



بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم

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تم رفع هذه الرسالة بواسطة / مني مغربي أحمد

بقسم التوثيق الإلكتروني بمركز الشبكات وتكنولوجيا المعلومات دون أدنى

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English Literary Criticism and Continental Theory: a Study of Raymond Williams and Terry Eagleton

A PhD dissertation

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Abstract

There have been recurrent emphases on “the commonplace English empiricism,” i.e. the distaste of the English for theory. These emphases have been concomitant with others on the dependency of English literary criticism on continental ‘influences’ throughout its history. Through a ‘genealogical’ reading of English literary criticism, this study attempts to rethink the terms in which the relation between English literary criticism and continental theory have been posed, recovering those moments which contest this unitary, homogeneous narrative. The study does so, however, not by contrapuntally positing a counter-argument but by exploring the possibility of such moments. For the sake of convenience, the study restricts this investigation of the genealogy of English literary criticism to two English literary critics; namely Raymond Williams and Terry Eagleton. As such, this thesis will be a comparative study of critical theory, which draws extensively on the history of literary criticism. The study approaches the problem posed in terms of Edward Said’s “Travelling Theory” and Michel Foucault’s/Friedrich Nietzsche’s notion of “genealogy”.

Keywords:

English Empiricism, Continental abstraction, history of ideas, archaeology, genealogy, anxiety of influence, "travelling theory", pre-twentieth English literary criticism, Renaissance Italian literary criticism, French neo-classicism, Dryden, German romanticism, Coleridge, Western Marxism, Lacanian psychoanalysis, French feminism, Derridan deconstruction, Williams, cultural materialism, Lukàcs, "totality", Goldmann, genetic structuralism, Gramsci, hegemony, Voloshinov, "historical semantics", Eagleton, Althusserian Marxism, ideology, Benjamin, Habermas, public sphere, Cixous, Irigaray, *écriture féminine*, aesthetic theory, Kant, Adorno

Acknowledgement

And I, who had my head girt with horror, said:

"Master what is that which I hear? and what folk is it that seems so overcome
with its woe?"

And he said to me: "The wretched souls of those who lived without infamy and
without praise maintain this miserable mode. They are mingled with that
caitiff choir of the angels, who were not rebels, nor were faithful to God,
but were for themselves

[. . .]

Let's not speak of them but do thou look and pass on."

(Dante *Divine Comedy*, Hell, Canto III, 17-8)

What is to unfold in this acknowledgement are, in part, redemptive, melancholic reminiscences. Like Walter Benjamin's angel, my head is turned backward. By inscribing those reminiscences, I hope that somehow I would be redeemed. This thesis has been marked by loss. Shortly after the registration of this thesis, **Prof. Radwa Ashour** passed away. **Prof. Faten Morsy**, in her gracious attempt to protect the legacy of Prof. Ashour, part of this legacy, she recognized, was in students whom she left behind, in theses that were left unfinished, most graciously resumed the supervision of this thesis, displaying the same graciousness, decency, kindness and understanding as the late Prof. Ashour.

Throughout **Prof. Morsy** has sustained what Goldmann would describe as the "wager", an act of faith in spite of constant deferrals on my own part. She sustained this faith even as things were at their worst, even as I was literally faltering all around. For that, amongst other things, but mostly for that, I am eternally grateful. (Throughout I have struggled with daunting, lengthy, strenuous blocks that have left traces on the structure of this thesis. Both **Prof. Faten Morsy** and **Dr. Hany Helmy** have been most

patient, and understanding. Prof. Morsy received first drafts, crude and unattended to. She had been an immense help in pointing to problems with structure, and with editing parts of the thesis. In other words, salvaging this thesis has been a "collective" endeavor. I am forever indebted.)

When it comes to **Dr. Hany Helmy** the debt goes so far back in time. It has accumulated over the years. The first time I came to know Dr. Helmy, it was as an undergraduate in my fourth year, in the Faculty of Arts, Tanta University. Dr. Helmy would later advise me to pursue my post-graduate studies. Since then he has always been there, so generous with his time, books and advice. Dr. Helmy's passionate commitment to his vocation as a teacher has persisted over the years. Like Prof. Morsy, he has never wavered in his "wager" even when things were at their worst. The "debt" lingers since then. This is a "debt" which language, parading all its glory and materiality, fails to convey.

