‘We Are All Marxists’
AN INTERVIEW WITH TERRY EAGLETON

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NOTE: This is the complete interview, which was offered in a limited version and in my own translation into Spanish, by the magazine *Quimera* as “Todos somos Marxistas: Entrevista con Terry Eagleton”, #242-243, April 2004, pp. 83-91. Prof. Eagleton had been invited to give a talk at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona by the Department of Spanish but the students’ Assembly declared one of their many strikes on the same day. Prof. Eagleton was, nonetheless, enchanted that his talk was cancelled because of student activism. Of all UAB, then, I was the one person who benefitted from his marvellous, insightful conversation.

On Prof. Eagleton’s career, see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Terry_Eagleton
On this interview, see the post in my blog *The Joys of Literature* of 17 February 2020.

1. Ireland

- To tell you the truth, I expected you would speak with an Irish accent.
Ah, no. I was brought up in England. I was educated in England. I’ve an Irish background but I was educated in England, I’ve only lived in Ireland for about eight years. I mean I’ve lived there permanently since then. I have a six year-old son, as a matter of fact. He’s the one brought up in Ireland.

- Your family is from Ireland, then. Why did you feel the need to return to a place which is not *your* place, if you think about it?
Well, I didn’t feel the need to. I just like Ireland. I enjoy it. I’ve a lot of friends there and in a way I feel it is my place. I mean I was born in England but brought up Irish partly, and so the island has never been strange.

- In a working-class neighbourhood, right?
Yes, in the north of England. Most Irish people in England would of course be working-class immigrants, mostly. So that was my background.

- Once you wrote that D.H. Lawrence was an exile from his own culture. Is that the way you feel about Ireland? As if you were in exile from your real culture?

No, no, I don't think so. When people ask me, do I feel English or Irish I never know what to reply. A bit of both. It's part of the privilege of now being middle-class that I don't need to worry about who I am. It's the dispossessed who need to worry about who they are and they will stop being dispossessed when they no longer need to worry about it, when it's no longer a problem. I don't need to worry about who I am, I'm between different cultures, that's my privilege. But, exile no. It's too strong a word. It's a word one might use of James Joyce, of course, as well as Lawrence. Too strong because actually one of the most native customs in Ireland is getting out –Oscar Wilde, James Joyce– but not only great writers, of course. Millions of people in the post-famine period. Ireland is one of those very few nations where the great majority of the citizens live abroad and have done so for many years. So, exiles, living out of the country is nothing new in Ireland. Ireland is very close to America because Ireland helped make America really and Irish people think nothing of going to America. Also Ireland was traditionally and particularly in the late Middle Ages very much a part of Europe. Before it was colonised it sent its monks and its missionaries and its scholars out to the great monasteries in Europe and in a way, ironically, that has come back today with the European Community. Ireland is a much more fervent and an active member of the EU than the chauvinistic Britain.

- Some paradox!

Yes. Britain of course, the Union as a post-imperial power has been used to seeing itself apart from Europe. Ireland has made a much better job, I think, of its European connections than Britain. But there isn't the same old tradition behind that. Ireland has often looked to Europe and to America rather than twenty miles across the sea to Britain and there are good political reasons for that. So I don't know who I am and I don't really care and that's my privilege.

- Does it make sense to have nationalist feelings in a globalised world?

Of course, there are good and bad kinds of national feelings. The difference I just made between Britain and Ireland might illustrate that. Britain's attitude towards Europe is backwards nationalism and chauvinism, a hanging on the imperial days. Ireland's nationalism is, of course, much more mixed. It's meant a lot for the Irish; it's also meant to attempt to resist the imposition of another kind of power. So, I think nationalism is a very double-edged phenomenon, it can be very reactionary and inward-looking and there is certainly that kind of thing in Irish nationalism. But, of course, it's also about defending the right of the nation to be defended. Ireland was the first post-colonial nation in the 20th century. In 1921 the Irish achieved their independence from Britain. And that set a kind of model for a great many subsequent independence movements throughout the world. Ireland had to do it alone. I'd distinguish, then, between nationalism as a conservative ideology –we, the people, versus you– and being anti-colonialist. The anti-colonial movements of the 20th century were, of course, the most successful revolutionary movements of the modern period. Far more successful than socialism, of course. Ireland was part of the movement which managed to roll back the imperial tide in the first half of the 20th century. That kind of nationalism I'm proud of, not the kind of nationalism that says my people rather than yours, of course. Nobody wants this model.

- And what's the solution for the Irish problem?
Oh, I wish I knew. How long have you got? Five days? Five minutes?

- I was surprised president Bush has anything to say about this…
I don't think he has anything to say about it. I think he has to pretend that he does. Of course, his predecessor, Clinton, really did have something to say about it, as Clinton had Irish roots. Clinton is very sentimental about Ireland but he did at least try to help. Well I've always been pretty optimistic in the long term about the Irish problem. There are still many problems in the middle-term and the short term. In the long term, Unionism in the North of Ireland, Protestant Unionism, is dying of course; they know it, which is why they're so obstinate, so stubborn. A lot of difference has been made in the Irish problem by Ireland's joining the European Community, by the decline of Britain's old imperial power, by the demographic growth of the Catholic population of Northern Ireland…

- Yes, I heard about that.
Yes, which is very interesting. And also, by the sudden leap into modernity of the Republic of Ireland. So far the Protestants of Northern Ireland could say, so we're the modern people, we belong to Britain as against this united, Catholic, priest-ridden, society. Now, Ireland has in some ways overtaken Britain in terms of its modern economic development.

- So Northern Ireland appears to be backward in comparison with the Republic.
Yes. Northern Ireland has been for a long time an alien, an economically backward part of Britain. If Britain could get rid of Northern Ireland tomorrow without political upset it would. I think it's a matter of time. It's been an awful thirty-year struggle, bloodshed with violence, but, in a sense you might say that History is with the reunification of Ireland and the end of this particular struggle.

- So you think it will come eventually.
Oh, yes, I think so. There'll be lots of problems and setbacks on the road but I think the road is fairly clear. I think the Unionists really know they've lost in a geo-political frame, which is why they're so greedy about it.

