postmodernists.

So it's genuine, solid ancestors we select, not just an imaginary fiction of our own making, as some postmodern theory seems to suggest. Our relationship with the past then becomes purely narcissistic, just an indirect relation with ourselves; whereas Brecht, when complaining about 'modern-dress' classics on stage, asked what then became of our delight in the *difference* of the past, the sheer, liberatory fact that it isn't us. Much of this sense of historical alterity has been displaced by postmodernism to Nature, in the guise of ecology. But the past is one of the ways in which we differ from ourselves, as at once that which we are made of, and that which forms a core of strangeness at the centre, of the present.

I think the conflict between socialists and conservatives isn't just one between the future and the past; it's a struggle over the past itself, and especially over the question of whether it is just to be pickled and preserved, or whether there are ways, as Benjamin trusted, of making the past happen again in ways which might transfigure the present. Happen again, in short, as comedy rather than tragedy or farce; as innovation rather just as neurotic repetition. The dead of past conflicts between the rulers and the ruled can't literally live again, short of some actual resurrection; but what we do in the present can give them new retrospective meaning, render their deaths a little less meaningless; and what they did in the past can become a precious resource for us here and now. Here, then, past, present and future meet in a creative loop, without any of them being *reduced* to the other —as happens in the 'presentism' of the new historicism, which seeks to colonise even the past in imagination, make it just an extension of ourselves, make it so much pliable raw material for instant refashioning. One thinks of the TV cartoon *The Flintstones*: Stone Age humanity as suburban America plus dinosaurs.

An important aspect of your work is the analysis of notions that played an important part in Marxist tradition and that now belong to everyday language. You have dealt with the aesthetic and with ideology at length, but you have recently moved on to culture. Why this move which goes back to ideas and arguments that you had already grappled with in your earliest work and which are closely related to central concerns of Raymond Williams?

As far as your opening point about everyday language goes, it's notable that no modern theory has permeated the discourse of common speech more than psychoanalysis —much, much more than Marxism! You can hear talk of paranoia, the subconscious, Oedipus complexes and so on all around you. What an extraordinary phenomenon, for the work of an esoteric Viennese philosopher to have become such common currency!

As for culture, I found myself, in the little book I've just produced about the idea, going back, spontaneously as it were, to my great mentor Raymond Williams, and discovering once again how relevant his thought still is for us. I think culture is a less specialist notion than the aesthetic, in fact one which bridges the aesthetic and everyday life, and this is clearly one of its attractions for a radical. The word covers both Voltaire and vodka ads. But I also believe, as I argue in *The Idea of Culture*, that a new and ominous redrawing of the global map of culture is taking place, in what I call an encounter between *Culture* and *cultures* which is also a confrontation between rich and poor, North and South, 'civilised' and 'ethnic'. And finally, I think I looked again at the idea of culture because it has been so inflated in a postmodern age. I want to whip the idea back into its rather modest place, after so much hype and modishness, and recall that, of the huge problems now confronting humanity, hardly any are 'cultural' in any very exact sense of the word. They're all as drearily, obstinately material as they ever were. So if I've returned to the topic of culture, it's partly to praise it and partly to bury it, as Mark Antony didn't quite say about Caesar.

In 'The Politics of Theory' you stated that the marginalization of culture corresponds to the enthronement of instrumental reason and argued that there is a loss and a gain in this: art becomes a 'critique', but also politically ineffective. 'Instrumental reason' has been criticised for good reason, but it is instrumental reason that enables a certain human control of our circumstances on the basis of the explanation of the mechanisms of the material world; do you think that the rhetorics of the attack on instrumental reason may have led theorists to ignore a necessary dialectical approach to it?

Yes, few notions have had such a bad press recently than instrumental reason, and rather ludicrously so —since it's clearly something absolutely vital to any conceivable form of human life. You would need instrumental reason to establish a society in which the grip of instrumental reason was weakened somewhat! I suppose the object of attack is the conversion of this brand of rationality into the dominant one, which is what capitalism has ensured. And of course that has many obnoxious consequences which have to be opposed, in the name of aesthetic or communicative or some other, more benign form of rationality. But it is absurd to imagine that instrumental reason is something one ever could or should abolish. If you did, you quite literally wouldn't be able to get out of bed! And it has its value: as a form of essential control of our world, as you suggest, but also because to see X in its means-oriented relation to Y is, for one thing, to prevent oneself from fetishising X as a thing in itself. We are all always in some means-oriented relation to some end, in fact usually in many of them at the same time. And this isn't to be regretted as some sinister Enlightenment plot.