This thesis has suffered, as has been briefly noted, the intolerable aftermath of the loss of the late **Prof. Radwa Ashour**. Hopefully she remains a presence throughout its pages, however sadly mediated, refracted that presence may be. Recurrent emphases on the "relevance" of a theoretical utterance, i.e. the practical resonance of utterances in their contexts of articulation and reception, and indeed, in its overall economy, the ideological orientation of this thesis, coincide with the ideological orientation of Prof. Ashour. In its project this thesis has Prof. Ashour written all over it.

In Dante's *Divine Comedy* the most condemned in the Inferno were "those who lived without infamy and without praise" (Dante *Divine Comedy*, Hell, Canto III, 17), in other words, those who have not taken sides, but remained "by themselves". Their fate, according to Dante, was to

remain nameless and to be thrust into oblivion (See the very epigraph to this acknowledgement). Prof. Radwa Ashour, like Dante, believed in taking sides. Her "alignment", or, as the title of Raymond Williams' novel puts it, "loyalties" were with those whom Fanon called "the wretched of the earth". She is in company with those men and women who, as Gramsci would have put it, have not "abandon[ed] their positions, even among the ruins. . ." (Gramsci 235). In Ashour's writings, one can trace that "unmistakable" "sound of that voice which, in speaking as itself, is speaking, necessarily, for more than itself. . ." (Williams "The Writer" 87). Like Williams, Prof. Ashour believed in, as Williams puts it with reference to Marx, "the transition from a possession of knowledge to its *transforming* use" (Williams "Marx" 198) [Emphasis Added]. Prof. Ashour, as bell hooks might have put it, wrote, and "t[ough]t to transgress." She was above all a multi-dimensional character. Some of her students have taken up her resilience, others her (com)passion and commitment, others her unorthodox approach to theory and literature. But none of her students is her. And I consider this to be her feat rather than her defeat.

Along with Prof. Ashour, **Prof. Hoda Gindi**, in Cairo University, made such a powerful impact. These two women professors have taught me how to develop an argument without ever using the word "argument". Almost twenty years have passed since I last saw Prof. Gindi and her voice still resonates in my mind, highlighting limitations in this thesis, particularly her insightful remark "*less is more*". This is telling of the powerful lingering impact she has had. What is most fascinating about Prof. Gindi is the way she teaches: subtly, quietly, without much fuss, vanity or pretense. I remember her as a fascinating mind that challenges,

meets half way, a mind that beautifully *suggests* without ever explicitly dictating.

Dina Hosny is a co-Don Quixotean. In our "journey" together we have exchanged the roles of Don Quixote and Sancho Panza. Whenever one of us is "battered" in one of those episodes of madness in a battle with "the Knight of the White Moon" or with "windmills", the "wise" other comes to the rescue and to console, at times knowing that all this is in vain. For the "madness" of a Don Quixote is beyond repair. Yet we stick together to the end of the journey: two Don Quixoteans reflecting on "time" as "time" walks us by.

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Preface

"I belong irreducibly to my time" (Fanon *Black Skin, White Masks* Cited in Gates "Critical Fanonism" 141)

"And the whole essence of Gramsci that he started off by saying: "Right what we hoped for hasn't happened. Now, where do we go?" (Hobsbawm, Eric "Eric Hobsbawm on Gramsci's Marxism

(1987) 1/7" at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X6Pb0Ttkerw&t=164s> (1987)).

"[T]hinking "disinterestedly" or study for its own sake are difficult for me. . ." (Antonio Gramsci Cited in Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith "Preface" x)

"You know I read a story. . . . Early in the century, last century, General Pershing, did you ever hear? Rough guy, rough guy. They had a terrorism problem. And this whole thing with swine and animals and pigs. [. . . .] And General Pershing was a rough guy. And he sits on his horse and he is very astute And the year was early 1900s. And this was a terrible problem. They were having a terrorism problem, just like we do. And he caught fifty terrorists who did tremendous damage and killed many people. He took fifty bullets and he dipped them in pigs' blood and he had his men load their riffles. And he lined up the fifty people. And they shot forty-nine of those.... And the fiftieth person, he said: "You go back to your people and you tell them what happened." And for twenty-five years, there wasn't a problem'.