- What's your situation as a teacher, then? You don't teach in Ireland, do you?
No, I don't teach in Ireland because when I came to live in Ireland 8 years ago, a friend of mine took me aside and said, 'Look, if you come to live here, you'll never do any work.' And that was not what I wanted. Also, it would be undiplomatic for an English Irishman like myself to approach the academic territory of Ireland. Ireland has only four or five universities…

- It's the size of the province of Barcelona in population.
Yes. Also, you know, the Irish need their own academic jobs, I don't want to take any. And, so now I teach in Manchester, which is ironically where I come from.

- So, you come and go from Ireland to Manchester.

Yes. I have a wonderful academic life because the deal is that I teach and do no administration whatsoever.

- Everybody's dream!
Yes, but in my own defence I must say that that comes at the end of thirty years working in perhaps one of the most intensive academic situations in Britain which is that of Oxford.

- I'll ask you about that… So what's your position in Ireland? Are you accepted as an authority or treated as 'that Englishman'?
Oh, no. I think I'm reasonably accepted. One always has to be careful, of course, living in another country and Ireland is a very different country from Britain. The fact that they speak the same language makes that sometimes not so obvious as it should be. Sometimes I have to tread carefully; occasionally, I provoke some antagonism. On the whole, I'd say that the Irish are friendly at accepting people, at least, let me say it, friendly at accepting with white people like me. The Irish are now being faced for the first time in their history with having to accept non-white immigrants.

- Same in Spain.
This nation, which has relied throughout its history on the hospitality of the world is now for the first time in need to play hostess itself and it's not doing a very good job of it. It will take a lot time. Because Ireland is a very mixed nation itself: Scottish, and English, and Welsh, and Norman, and Viking, but it's not doing a very good job at the moment, since it's just beginning, in welcoming the strangers. Yet strangers like me have no problem.

- I remember this novel by Irish writer Roddy Doyle, *The Commitments*, which deals with an Irish soul band. The singer and leader explains they play soul because the Irish are the niggers of Europe.
That's right. Well, you see? that's a traditional way of looking at it and there's some truth in it. These days the majority of the Irish are very concerned to be seen as up-to-date. You may have heard of the Celtic tiger, which refers to the economic boom. For the first time in their history the Irish have become reasonably affluent and that's excellent, they deserve it. One of the worst aspects of that is that a lot of the Irish these days tend to look rather uncritically upon modernisation, as if modernisation were in itself a positive thing.

- Rings a bell.
It rings a bell. Many nations like Spain, like Ireland which are benighted, poor, agrarian nations which have then had to leap into modernity, or you might say – certainly for Ireland– to leap from that into post-modernity. In these nations which haven't had to live through a period of high modernity in the same way as Britain there's a strange timewarping whereby they leap from being Catholic, traditional, agricultural into being technocratic, secularised and Ireland has all the problems with that that I imagine are true here as well.

- Yes, I think that in the last 25 years we've gone through a transformation that should have taken at least three generations.

That's a very good way of putting it. It's an exciting time to live through, and it's also a very difficult time and the worst aspect of it, as I said, is that you can develop a very uncritical attitude towards the post-modern world.

- I think that President Aznar's intervention in the Iraki war had to do with that: we're finally a modern nation, so let's join the first rank, in a very wrong way, of course.
Yes, let's show how modern we are by killing other people.

- Are you in touch with Irish writers?
Yes, I would say so. Ireland is, of course, a small literary community, so they stick together for good and bad. I lived down the road from Seamus Heaney and I knew him before he *was* Seamus Heaney. A long time ago.

- Before you were Terry Eagleton…
Yes. You see? If I stare out of my window I almost see the house where Yeats was born. If I walk down the beach near Dublin where I live I can see the tower where Joyce lived, you know? the one at the beginning of *Ulysses*. Yes, I do have friends among the Irish writers. As you may know, Ireland is very civilised in that it doesn't charge income tax to writers. All artists in Ireland live free or at least free of income tax on their artistic work.

- It's an incentive!
One of the great things about Ireland is that what it has exported is on the whole culture, even today. People know U-2, Riverdance, and Irish films. I'm very proud in fact that Ireland's presence in the world, unlike Britain's, has never been primarily military or imperial, it's been cultural. To keep artists in, actually, it has adopted this very friendly policy of relieving their artists of income tax and I'm trying to share it. In order to do that I had to send some of my books to Dublin Castle. I have this nice fantasy of teams of clerks spending the nights reading my books to see if they qualify as Irish art, checking if they're fine. Unfortunately, they send them back about two days later saying 'as long as we don't have to read them it's all right'.

- I think it's a clever idea. After all, the investment pays…
It's not very expensive, there aren't that many artists, many of them just don't make much money. The only flaw is that this is open to people from elsewhere –everybody from Jack Nicholson downwards (or should I say upwards?) wants to live in Ireland. So, it's a great incentive for Irish writers but also a great incentive for people who want to sponge off the Irish. But it's a good idea.

- Of course, the language is mostly English. So you have the advantage of having a strong local identity and a world-wide language to project it.
Yes, this also benefits the growing Irish film industry. It's also a beautiful country which attracts world-known filmmakers.

2. Literary Studies

- In the final chapter of *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (1983) you consider the crisis of Literary Studies and even announce the end of English. Twenty years later the crisis is still being debated and English keeps its course. Isn't perhaps a permanent state of crisis the very nature of Literary Studies?

I think so. Perhaps when I wrote the book in the early 1980s there was a particular sense of crisis, obviously. But, yes, crisis has become a bit of a cliché and I think that you're right. There's a sense in which I think the Humanities – not only Literature but the Humanities– have always been in a certain crisis. Now, certainly, we all know the titles: the Crisis of the Humanities or the Crisis of Criticism. I think that crises in the Humanities go together like Laurel and Hardy. I think they belong together. In an industrial, capitalist modern society, you have to have a special place where values which can't survive very easily in the world on their own are cultivated with a certain apartness. And what you call that place has altered variously from time to time: you call it Literature, the Arts, the Humanities, Culture, Civilisation. But the problem has always been structural: the separation between that and ordinary society. So that meant the Humanities could always act as a critique of all the society because they were separate and prompted them to do that. At the same time that separateness meant that they can't be very effective. I think that contradiction is perhaps somewhere near the heart of the crisis. You're right, it's an ongoing, chronic crisis. Every now and then it flares up particularly and it did around the time I first wrote the book and it took the new name of theory. I think that theory was just a fashionable new name for a phenomenon that had been there all along, really, and which is still there.