Some of the attack on instrumental reason has been in the worst sense irrationalist. What we can hope for is that it ceases to be so dominative in our lives, and —more to the point— ceases to provide the paradigm for reasoning itself. Instrumental reason can tell us what means to select to attain our ends, but it is struck dumb when we ask: are these ends ones worth pursuing? It defines such a crucial question as *beyond reason*. Yet in its more classical, traditional sense, reason addressed itself to precisely such questions. If it's irrational for me to think I can spend the whole day drunk by eating bananas, it's also irrational, in an older, wiser sense of the word, to want to spend the whole day drunk in the first place.

ON POLITICS

Religion is the opium of the people is a famous dictum that expresses the incompatibility between Marxism and Religion. Nonetheless, several attempts have been made at reconciliation. The most salient in the Spanish-speaking world is the so-called 'theology of liberation movement', in permanent crisis with Rome. Ellacuría wrote about the debt of 'Liberation Theology' to Marxism; Jon Sobrino, his friend and colleague, has recently stated that in these countries (of South America), those who gave their lives for the poor... realised that Marxism put its finger on the sore that is the analysis of the economic base, and added that Marxism could also learn from the Christian faith. From an emancipatory point of view, the best of Christian religion is to try to give voice to those who do not have power; is this too idealistic for Marxism that realised that only those with capacity to act politically will be listened to, or does it somewhat supplement Marxism?

I was something of a theologian in my early years, and have always retained a close interest in the connections between Christianity and socialism. Both are emancipatory narratives which turn on a transition from death to life; both find the agency of this revolution or radical conversion in what St Paul colourfully calls the 'shit of the earth'; both see this new or risen life in the shape of human community; both believe that what has been rejected will form the cornerstone of the new order. Both look to another world, but find the seeds of it in a militant, suffering engagement with the present.

The stories they both have to tell, ironically, are at once considerably more pessimistic and greatly more optimistic than the tales of bourgeois-liberal Enlightenment. On the one hand, both believe that things are very bad indeed, whether you call this exploitation or injustice or original sin. On the other hand, both fables trust to a power which is finally stronger than injustice, though for a Christian that could come only through the death of history itself. And of course there are many more connections, not least the unpalatable fact that each liberation movement has succumbed to its oppressive opposite, whether in the form of the Inquisition or the Stalinist state.

In the past, the state occupied a social, economical and political position, which could make it instrumental in the appropriation of the means of production. Does the relative weakening of the state and the empowering of transnational

capital necessarily lead to micro-politics? If this is so, and given the division in the proletariat, is there still room for a politics based on class struggle?

It's true that the nation-state has at some levels been weakened, not least by the operations of a nation-blind capitalism: but we shouldn't, even so, exaggerate this weakness. Politically and culturally, we still live in a world of nation-states; and as far as policing and surveillance go, the state is more powerful than ever. Transnational capitalism makes use of nation-states for its own purposes; it relies on them, for example, to discipline the labour force and create the right economic and social conditions for its predatory operations. So though it's true that the nation-state is being undercut these days both from 'above' (the big corporations) and from 'below' (the growing importance of regionality and community action), its days are far from over. Though what has, for the moment, come to an end is revolutionary nationalism, whose last great moment belongs to the early 1970s.

As far as class-struggle goes, we should remember that the struggle against the global corporations, by a whole range of community-based projects, *is* a class-struggle, whether it recognises itself as such or not. The corporations are the new international bourgeoisie. What has lapsed, however, is the idea of international solidarity. That phrase has now been, as it were, divided up, with 'international' assigned to the transnational corporations and 'solidarity' assigned to local resistance. On the other hand, though I wouldn't want to idealise it too much, the oppositional politics of the Internet is helping once again to globalise political resistance. The more capitalism globalises its operations, the more obviously powerful it is; but the more also any one point of it is involved with any other, and thus attackable through any other, the more fragile and vulnerable the system becomes. If it strengthens one currency or one economy to have its fate bound up with another, it may also prove its nemesis.

The appropriation of the means of production, which would make it possible to attend to basic needs of human beings across the globe may also endanger the functioning of the mechanism of production of wealth based as it is on private enterprise and which has proved most effective. Do you find this a genuine contradiction or just a piece of ideology? Benjamin said that history progressed by its bad side. Can the relative, or even parody of, socialization of Capital amongst sharers be taken as an instance of this?