[Crowds' cheers are heard]" (Donald Trump, "Donald Trump tells the story of General Pershing" at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DQMFSvjezzg>)

"Can't breathe, mamma" (George Floyd)

Trump's "terrorists", his "swine and animals and pigs" were in fact members of the Filibbini Islamic resistance against occupation; his idol, General Pershing was involved in the extermination of Red Indians and the bloody suppression of Filibbini Islamic dissent. Trump's invocation of this ideologically refracted incident from "history books", one may say blunt appropriation, in which his authoritarian vision inflects this "historic" "event", crystallises the context in which this thesis is articulated. This process of "crystallisation" becomes more tragically apparent when juxtaposed to the faint voice of George Floyd, an African-American whose

murder is situated, and one may say, pre-empted precisely in this context of hate, discrimination, suppression represented by Trump's utterance.

This thesis has been laboured in a moment of defeat. The Donald Trump invoked "historical" incident, the accuracy of some of its details has been historically questioned, is representative of the authoritarian, monologic discourse that predominated the scene, the main theses of which are the valorization of the interests and values of the privileged few, the discursive exclusion, economic and political crushing of those whom Franz Fanon called "the wretched of the earth". This thesis is born at a moment, "as Adorno's heretical opening [would have] put. . . it" (Ashton xiv), "after the attempt to change the world miscarried" (Adorno *Negative* Cited in Ashton xiv). Its is a moment in which the ideal of the "nation" has been invoked, celebrated, staged and paraded by power to mystify its own economy of exclusion, its own bracketing, if not erasure, of the dignity and very "humanity" of its "subjects" who dare to challenge its definitions, "sacred" subscriptions, narratives of the world. In short, it is a moment in which the "nation" functioned as a legitimatizing ideology for suppressing dissent.

I have lived in a moment in which, as Marx puts it, "[i]nstead of society having conquered a new content for itself, it seems that the *state* only returned to its oldest form, to the shamelessly simple domination of the sabre and the cowl" (Marx *The Eighteenth* 13). With consensus breaking down, power resorts to coercion, subsequently netting its own hegemony all over again. Then a moment ensues in which the people are "massed," their consciousness interpellated. People become agents in their own oppression. Consent is re-manufactured. An emergent "public sphere" is annulated and a hegemonic space is created in which reactionary

dominant ideas are circulated as the "natural" order of things. The myth of historical progress is invoked to validate the status quo. History thus narrated as a sacred narrative of progress is, Benjamin was to remind us, "a tool of the ruling class" ("Theses" 255).) Against myths of historical progress, against narratives of historical linear evolutionary continuity (often invoked by power to justify its *raison d'être*), Benjamin was to posit a conception of history as a narrative defined by rupture and discontinuities. In a densely metaphorical passage, Benjamin writes:

A Klee painting named "Angelus Novus" shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and *make whole what has been smashed*. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress. (Benjamin 257-58) [Emphasis added]

The result of this "flash" of disjoined heterogeneous episodes that cannot be synthesized into totalized closure is what Benjamin calls "illumination".

It is imperative to document this brief moment, even though it is defined by sorrowful defeat, or rather, as Gramsci would have put it, "a series of defeats". Benjamin's above-cited densely allegorical passage fully conjures this evasive brief moment of revolutionary rupture. "[R]eminiscences", moments of reflective breaks are imperative. For by conjuring up a scene of devastation, one hopes to prevent the disaster:

A nation, like an individual, has to be able to recount a reasonable narrative of itself, without either despair or presumption if it fails to work through the traumatic points of its history, it will find itself caught between repression or disavowal on the one hand and neurosis on the

other. What we cannot truly remember, so Freud warns us, we are condemned to compulsively repeat. . . . (Eagleton "The Irish Sublime" 31)

So "the Irish Eagleton" reminds us. This context of "defeat" renders "second reflection" an imperative and silently haunts this thesis. Otherwise, we fall into the trap of "resignation in the face of reality" (Adorno *Negative*).