- I can't imagine Literary Studies as something completely static. What would that mean? That we've come to end of our knowledge about Literature? That we know everything?

The Humanities are always in a certain crisis because they belong to a society which in one sense needs them but which in another sense has very little time for them. That's part of the contradiction, too. It needs them at points when it needs to tell people 'look, this is what we ultimately live by', and it's very convenient for it to have something called the Humanities or Culture standing by in the wings, which you can bring onto the stage. At the same time, its actual attitude towards these things are often very philistine, very utilitarian, very disparaging. It needs in a certain ideological way but it has less and less practical use for them.

- Often the cultural establishment tends to forget that work is not really compatible with the consumption of certain kinds of demanding Culture. A person tired after a hard day's work has hardly the energy to watch TV… but somehow those who have more time think the others are lazy.

Culture is hard work. You don't want more of that if you're working already. What you're saying at a personal level is what I suppose Marxists call the basis and the superstructure. If you want to have a thriving culture you have to have the material means to do so. And the trouble is that once you have the means, once you have a thriving culture, the culture behaves as if it had no birth, it had

no parents; it behaves as Freud thinks we all behave, as though we are all self-begotten because its parents, labour –for the parent of culture is labour– but it's a parent that culture is often ashamed of, and wants to forget it ever had.

- So how do you solve the problem? How do you make Culture accessible for people who have no energy for it? Or you don't at all?
I think what you're saying indicates the right direction, which is that the problem lies not first within the view of the culture, it lies within the view of work and society as a whole. A long time ago Marx imagined that the solution was not for work to become creative but for work to be abolished as far as possible, work in the sense of labour, using technology not to increase profit but to ease the burden of work on people. As I sometimes tell my students, the only good reason for being a socialist is if you don't like to do any work.

- Yet, I'm thinking of those people forced to take an early retirement, say at the age of 50, and don't fill their new leisure with culture.
There is use in technology within a framework which makes it more than just making people redundant at work, a framework which includes, for example, trying to tackle the cultural deprivation. Whatever the people have, that is actively created by the capitalist media and capitalists don't want culture itself. It's not just a matter of people not having culture, it's a matter of people being positively and actively denied the right to it for the most cynical of reasons, for cynical commercial reasons. So it's not a matter of not having time to spare, it's a political matter in the end: a matter of confronting the institutions which are the cause of cultural deprivation, which exclude us from so-called high culture.

- So, maybe the ideal is the socialist utopia by Edward Bellamy, *Looking Backward*, in which people work very hard until the age of 45 and then use the rest of their lives to consume high culture and other kinds of material objects. If this happened, we could even turn the university into a centre for real cultural exchange and not just the education of the young.
It's been a known socialist slogan: you must work to live and not live to work. Changing these priorities, I think, is the basis shared by all socialist thinkers who see that work is a means to life not the end of life. What's so scandalous about capitalism is that work becomes the end of life and not the means to it.

- Is that what you meant when you claimed that a socialist, Marxist model of culture should be defended?
Yes, again, Marx of course, is part of the enormous crises in our times, not only for cultural reasons but also for political ones. The materialist approach to culture, whether it is specifically Marxist or not, understands that in order to produce and enjoy culture you must have a material abundance, you must have a certain kind of social relations, otherwise you will end simply with a type of society in which culture is yet another weapon used against people, to exclude them rather than to include them.

- So, a real Marxist critic is not a person who uses Marx just to read Literature, right?
No, not at all, I don't think so. I mean you could do that and that's kind of interesting but I think that it's not primarily about Literature. Marxism is raising

questions about the place of culture, the cultural practices in our kind of society. Once again it is important to see that Marxism is not utopianism. Marx began his criticism in combat with utopianism of that kind, the sort of 'wouldn't it be nice if' kind of utopianism. Marx very deliberately refused to withdraw into that discussion. Marx said, 'look, the point is to create a situation in which people can then begin to be free to create their history, to create their culture. What they would then create I have nothing to say about, I'm not a prophet, I can't predict that.' We just need to resolve the kinds of contradictions now which prevent us from doing that sort of thing today.

- So it still makes perfect sense to call yourself a Marxist critic today.
I would call myself a Marxist for all kinds of reasons. How important it is to label oneself that way, I'm not sure. I think it's important to say one is on the left; as a socialist one must meet certain socialist goals. People speak of the end and the death of Marxism. Somebody once described socialism as the greatest reform history has witnessed. It must at least one of the greatest, depending on what you think about Christianity; that would be a good question, but certainly that just doesn't go away. If Marxism was just a set of critical tools or good ideas, then indeed it might go away overnight like, say, phenomenology or logical positivism. But Marxism or socialism isn't simply an intellectual method. It is a movement, millions and millions of people have been involved in. And Marxism as a theory is part of the modern mentality as much as Darwin or Freud or Nietzsche. As you might say, we're all Marxist now in the sense that Marx was the first to say 'look, there is this object called capitalism, it has its peculiar ways of working; we must look at it as an object of study.' You don't simply throw that aside overnight. It's part of our very deep way of thinking in the West.

- I've never come across any colleague or student who disagrees with this. Everybody presents themselves as liberals and nobody boasts 'I'm right wing' and I disagree with your liberal ways.
Well, I'm glad to hear that. I must say I've been the subject of certain right-wing attacks.

- You have??
Oh, yes. One must expect that within a capitalist society. One is in a minority which the powerful attack.

- You tried to do something very difficult, which is organising a revolution at Oxford, coming from Cambridge yourself as a student. How does this work? The impression is that places like these are elastic enough to take in any oppositional current.
There's lots of truth in that. They're so immensely confident, some people might say so immensely arrogant that they think, perhaps, they could absorb any criticism. There's some truth in that. I found myself in Oxbridge by a kind of accident. I worked with Raymond Williams as a student but I had real no intention even of staying within academia. Williams himself had only recently gone back to academia from adult education. I wasn't sure what I wanted to do, but the last thing I wanted to do was staying at Oxford or Cambridge.

- So what attracted you in the end?

I wasn't attracted. I ended up there. Williams offered me a research scholarship in Cambridge, which was a chance to work with him that I seized. I just liked Cambridge very much. Then, because of my politics I was not given a lectureship in Cambridge.

- I mean, were you told 'we don't think your politics are right'?
Oh, no, I don't think they were silly enough.