I think there are genuine problems here. Marx recognised that capitalism was the most revolutionary system of production known to history, one with a formidable dynamic of development, self-elaboration, the capacity to create new needs, new relations, new networks, new forms of subjectivity, and the like. And this includes the fact that the profit motive, though it may be morally disreputable, has proved in some ways an enormously effective way of developing the productive forces. If you rely on the state alone to develop the productive forces, you will tend to get Stalinism and stagnation. So socialists have to ask themselves what they would do about this if and when they come to power. It's sometimes forgotten that the market was for Marx by no means just negative; on the contrary, he saw how

markets and competition and commodities had been part of that revolutionary historical development which had laid down the material ground for socialism. This is one thing that is meant by history progressing by its bad side. It's also often forgotten how even someone like Trotsky, after the Bolshevik revolution, urged the indispensable role of markets in the Soviet Union, within the context of a democratically planned economy.

But the problem is obviously how we then avoid perpetuating some of the worst aspects of capitalism. Could some form of democratic, local, participatory planning work, or do markets yield us kinds of information and allocation of resources which would still be indispensable even under socialism? Would we need markets for a while to supply the kind of incentives which, in the long term, education, cultural change and a less cynical attitude to work and society might come to provide instead? How far might modern information technology perform some of the functions which markets have so far fulfilled? Might socialising capital by share-holding be a feasible form of social ownership? These all seem to me important questions, and they are questions which are being intensively worked upon today. Let nobody say that the left is overlooking them and just clinging nostalgically to its old panaceas. But as a mere cultural theorist, I can't claim to know the answers...

THE ACADEMIC WORLD

How do you see the English Academic world today? What major institutional changes have been lately produced for the better and for the worse, and which do you think should be introduced? What has been the effect of the institutionalisation of theory?

One of the effects of the institutionalisation of theory is that it no longer has quite the attraction which it previously did. In this sense, theory has passed its peak, and kinds of study which aren't purely theoretical —postmodernism, post-colonialism— are taking its place. Since these areas are more cultural and political than purely theoretical, this is often a welcome development. What has happened in English academia is that a lot of those who pioneered theory in the universities are now of the generation which holds the professorial chairs. If you look around the professors in English universities, a great many of them are on the political left. They can thus introduce certain changes from above which are less easy to push through from below.

But in England as everywhere else, a whole generation of people walked into academic jobs in the Sixties, and given this security have ceased to be intellectually very active. This is a pity, because it was of course just at this moment that the whole subject began to be dramatically transformed. And many of these people have simply not kept pace with that. So we just have to wait patiently or impatiently for them to retire. Not, of course, that these days one can assume that being young means being radical. One of the problems for the younger generation is that politically speaking they have very little of interest to remember. Contrast that with

a generation which could remember Vietnam, Black Power, civil rights, student insurrection, major industrial struggle and so on.

Cultural materialism has become a strong trend within the institution. Perhaps one should rather talk about Cultural Materialisms, do you think this diversity affects the political efficacy of the trend allowing a better political containment of it? The phrase 'Cultural Materialism' rarely appears in your work. Do you find it useful? How does your own work relate to the trend?

Cultural materialism has indeed been a vital development, not least because it suggests that we should do something other than just provide 'left' readings of the same well-defined objects. Though I'm not sure I like the current fad for pluralising things. As though sticking an 's' on the end of something were any real solution. (Maybe, incidentally, we should speak of 'pluralisms' in that case...) I haven't used the phrase cultural materialism much in my work, though I've certainly employed the idea. My only slight reservation about it is that Raymond Williams invented it partly because he thought that Marxism tended to treat culture immaterially, as simply part of the superstructure. This has certainly been true of a lot of Marxist aesthetics; but I think it's a mistake to imagine that 'superstructure' necessarily means 'immaterial'. It simply means 'less determinant in the long run'. And culture, for all its importance, is surely that.

ON STYLE

Marxist tradition is not noticeable for the value that its adherents have attributed to humour. But this is very important in your style. Is it just a trick to spread readership? One of the devices you use is to throw a commonsensical observation in the course of exposing a highly philosophical argument. Suddenly two worlds are confronted: the highly academic world to which only a specialised readership belong and the wide world of common sense. This undermines and unbalances the elevated discourse provoking the reader's smile. You have criticised the notion of common sense, but you make a lot of stylistic use of common sense. What kind of common sense is still defensible?