The former formulations are cast in Marx's, Althusser's, Gramsci's, Habermas', Benjamin's, and Adorno's terms. "Theory", in its *main* bulk a 'Western' import, spoke in deciphered echoes that signified its gloomy relevance to my communal time and place. It is at those crossroads that this thesis is laboured. What I would like to emphasise is the *relevance* of what ensues in this thesis to my time and place, however refracted and muted this relevance may seem. And with the question of relevance there comes the question of the historical contexts of utterances, their moments of articulation and reception. Both questions are imperative in a thesis in which the problematic of, in Edward Said's terms, "travelling theory" is posed. Throughout this narrative of, in Francis Mulhern's words, "the complex cultural relation between Britain and Continental Europe" (Mulhern "Introduction to Goldmann" 38) that unfolds in this thesis, both emphases resonate.

This emphasis on the historical context of utterances is a main premise that runs throughout this thesis. The question of relevance that governs the itineraries of "travelling theory" cannot be over-emphasized. The various moments and episodes in which the English invoked continental theory were, as it will be suggested throughout this thesis, informed by ideological imperatives of the historical moment in which the various waves of the continental paradigm were received as well as by a

"need" to fill a gap in their indigenous critical "tradition". In other words, it is not by accident that theories "rise," "travel", reign and "fall from grace".

I put forward the argument – and here I make a relative departure from Foucault – that radical ruptures, discontinuities, in the history of thought, are often *informed* – to avoid the mechanical “respond” – by “huge historical dislocations” (Con Davis and Robert Schleifer 22). (Foucault in his genealogical analysis seems to suggest that such ruptures in “the history of ideas”, or to put it in his own terms, "systems of thought", are a matter of internal rules that govern discursive formations. The socio-historical context framing, bracketing these changes remains to a large extent, an *aporia* in Foucault’s work). This thesis shares the now dominant “belief that social and cultural contexts frame all critical approaches” (Con Davis and Robert Schleifer “Introduction to “What is Criticism 21), and indeed all utterances, including this thesis.

If the fragment of a narrative introduced in this "Preface" is perceived as an "alien" element out of context with the project of this thesis, one should note that it is in line with Walter Benjamin's 'technique of "quoting out of context," of pressing disparate elements together to produce an effectively illuminating constellation . . . , a tool which lays bare what might otherwise be passed by and remain concealed to any other approach" (Bullock 156). (Early on Friedrich Schlegel was to strive for an "aesthetic 'discipline' of philosophy" (Michel and Assenka Oksiloff 170), an order in which the boundaries between the aesthetic, the philosophical, the religious, the political, the worldly and the transcendental are transgressed. To this order, he ascribed the attribute "magic". He defined it thus: "A discipline that combines politics as well as religion, that combines all arts and sciences into one, that would thus be the art of producing the divine,

this could only be called MAGIC" (Cited in Michel and Assenka Oksiloff 170). (One can only marvel at the extent to which the worldly penetrated the so-called transcendental aesthetics of the Romantics). This transgression of disciplinary boundaries, an ideal of a heterogeneous pastiche that transgresses the boundaries between the ideal and the worldly, has defined the amalgam of work, known as "Cultural Studies", a discipline that was born out of the work of Raymond Williams.

Theory ("abstract thinking") is born in dialogue with reality. Whatever boundaries are constructed between the theoretical and the historical are to be transgressed if the initial subversive impetus of what has come to be known as "theory", as opposed to the fetish "Theory", is retrieved. It is only thus, i.e. only when brought into contact with the social, that theory survives beyond the current moment of so-called "post-theory". (Lukács makes reference to "the way society has developed and to the political theories this development has produced..." (Lukács "Preface to the New Edition (1967)" xxvii). He later writes, "[t]hese facts meant that I had to re-think my theoretical position" (Lukács "Preface to the New Edition (1967)" xxviii). And Adorno writes: "Theory does not contain answers to everything; it reacts to the world, which is faulty to the core" (Adorno *Negative* 31).)

As I conceive of it, "do[ing] theory," as Ann Ferguson puts it in her (1994) 'Twenty Years of Feminist Philosophy' is a project undertaken "in the hopes that understanding the [and here I displace Ferguson's "patriarchal" with what I view as a more inclusive category, [social]] world [with all its injustice, hierarchies,] would aid us in developing the tools to change it" (Ferguson 'Twenty Years' 197). (This is a seemingly problematic proposition in the light of the growing "theory/practice split"