- But you knew?
Yeah. By that time I was a young academic and I had to go somewhere else. Oxford had a job coming up, I applied and I was accepted. That happened to be at the only college at Oxford that was fairly liberal.

- Does this mean that Oxford is more liberal than Cambridge?
No, it was just a fluke, it was an accident. Then I stayed on at Oxford and I tried to build the kind of basis or centre for radical change. And there is something strange, of course, about trying to break a radical boundary with the sons and daughters of the ruling class. Oxford and Cambridge are there to produce the ruling class.

- Of course!
On the other hand, in a sense, that's why it's an important place to do it. Institutions like Oxford and Cambridge, I suppose most conservative institutions, generate their own dissidents. People always, being liberal, have people who are frightened of them.

- Were you the token dissident?
I don't mean this is in terms of the dons, I mean this is also the students. Oxford and Cambridge attract a great many highly intelligent, sensitive, socially-conscious young people who are too intelligent to accept the sort of ideological nonsense that they've been given and who therefore naturally look for some alternative.

- Did you get top working-class students?
Oxford and Cambridge still take the lowest percentage of working-class students in the country. Oxford and Cambridge are much less obvious ruling-class institutions now than they were when I started. When I started, when I was a student at Cambridge, everybody around me was an aristocrat. They were all about seven foot tall –I was quite small a student– because they had generations of good food and good breeding. They looked distinctly different from ordinary people, they spoke differently. That's not true any more. Oxford and Cambridge students are now anonymously middle-class students. They still don't have a lot of working-class students, that's true. The places have changed in social tone. And my job was to create a space in which these different people could come together. And I think you will find that most conservative institutions create their own internal opposition, and there has to be someone there to organise it and that's what I really tried to do. And it was incredible receptive in some concrete way: we changed the syllabus at Oxford, we introduced new topics, you know? The place I left was very different from the place I joined. But that wasn't just because of me.

- How did your family react to your being an Oxford don? Did they understand?
Yes, they understand. They were one of those working-class families who are ambitious for their children. You are ambitious that children should have what they want for themselves.

- But it also creates a distance between the child and the family.
Yes, that's what I was going to say. It's a very ambiguous situation because in a sense you lose touch with the children at the same time as you're pushing them to get what they want. I think that was my situation. I think my parents were very proud of me but they didn't really have the language with which to articulate that very well. They were a little bit fearful; they knew I was becoming a well-known radical who was the subject of criticism from other people. So, yes I think it's an ambiguous situation. My mother died last year only and right up to her death I think she felt that ambiguity with me, even though I was by then 60 years old, she was probably still secretly afraid I was going to be thrown out.

- Be a good boy and don't make them angry.
Exactly. But that, of course, is the deferential working-class attitude. My father was less deferential. My father would have called himself a socialist and, you know? He knew what was going on, even though he didn't have the language in which to put that. Yes, it's very complicated thing.

- I call that the Billy Elliot syndrome after the film, when you lose your brightest children to a culture that is not your own.
All I can say is that at least I didn't become a ballet dancer. That might have been the end of me.

- If I read you correctly, you were very critical of the theories you introduced. You were not really interested in just disseminating them. But didn't you have the opposite effect? Didn't you convince people to be aware of theories you yourself were critical about?
Well, I think that was part of my intention. I think the book *Introduction* genuinely wanted to disseminate interesting ideas about Literature, even those that I didn't personally entirely agree with, but to do so in a positive but critical way, which wasn't *just* critical but also positive. I've always objected publicly to the cult of theory as an end in itself, which is not at all necessarily radical. Or the fact that theory, particularly in the United States, has become a kind of precious commodity, although actually less and less so today. I have a book coming out in September called *After Theory*…

- *After Theory*, so it's over…
Oh, no, one has to be careful about this. I think that theory of a certain kind always has something to do. But theory in the sense of what happened in the years between, let's say, 1965 and 1980 was really a huge phenomenon and I think that should be looked at historically and understood. So we're not 'after theory' in the sense that we all go back to whatever we were doing then. But, for example, I've always had very ambiguous relations with things like post-structuralism and in some ways, I think there are many useful ideas, and in

other ways, ideas I want to criticise. So I'd characterise the book as being ambivalent to them. I wasn't simply trying to do what Marxists do, if you notice there's nothing explicit about Marxism in the book, because Marxism is the frame. I think a lot of the ideas are non-Marxist theory; there were quite a lot of radical ideas around feminism, for example, which are not perceived as Marxist and I think that particularly now when the left is much less central than it was before, one can't afford to be puristic with theory or politics in general. Perhaps there was a time when the left was riding high in the late 1960s and early 1970s, when I did some of my early work, when one could afford to be rather purist, and rigorous and exclusivist, because all one thought of was the winning game. One of the advantages of not feeling one is on the winning game is that one is less exclusivist. Anything that can help, whether it comes with the label Marxist or socialist, it doesn't matter.

- Edward Said says that contemporary theory has become a kind of bazaar. You just pick up whatever you need and there is no political commitment at all.

Yes, the consumerist's theory, apart from what one can mean by the commodification of it. I'm not sure, since a lot of conservatives portray theory in that way. It's true, I think, to a marginal extent. I don't think it's true as regards what many students have been doing. Many students come seriously wanting over the years some more fundamental and ambitious way of thinking about what they're doing, and theory is just the word which answers to that, that fulfils that serious demand, a demand that you expected. They don't want to be taught the novel by teachers who never even stopped to ask themselves what a novel is, and I'm not saying there's any simple answer to that, but at least they raise a question. I see theory as pushing questions a stage back: it doesn't just say 'is this a good poem?', it asks 'what do we mean by a good poem?'; it doesn't just say 'is this a moving tragedy?', it asks 'what is it to be tragic?'. It's not replacing criticism, it's asking questions that go one level deeper. Of course, you can commodify that, as you can commodify most things, but I think a lot of students would turn to it because they are already serious, whereas in the case of other students that I had chiefly at Oxford, who came from conservative middle-class backgrounds, I could almost see, almost pinpoint the moment when they saw the possibility of another stream and then they backed away. It wasn't gonna help them read, it wasn't gonna help them with their careers; they saw a new distance looming up and they turned away. If that's their decision, then that's their decision. But I think students always come to several cross-roads there and one's job is to define what possibilities they may meet.

