

Review: Terry Eagleton, *The Event of Literature*, Yale University Press, 2012

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Despite the somewhat flippant tone in the introduction to his new book *The Event of Literature*, Terry Eagleton takes the oft derided question ‘can there be a definition of literature?’ very seriously indeed. In attempting, if not necessarily to ultimately define literature, but to take the task seriously, he has produced a timely and thought provoking book which speaks of issues well beyond the sphere of ‘literature’. Whilst this is an often very funny and engaging book it is also one which assumes a knowledge and understanding, not only of the field of literary and cultural studies in the last thirty years but also of philosophical debates about the nature of literature. Eagleton is irritated both by the conservatism of traditional literary studies and the lazy smugness of ‘radical’ cultural theorists. The former assume literature can be defined by its ‘quality’, the latter that only an old duffer could imagine such a thing as literature exists at all. Eagleton’s concern is with challenging the grounds upon which the idea of literature is so summarily dismissed. So what? Why does it matter if an impenetrable cultural theorist insists that a work by Charlotte Bronte is no different to Glee as both are available for interpretation and worthy of study? This is now an old question in literary studies, but unlike twenty nine years ago when Eagleton’s *Literary Theory* was written, the supposed radicalism of the breaking down of distinctions between ‘high’ and ‘popular’ art has become institutionalised. Thus there is an often unquestioned assumption that an attempt

to define literature is somehow deeply suspect. ‘Not all universals or general categories need be oppressive’, Eagleton argues, ‘any more than all difference and specificity are on the side of the angels’.

At the core of Eagleton’s argument is an insistence that is not enough to assume that any attempt to define literature is automatically reactionary and elitist. *How we know what we know*, is at issue here, and Eagleton’s book is a crusading defence of materialist analysis against both the liberal insistence that literature has an inherent moral purpose, and contemporary claims that there is no such thing as either literature or morality. As his devastating critique of the American literary theorist, Stanley Fish, demonstrates, surface ‘radicalism’ is often a cover for highly dubious claims and rubbish politics. *The Event of Literature* is Eagleton’s methodological attempt to fuse a variety of philosophers and literary theorists to shift the intellectual ground of the debates about the nature of literary texts. In his book the notion of literature as a rarefied space *apart* from the squalid realities in which people make their lives is ruthlessly interrogated. The complex relationship between literature and societies from which it emerges is at the centre of Eagleton’s investigation. He convincingly argues that, in both the literary and non literary world, what is or is not ‘literature’ is not an ivory tower debate but an intervention in how we might hope to understand the categorisation of the unequal world in which we live.