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Title of the book: *The Event of Literature*
Author: Terry Eagleton
Publisher: London: Yale University Press, 2012
Pages: 255

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Terry Eagleton's *The Event of Literature* (2012) is currently in discussion in the academic forums of literature and theory across the world. In the book, he has made a modest, liberal and pragmatic approach referring to the parameters of select Western philosophical canons, common linguistic and literary theories with admixture of the commonsense understandings of literature in our time. We know that in his earlier books like *Literary Theory: an Introduction* (1983, revised 1996), he traces the history of the study of texts, from the Romantics of the nineteenth century to the postmodernists of the later twentieth century. His approach to literary criticism remains firmly rooted in the Marxian tradition though he has also incorporated techniques and ideas from more recent modes of thought as structuralism, Lacanian analysis and deconstruction. In his *After Theory* (2003), he represents a kind of about-face: an indictment of current cultural and literary theory and what Eagleton regards as the bastardisation of both.

While developing a revisionist attitude to analyze literary work of art, he does not forget to bring in the highlights of the two other famous books written on the thrust topic so far viz. *What is Literature?* (1949) by Sartre and *Theory of Literature* (1982) by Welleck and Warren. Sartre, one of the most influential philosophers and writers of the existentialist movement discusses the differences between literature and other arts such as music and painting. His argument is that prose writing is different than all other media because of the relationship between the individual and language itself. He says that we might not know anything about musical scales for instance, but we cannot know about language. In the context of 'Why We Write', he says that there are some fascinating and vigorous reflections on the psychology of writing and reading and that the meaning of writing remains only latent until it is brought alive in the reader's mind - and his

observation that "reading is directed creation" is so to say Reader-Response Theory summed up in four words.

The book contains a preface and five chapters. In the 'Preface' he makes it clear that the book takes a liberal, open, general yet up-to-date account of understanding the basics of literary works of art in the light of the philosophical, linguistic and literary theories we know so far. He declares his purpose of rejuvenating the literary theories of 1970s and 80s in order to avoid imbalance of interpretation of literature in the heat of the studies of literature mostly that go along with postcolonialism, ethnicity, sexuality and cultural studies. He says that this is an 'evolution to be welcomed' in the course of 'shift from discourse to culture – from ideas in a somewhat abstract or virginal state' (*EOL ix*) with an investigation of the critical trends of the 70s and 80s in the light of the present scenario of literature. He says that 'this book is an implicit rebuke to literary theory' and rather much of his argument, apart from the final chapter, draws not on literary theory based on the philosophy of literature because according to him literary theorists have 'too often cold-shouldered this sort of discourse, and in doing so they have played their stereotypical role in the age-old contention between the Continentals and the Anglo-Saxons.' (*EOL x*) They seem to lead a controversy with the approval between literary theory and philosophy of literature. He reacts saying that such intellectual conservatism and timidity of so much philosophy of literature is characterized by fatal lack of 'critical flair and imaginative audacity.' He makes it clear by ironically saying that, some of these theorists behave as though they never heard of Frege, while the other acts as though they have never heard of Freud. He gives his remark that literary theorists tend to give little attention to questions of truth, reference, the logical status of fiction and the like, while philosophers of literature 'often display a marked insensitivity to the texture of literary language.' (*EOL x*).

Then, he tries to touch the line of the age old question 'Can there be a definition of literature?' and subsequently focus on many important logical sub-questions in the field of literary theory. His concerns in his book are broadly based on:

- i. the question of whether one can speak of 'literature' at all
- ii. how the term 'literature' is generally used today
- iii. characterizing fictionality

- iv. the question of whether literary theories with their various forms have central features in common or not (*EOL* xi-xii)

Chapter one entitled 'Realists and Nominalists' presents his views on the dispute between realists and nominalists that flourished most vigorously in the later Middle Ages among a number of eminent schoolmen of opposite persuasions leading to two sets of questionnaires. They are:

Q.1. Are general or universal categories in some sense real, as the realists claim in the wake of Plato, Aristotle and Augustine, or are they, as the nominalists insist, concepts which we ourselves foist upon a world in which whatever is real is irreducibly particular?

Q.2. Is there a sense in which literature or giraffeness exists in the actual world, or are these notions entirely mind-dependent? Is giraffeness simply a mental abstraction from a multitude of uniquely individual creatures, or are such species as real as those individuals, if not necessarily in the same way? (*EOL* 1)

He concludes this Chapter by saying that most literary types are in this sense natural-born nominalists, whether of the old-style liberal or newfangled postmodernist kind. There might be movements away from theory but they lead towards truth. So, in this way, he recognizes all theorizing is flight and that 'Theory is one thing, while art or life is another.' (*EOL* 14).