- Here in Spain, Literature is part of a degree in Language and Literature (Filología) so we mostly teach students close reading. When we look at British students, who are privileged to choose to study only Literature if they wish the impression we have is that they know plenty of Theory (though maybe not plenty of Literature). How much Theory do we have to teach and how do we combine it with close reading?

I suppose it varies, I don't have much contact these days with other graduate studies so I'm not quite sure. My impression is that most Literature syllabuses both in Britain and in America are a mixture of both, though students would expect theory. But syllabuses remain in some ways quite traditional, you know?

They move from Chaucer to T.S. Eliot. Your question implies an opposition between close reading, on the one hand, and theory, on the other, and I understand what you mean, yet, why should this be?

- How would you teach basic reading and critical skills if you're teaching theory at the same time?
Let's put it the other way around. For me, any theory which doesn't come to terms with the word on the page is pretty useless, so I don't accept fundamentally that distinction. In practice, of course, one often finds himself having to accept that distinction, because one hasn't got time to do for everything but I think fundamentally it's a false distinction. Fredric Jameson, the American Marxist critic, once said that theory had a responsibility to come to terms with the shape of the sentences and I think that's absolutely right. So, any theory which can't read the text closely is not for me a very valid theory. Close reading is not an alternative for me to theory. There are different kinds of close reading: some of them informed by certain assumptions, others informed by other assumptions. There is for me no neutral close reading, we always read with assumptions of a kind, but in practice I agree this depends on how you strike a balance, how you organise your time. I'd say that there is probably a danger that students approach Literature simply to extract ideas from it.

- What about aesthetics? How do we judge?
I don't think aesthetics is just about judgement, though it *is* about judging; it's about many, many things about what people thought. I've spent my whole career as a teacher telling my students that there is something that I would call the politics of art, and not just ideas, not just content and not just form in the formalistic sense or a narrow sense, either. I always felt that a student could grasp the concept of the politics of art, that he or she could make a real breakthrough if they could grasp the way in which ideas, politics, ideology were aligned in these various microcosmic structures of the text, then they achieve something, they'd crack it.

- You have yourself written mainly about canonical texts. Why's that?
I plead guilty to that. I have no real defence for that: I was brought up in that way. It was only with the subsequent generation to me, which in Britain may mean polytechnics, that popular culture, not only canonical culture, was taken very seriously. I was of a generation that tried to do a little theory from that, but having been brought up in a different kind of practice and I really never got beyond that. I mean, I'm now writing a book called *The English Novel: An Introduction* and I'm afraid is about Jane Austen, the Brontës, Lawrence, Hardy… Obviously, I think a great deal of non-canonical work done is very valuable, some by my students sometimes, but at the same time I think people make a kind of fetish of the idea of the canon. Yet, you could take the whole set of non-canonical works –say Toni Morrison or Native American Literature– and you could teach them in a conservative way. Why should the people assume that simply because the work is non-canonical you're gonna teach it so that it will have a radical effect? A lot depends on the way you process it; equally, as I tried to do at Oxford, you could take a canonical work and show how they could have a very subversive effect. If I was George Bush, I would not like to read *King Lear* with a proper understanding. Of course that would never happen

because George Bush a) would never read *King Lear* and b) even if he did he wouldn't understand a word of it. But if he did understand it, I should think he ought to tremble. So, it's not just a matter of the latest non-canonical writer to attract attention, a lot depends on the frame within which you read them. I don't think you should make too much of a fuss about the canon. Of course, it's important to work outside the canon; at the same time, again, practically speaking our time is very limited. And there's no reason to assume that if everybody takes to writing their masters thesis on the Simpsons it's going to be more revolutionary than writing about Jane Austen.

- But what I really miss as a teacher and researcher is a comparative method. I mean people shouldn't have to choose between high Culture and Literature and popular culture. There should be a way to work jointly with that material. What really worries me is that there are huge segments of, for instance, contemporary fiction –and I'm thinking of fantasy– which are not judged on aesthetic or formal grounds because of sheer prejudice and some of them are both popular and valuable. Martin Amis perhaps shows best in his volume of collected reviews, *The War against Cliché*, that the same critic can write intelligently about Jane Austen and *Jurassic Park*. Why don't we do that at the university?

Well, actually, some theories, and I'm thinking of structuralism and post-structuralism, have actually cut across the divide between high and low. Roland Barthes can write about a wrestling match using the same codes and terms he uses to write about Balzac. Those theories are indifferent as to their objects, they're indifferent as to the status of their objects. I think that's very important. All I'm saying is one must insert a certain warning, a kind of health warning. One could imagine a whole generation of people writing their masters theses on the Simpsons, which would make no difference, as I said. What happened with the revolutionary avantguard in art was that it said 'let's just not produce a different kind of artefact, let's rethink the whole conception of art itself'. I think the best kind of theory is not just saying 'let's work with different texts' but as you say 'let's rethink the idea of the text'.

- Yes but what happens to value in the process? In a sense, the Simpsons are paid attention to because they are top creations of the popular culture they represent so well.

I think that the Simpsons *are* very valuable, I think they're one of the great American satires of our time. And I also think that criticism of course must deal with value. Value is part of our social life, people make value judgements all the time. They say, you know?, that David Beckham is a better footballer than others…

- Everybody's is canonical-minded.

That's absolutely acceptable, it's not wrong at all. What is dreadful is to find that kind of criticism or critic who shrink from making value judgements at all and then makes value judgements all the time, as making value judgements is the most popular thing in the world. I don't think the question is one of making value judgements or not. You do it even without thinking about it. Value is part of our language and it's not just saying 'this is good, that's bad', it's all about language. I think that what theory tried to raise is the question of where value comes from.

We do it all the time but we don't stop to think of what this involves. And I think that the best theory won't say don't judge –of course, you will– rather it will ask you to be more self-conscious perhaps of the particularity and the changeability of the criteria on which you base your judgements. You think that Shakespeare is the greatest writer of all, well, fine, then don't forget that Samuel Johnson, perhaps the greatest critic in the 18th century, didn't agree.

3. Culture

- I'll tell my students, they will love it. So, do you call yourself a Literary or a Cultural critic?
I don't know. I think all of these categories are arbitrary. My chair is called 'Chair of Cultural Theory'. I chose that title.

- You chose it?
I did, I was given the choice. I think that in, for instance, the work I've done on tragedy I tried to tackle questions in a wider way than just tragedy in Literature or on the stage: ideas of tragedy in philosophy, ideas of tragedy in everyday life, political tragedy. I think all the most interesting work I've been doing for many years has been going on in some ill-defined area between official disciplines.