I think some of my humour takes the form of a kind of debunkery or deflation, which might be related to my Irishness, since the Irish are famous mockers, satirists and debunkers. But I suspect it also has something to do with my working-class background. Coming from outside middle-class culture, one can never quite take it as seriously as one otherwise might, and perhaps one then tends to be particularly sensitive to pomposity and particularly keen to deflate it. I find that I share this sensibility with a lot of women, who also of course in some sense come from outside that enclave of very male pomposity and high-minded solemnity, and I've always felt this to be one of my closest points of contact with feminism.

I don't think my humour is a calculated strategy to gain readers, though I do believe that radicals should be very concerned with popularising their ideas, and I'm horrified by the lack of interest in this among radicals in the USA. One has to be prepared to engage in a spot of what Brecht called 'crude thinking'. The

confrontation you speak of, between a world of high culture and a plain world of common sense, is an extremely recurrent figure in Irish culture, all the way from Swift to Joyce and Beckett. It comes, I suppose, from living in a society which has a 'high' scholastic tradition of learning, but which is also extremely poor and barren; and one can't help satirically playing the one off against the other. Bathos, I think, is probably the major trope of Irish writing. And no doubt I have some of this in my bones.

There is an objectionable 'common sense', which as Gramsci remarks is the sense of our rulers; but there's also something he calls 'good' or practical sense, which he sees as springing from a regular contact with material reality, and which working people are therefore more likely to have than their bosses. I would add, women, too. Women, because of their history and conditions, are much more spontaneously materialist than their chronically idealising menfolk, much less likely to be led astray by abstract ideals. And this kind of practical sense has a scepticism about it which is the exact opposite of the complacent dogmatism of 'common sense'.

I have sometimes offended colleagues by seeming to be too debunking ('carnavalesque' might be the appropriate technical term), but I don't apologise for this at all, any more than I apologise for being sardonic and polemical. These seem to me essential qualities of oppositional writing, and I'm depressed by the absence of them in so many radical theorists —by the way they simply take over the protocols of conventional academia writing and turn them to a different political end. To make a difference, you have to write differently. Not just write about different things with different opinions, but change the mode of production. And this is what I've tried to do.

Dialectics is inseparable from your style. It is an intellectual exercise that can find positive aspects in what has been fixed as negative, and that lends an extraordinary flexibility to your thought. Furthermore, though it is not a kind of Hegelian dialectics —the 'aufhebung' plays no central role here—, it is more than just a mental exercise or methodology; it is also a worldview capable for instance of accepting progress and politics without a capital P. The lack of a transcendent basis (Nature, History, God) has led some thinkers (e.g., Vattimo) to embrace the so called 'weak thought'. Is your use of dialectics a guard against weak thinking or do you relate in some way to this movement? What is the political advantage of the dialectical approach?

I've never liked the leftist use of the term 'the dialectic', which seems to me deeply reificatory, but the 'dialectical' is a different matter. I hope what you say of my style is right. I'm struck by the disastrous lack of dialectical thought among many postmodern writers, who for all their concern with plurality, difference, ambiguity, heterogeneity, contradiction and so on, usually fall back in the end into simple binary oppositions: Plurality good, Homogeneity bad, Difference good, Identity bad, Fragmentation good, Totality bad, Postmodernism good, Enlightenment bad, Decentred subject good, Humanist subject bad. This really does

strike me as a savage irony. The dialectical, by contrast, is the attempt to think both sides of a contradiction without letting go of either—to demonstrate the *necessity* of the contradiction—and this is extraordinarily difficult to achieve. In particular, socialists need to distinguish it from a number of familiar liberal positions which can sound a bit like it: there's good and bad in all of us, variety is the spice of life, everything's mixed and ambiguous, and other such high-minded liberal clichés. These are often enough sophisticated ways of avoiding commitment; whereas commitment and the dialectical go together. Quite how they do deserves more examination than we have given it.

Let me end with the most scandalous Marxist dialectical thought of all. As we all know, Marx denounces capitalism as an era of greed, misery, plunder, exploitation, brutality and injustice. Who doesn't know that? And who remembers that he also showers praise on the bourgeoisie, as a great revolutionary class who transformed the face of the earth and swept away their feudalist oppressors in an enormous movement of emancipation? Marx is at once deeply suspicious of bourgeois notions of Progress, and equally suspicious of any nostalgic return to the parochial social order of pre-modernity. He sees capitalism as an exhilarating global liberation, and at the same time as one long, unspeakable tragedy. Now where else, exactly, would you find that dialectical way of looking? Who can cling, simultaneously, to those outrageously contradictory thoughts? But if we don't, we understand very little of the history through which we have been living.