In chapter two entitled 'What's Literature?(1)', he questions whether something called literature actually exists or not. Primarily, he focuses on the properties of literary work of art in terms of linguistic and literary interpretations. Referring to his earlier written book *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, he argues that the nature of literature is a strongly anti-essentialist case. Those pieces of writing dubbed literary have no single property or even set of properties in common. (*EOL* 19).

Relating to art and literature, he says that the fact is that art is made up of too amorphous a set of objects for this to be done with any great reasonability. Literature, however, is a less amorphous phenomenon than it. A crime thriller and a Petrarchan sonnet are scarcely lookalikes, but they would seem to have more in common than do impasto, a bassoon solo and a glissade in ballet. So, perhaps family resemblances can be

more easily picked out in the case of works that people call literary. They mean by 'literary' a work which is fictional, or which yields significant insight into human experience as opposed to reporting empirical truths, or which uses language in a peculiarly heightened, figurative or self-conscious way, or which is not practical in the sense that shopping lists are, or which is highly valued as a piece of writing. The fictional, moral, linguistic, non-pragmatic and normative factors are combined in a specific piece of writing to make it literary. This literary work talks in a certain way about its language, moral vision, and fictional credibility and so on including literariness.

Chapter three entitled 'What is literature? (2)' focuses on the moral and non-moral dimensions of literary works. He uses the word 'moral' to signify the realm of human meanings, values and qualities, rather than in the deontological, anemically post-Kantian sense of duty, law, obligation and responsibility. He finds that the literary figures in nineteenth-century England, from Arnold and Ruskin to Pater, Wilde and Henry James, who helped to shift the meaning of the term 'morality' from a matter of codes and norms to a question of values and qualities. It was a project consummated in the twentieth century by some of the age's most eminent critics like Bakhtin, Trilling, Leavis, Empson and Raymond Williams. Moral values and literary meanings have in common the fact that they are not objective in the sense but they are not purely subjective either. For a moral realist, moral judgments pick out real features of the world rather than simply expressing attitudes to them.' (EOL 62)

Chapter four entitled 'The nature of fiction', says perhaps theory of fiction is perhaps the most difficult aspect of the philosophy of literature, as well as the one that has attracted the most sustained scholarly attention. It is full of agreeable paradoxes and conundrums. Fiction and literature are not synonymous, despite Jonathan Culler's claim that 'to read a text as literature is to read it as fiction', and Morse Peckham's opines that what makes a work literary is its fictional dimension. But he argues that Boswell's *Life of Johnson* and Hazlitt's *Spirit of the Age* are usually ranked as literature, but neither is fictional or generally read as such.

In this chapter, his reflections on this topic turn on the idea of a grammar as an important element of discourse as he says meaning a set of rules that determine how expressions are to be used in a form of practical life. Instead, a grammar determines what

might be intelligibly asserted about the facts. A grammar does not mirror anything in reality, as Wittgenstein himself had once believed. It is an activity, not an image. (*EOL* 156).

In Chapter five entitled 'Strategies', he begins with questions like 'What, if anything, do literary theories have in common? What links semiotics and feminism, formalism and psychoanalysis, Marxism and hermeneutics or post-structuralism and reception aesthetics? Then he tries to give an explanation by saying that there is no single feature or set of features that all literary theories share in common. There is, however, in Wittgenstein's words, 'a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing' links them and this can be the case for psychoanalytic criticism and feminist literary theory too.

The book refreshes the critical tempo of literature by making a walk through the remarkable tracks of events of literature till now. But it is noticed that his interpretation is somehow dominated by the principles outlined by Wittgenstein, Lamarque and he liberally accounts for the reader-response factors as well as text linguistics plus analysis of speech-acts to consider validity of literature in our time. Quoting Barthes, he says that no literature in the world has ever answered the question it asked. The text is not bound to provide an answer like a medical diagnosis is meant to do. It may simply represent a response to the questions it poses, rather than a literal solution to them. If there are both acceptable and non-acceptable ways in which a work may resolve a problem, there are also acceptable and non-acceptable ways in which it may leave it unanswered. (*EOL* 174) As a matter of fact, his saying that one can only understand language if one understands more than language sums up his interpretation of literature in the book altogether.