- You can get away with that indefinition in Britain or in the Anglo-American context, but not in Spain where we don't have a single Professor of Culture in the same sense you are one.
Even before there was Cultural Studies in Britain, I think that a lot of interesting work – like the early work of Raymond Williams– was not really definable. If you ask, what was he? Was he a sociologist? Was he a cultural theorist? Was he a literary critic? Was he a cultural historian? It's interestingly impossible to answer that question. A new discursive formation was taking shape for which there was and there is still no definitive name, there are provisional names: Culture, Theory, Cultural Studies. None of them are quite accurate, nobody quite knows what they mean. We've inherited a very highly demarcated traditional academic structure and it's been blurring at the edges for some years, and that's not only because of internal criteria, it's also due to changes in society: demands from students who hold different assumptions, as well, and this post-modern blurring between high and low cultures. Nowadays I often have interesting conversations with fellow academics, and only later I learn that he was a geographer, she was a sociologist, it hardly matters. A new formation has been in the process of developing and giving it a name is the least of our worries, you just keep the thing going.

- So, you would say that in general the impact of Cultural Studies on Literary Studies is positive. That they have renewed the way we study Literature, that they're not the enemy.
Oh, no, I don't think so. I think Literature must be taught in the context of wider culture. But, of course, once again, Cultural Studies is a floating signifier, you know?, it can mean lots of different things, some of them a lot better than others. It can be almost in some American contexts a sort of academic adjunct to the media. In some places in Australia it's what they call Cultural Policy,

where, in a sense, cultural theorists are almost like unofficial advisers to the Government. And it can be cultural critique in the tradition set by Birmingham. I think there's no single thing for Cultural Studies to say, whether positive or negative, as in moves in many different ways. I remember talking to a Scandinavian who claimed she had been taught Cultural Studies at school when she was 8 and she recalled one of the children saying 'oh, not Cultural Studies', he would do anything but that!

- What do you think of the fact that *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* (Leitch at al. 2001) excludes Auerbach, I. A. Richards, Leavis or Trilling, but includes Homi Bhabha, Helène Cixous, Stuart Hall and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick?

Of course, there's been some enormously important theory from the United States, which in many ways has been the avantguard in this respect. But it's also a search for the last work in fashion, and who is in and who is out, and that's very objectionable. Of course, people you mentioned, say Frye or Trilling, the great classical humanists, the liberal critics, argue for the importance of popular realism and the low life in it far more so than say someone like Homi Bhabha, who, by the way, was once my student and whom I have an enormous respect for. Once again, some of those critics who are today fashionably excluded were actually far more radical than some of the fashionably included. Also what I think people of today sometimes forget is that the liberal humanist tradition in its time was a revolutionary one. Liberal humanism, however questionable some of its assumptions may be today, was the ideology of the great, progressive, revolutionary bourgeoisie for whom Marx had so much praise despite criticising it. That was known as dialectical thinking. One had to embrace the riches of the great liberal, middle-class tradition and at the same time as one transformed it. I think one of the great loses of post-modern theory, if that's what it is, has been the loss of that dialectical habit of mind, which is not just saying 'on the one hand there's this, on the other hand there's that' but seeing a relation between the opposites, seeing that the bourgeoisie was at once a revolutionary and a repressive class, seeing as Marx would say that modernity is at once a tale of exhilarating liberation, emancipation, from all kinds of slaveries and, as for Marx, once long nightmare. One reason I'm a Marxist still is I don't hear anybody else say these things again. Again, liberal progressives say 'modernity is the greatest thing that ever happened'; I hear post-modernists, mainly conservatives, say 'it's more of a disaster'. But I hear no third position nobody say actually 'both are true' and I'll teach you the relation and o you'll be able to understand the nature of the world around you.

- Is it true that Theory is excessively dominated by the United States? And if that's the case, what should Britain's role be? Look towards Europe or towards the USA?

I once spoke at a conference on theory in Nigeria, years ago, the very first theory conference ever in Nigeria. I was talking about post-colonialism, the Nigerians were talking about the floating signifier. Just imagine the situation of any young graduate student from, say Malaysia, Korea, or China, working away on their subjects and some day they hear 'I suppose you're working on post-colonialism or ethnicity'. Where do they hear that from? California, Boston, Washington, and they take over an orthodoxy – post-modern, post-colonial,

whatever you call it– which is bred in the West, and not only that, but bred in the West by people who are very opposed to ethnocentricity. It's an enormously ironic situation. I had once a South African student of mixed race who came to me one day to ask me why everybody in Britain assumed she was working on the literature of the apartheid.

- Everybody assumed that because she was South African she could only have one interest.
Exactly. It is in its own way a situation as oppressive as regards academy as the previous one. The worst situation is that in which American exports post-modernist culture along with the Coca-Cola. In Beijing they have something called The Institute of Post-modern Studies. Well, what Post-modern means in China may not well be quite what it means over here. The West have to be very careful, avoiding a new kind of cultural imperialism, which is not the British Council taking copies of Dickens to the natives, which is what it used to be, but the British Council taking copies of Homi Bhabha's works to the natives, or, for that matter, volumes of my own work or anybody's work of that kind. People in those societies have to find their own space and work on what matters to them and they haven't to have their agenda set by the West, particularly by Westerners who think they're being non-ethnocentric.

- We don't have to accept Anglo-American models at all.
Yes, any idea that you do export will always be transformed by whom receives it, that's part of what one would expect, it won't come back to you in a recognisable way and that's right.

- Is there a satisfactory relationship between English criticism and European criticism? Or are these isolated worlds?
They've been drawing close together. I talk in Europe a lot, I talk to Europeans that come to Britain. No, I think one thing we've gained with theory is that it has become a sort of lingua franca, it's been a kind of universal language.

- I wonder!
Well, maybe not necessarily everywhere. I'm going in June to Bulgaria; now, if there was simply English criticism and Bulgarian criticism we probably wouldn't share a language and I probably wouldn't be going. But obviously if I'm going it's because there are certain ideas both parties are interested in. And so, I have found that one of the advantages of theory has been a certain kind of cosmopolitanism. I don't mean that you find it everywhere and certainly you find resistance to it, but it's created a new kind of internationalism.

- Yes, but it doesn't work both ways. Everybody knows about Anglo-American criticism. But say a Bulgarian produces wonderful Literary Theory and unless this Bulgarian published in English and is the right journals it goes nowhere.
Of course there was one Bulgarian who did do that greatly.

- Julia Kristeva! But she made a name for herself in France and in French.
Yes, she's very unusual. And, then, she seems to be having trouble remembering her Bulgarian to speak to her mother or so she told me. But,

you're absolutely right, it's been largely a one-way traffic, though that's not entirely the case; there have been important focus of theory produced outside the West. Nevertheless, I think of the new networks opening up, it's no longer a nation locked into its own national Literature, that's an advantage. But, then, of course, think of France. I think my books had been translated into twenty languages before they were translated into French. Why? Because the French can't imagine that the English could be writing interesting theory. The French are extremely Francocentric in some of their academic and intellectual approaches. So ironically, some of the problems have not been between Britain and Bulgaria but across the channel. I think that one role that English intellectual life has played is actually to bring together the German and the French traditions, because quite often they've not spoken to each other. They're both extraordinarily rich in their own right, yet how often have Habermas and Derrida interacted? I think that part of Britain's role in this whole Anglo-Third World flow has been that of fulcrum between the different European traditions.

- A colleague and I are trying to put together a meeting of European specialists in fantasy from different countries and we can't agree on what the official language for that should be.
Well, it's gonna have to be Bulgarian, then.

- How should theory work, on the one hand in relation to the writer and, on the other hand, in relation to the reader?
I'll try to be brief about that. As far as the writer goes, one of the aspects of the Modernist, or rather, post-Modernist period, I think, one of the many borders that have broken down is that between the critic and the writer. Writers are becoming more conscious of critics and criticism or theory; at the same time the critics –theorists in particular– are writing as though they were creative writers, you know?, people like Derrida. There's a type of theory which is not just theory about Modernism but is Modernist theory in the sense of theory which tries to write differently. There comes a certain crisis when theory or criticism can only do what it needs to do by adopting some of the techniques of Literature.

- Does this mean that criticism has become a literary genre in itself?
I don't know what to think about that. At least, it's no longer seen as a kind of humble handmaid to the text, which I think was too limiting. It may be too ambitious to say criticism is a thing in its own right, but I think it's too limiting to say it is only wholly justified by the need to explicate the text. Nietzche, Heidegger, Derrida, Wittgenstein… you have a whole number of philosophers who can only say what they need by writing differently, in a more allegorical, imaginative, textual, poetical fashion, whatever you call it. And that was happening just at the same time as writers –Thomas Mann, D.H. Lawrence– were becoming more conscious about theory.

- More critical.
Yes, and at the same time as the work of art, in order to be authentic, had to reflect upon itself in a Modernist way and I see theory very much as a kind of self-reflection; in a sense, just when theory is becoming more poetic, more aesthetic, the aesthetic avantguard was becoming more theoretical. I think that's a very rich, powerful convergence, really. I once wrote a novel and I write

plays, sometimes people ask me why I don't write more novels. The answer is that I find writing criticism enormously creative, fulfilling, and I don't feel any difference between writing a novel and writing about tragedy.

- You don't?
No. I think I'm one of those strange people who are probably for good or bad just called 'writer' in the sense that what I write is far less important to me than the fact of writing. I happen to have ended up writing about culture and tragedy, but I might have ended up writing about something else.

- There's a sense of humour in your criticism that I miss very much in other critics. I wonder why academic criticism is generally so dry.
Not to speak of left criticism, heavy-handed, purist. Well, I've been accused of being too frivolous, of not being serious…

- Ah, the key word.
The French, people like Derrida, are unserious but in a very serious way. There' s a very Gallic, French way of being playful but in a very serious way, whereas I want to be playful in a playful way. I would like to think this has something to do with my Irish background. I come from a family of raconteurs, tale-tellers, wits, amateur musicians, amateur actors –I myself acted a little bit when I was younger– and I think perhaps it's something to do with Irish culture, which was kept alive not so much in writing but in oral ways: in jokes, stories, in wit. Perhaps almost unconsciously, I've plugged into that tradition in my own writing. I think I was only able to do it at a certain point; when you're younger and you are establishing yourself you have to play by the rules of the game and I look back on some of my early radical works and I'm shocked by how conventional they're in their methods, or their tones, or their styles. And then I can see a certain point where the style begins to loosen up and becomes more writerly, perhaps I hope more humorous. Another important contribution I think is feminism. I very rarely have written directly on feminism –my book on Richardson is the nearest I came to it but I think that feminism was an enormous sort of indirect influence on me, showing me that this very masculine sort of theory…

- Abstraction.
Well, abstraction has its place but, indeed, it needn't be quite as intimidating a place as people think. And I think that feminism in all kinds of unconscious, indirect ways influenced me, not in the sense of sending me out to write on Angela Carter or whatever, but in deeper, more important ways, in showing me a new style of approaching some subjects.

- That you could be personal and not necessarily less serious.
Yes, exactly. Nowadays, of course in America, some of this way of being personal has been carried to a ridiculous point, to a sort of confessional criticism, where you break off every paragraph saying that you've just eaten a ham sandwich or you're seeing your husband washing the car. In America they always take everything to extremes.

- Can a competent contemporary writer perfectly ignore academic Literary Criticism? Or do you have to train yourself?
I don't think so. I do think there've been many fine writers, and there still are, who know nothing about criticism and why should they? On the other hand, I do think that creative writers often have a prejudice against academics, which is not always justified. Some academics they're right to be prejudiced against, or some kinds of academics, but I find in particular within the company of certain writers a sort of unthinking and dogmatic assumption that academics or critics can give them nothing, that 'we are doing the real creative thing'.

- Well, when a discipline declares 'the death of the author', what can you expect? Possibly authors resent that and miss a more personal attention? They don't like being told that the text is the thing and the author is nothing.
Although some great writers like D.H. Lawrence had said that themselves: 'don't trust the teller, trust the tale.' I think many great writers have understood intuitively at least that there was this distinction, as the Italians say, between the man who creates and the man who lives. So I think that the death of the author is maybe a much older and more understood doctrine than we think. I think that a more arrogant assumption is held by some artists who think that creativity is limited to them, that really is prejudiced. When did the point come historically in the West when suddenly politics, social thought, philosophy were no longer creative? Some new and quite rigid distinctions were set up. What kind of a society is this whose ordinary life seems not to be creative and creativity is reserved for a very small area? That's the kind of attitude I object to. I once had the misfortune of being with Fredric Jameson, the only two critics at a conference of poets in the United States, and we just about escaped with our lives. It was very, very funny as well as frightening, but I'm afraid that for the wrong reasons: none of them had read a thing we'd written. All they needed to know was that we were critics and so we were dull, anti-life and they were dynamic, creative.

- How can criticism reach common readers and what can it do for them?
Criticism can reach them by being what is now called reader-friendly. I try to do that, and I'm angry that so many, even radical, critics don't try to do that more. I think it's the responsibility of the left critic to try to communicate with an audience beyond the academic. I understand that for the younger academic that's very difficult, they're still making their ways, and it's difficult anyway, but some of the best responses I've had to my work have been from people who've never seen the inside of the university.

- But what are the proper channels? The media?
The problem is this: criticism in the 18th century and certainly in the 19th century was a public discourse; it didn't just mean a private reading of texts, it was part of the public sphere. The critic as a man or woman of letters was a public figure. It's some societies, like Ireland, for various historical reasons, that continued rather later: Yeats is a fine example of a man who was poet, critic, politician, philosopher in a sense. What's happened in the modern period is that criticism has been driven into universities. But I think it's important to remember that criticism didn't begin in the universities: it began in the public sphere, in the

journals. And it didn't begin as being just about Literature, it was about morals, life, society… Radical criticism has tried to go back to that tradition. We ironically are more traditional in that sense than some of our poets, we don't think we're *avantgarde* people; on the contrary, what we should be trying to do with criticism is to take it back to its roots in a wider public sphere and in something wider than Literature. How you do that in a media-dominated, technological age is certainly difficult. But I think that trying to de-intimidate the discourse is a first step towards this.

- Perhaps reviews are the key, but not in the way most are today which are advertisements.
Well, I've done some work for television, radio and reviewing in Britain. I value that because it's as though that is the only place where the public sphere in a minor way survives. I've just published this month a collection of reviews I've done for the *London Review of Books* over the years and I'm very glad of that because, as I say in the introduction, it's a place where public issues can be discussed in a companionable way, and I think that the bringing together of these two terms is what I'm interested in. The public sphere in its classical form tried to do that, and I think it's still our responsibility in much less propitious times to aim for that kind of style and not just to write left criticism in the same old academic way.

- Martin Amis says that he writes reviews because he wants to keep up standards… and to prepare the ground for his own work. My last question for you, which critics should we read and do you know of any disciple of yours?
A friend once told me that he heard someone in a London pub describe himself as an eagletonian but I still don't know to this day what that means. I don't think I've started a school; I hope I have had some influence. An author who has disciples, say F.R. Leavis, may discover that some disciples are the most embarrassing people to have. I don't know about critics. I would say that there are a few people who are still fulfilling the classical role of the intellectual, in the sense of trying to be public figures speaking out on a range of issues. People whom I admire very much like Noam Chomsky, Edward Said, Habermas in his way, Raymond Williams certainly did that in his day, Susan Sontag. People like Michel Foucault may say that this kind of classical intellectual is dead, we have a new situation; maybe but oddly these dead people are still walking.

- It's funny how criticism tries to focus on the text, not the author, but then it's done by very strong personalities.
I think the commodification of theory has extended to the commodification of the theorist in an age of manufacturing personalities. Yet a lot of these people I've mentioned are not interested in that, they're highly dedicated people who have devoted to their career to speaking the truth to power, as the phrase goes, or trying to. There's still a role for the public intellectual, and that's why I say we should be pushing criticism as far as we can in that direction.

- Give it back to the people.
Go back to what criticism began as being.

Books by Terry Eagleton (so far…)

- *The New Left Church [as Terence Eagleton]* (1966)
- *Shakespeare and Society: Critical Studies in Shakespearean Drama* (1967)
- *Exiles and Émigrés: Studies in Modern Literature* (1970)
- *The Body as Language: Outline of a New Left Theology* (1970)
- *Myths of Power: A Marxist Study of the Brontës* (1975)
- *Criticism & Ideology* (1976)
- *Marxism and Literary Criticism* (1976)
- *Walter Benjamin, or Towards a Revolutionary Criticism* (1981)
- *The Rape of Clarissa: Writing, Sexuality, and Class Struggle in Samuel Richardson* (1982)
- *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (1983)
- *The Function of Criticism* (1984)
- *Saints and Scholars* (1987; a novel)
- *Raymond Williams: Critical Perspectives* (1989; editor)
- *Saint Oscar* (1989; a play about Oscar Wilde)
- *The Significance of Theory* (1989)
- *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (1990)
- *Nationalism, Colonialism, and Literature* (1990)
- *Ideology: An Introduction* (1991/2007)
- *Wittgenstein: The Terry Eagleton Script, The Derek Jarman Film* (1993)
- *Literary Theory* (1996)
- *The Illusions of Postmodernism* (1996)
- *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger* (1996)
- *Marx* (1997)
- *Crazy John and the Bishop and Other Essays on Irish Culture* (1998)
- *The Idea of Culture* (2000)
- *The Truth about the Irish* (2001)
- *The Gatekeeper: A Memoir* (2002)
- *Sweet Violence: The Idea of the Tragic* (2002)
- *After Theory* (2003)
- *Figures of Dissent: Reviewing Fish, Spivak, Zizek and Others* (2003)
- *The English Novel: An Introduction* (2005)
- *Holy Terror* (2005)
- *The Meaning of Life* (2007)
- *How to Read a Poem* (2007)
- *Trouble with Strangers: A Study of Ethics* (2008)
- *Literary Theory, Anniversary Edition* (2008)
- *Reason, Faith, and Revolution: Reflections on the God Debate* (2009)
- *The Task of the Critic: Terry Eagleton in Dialogue with Matthew Beaumont* (2009)
- *On Evil* (2010)
- *Why Marx Was Right* (2011)
- *The Event of Literature* (2012)
- *Across the Pond: An Englishman's View of America* (2013)
- *How to Read Literature* (2013)
- *Culture and the Death of God* (2014)
- *Hope without Optimism* (2015)
- *Culture* (2016)
- *Materialism* (2017)
- *Radical Sacrifice* (2018)
- *Humour* (2019)