

# Three Essays On 'Potty' and 'Unprincipled' Professorial Poetics

## (3) *The Semi-Idi-Otics of Terry Eagleton*

### An Assessment of Terry Eagleton's Book *How to Read a Poem*

#### I

#### Introduction

1. In his book *How to Read a Poem* (Blackwell 2007), Terry Eagleton shows himself to be a very clever but also in some ways a somewhat stupid man – and thus a dangerous one. As a 'literary theorist' he is something of a cheat: and cheating is both stupid and dangerous. It is rather unlikely that the 'students and general readers' for whom Mr Eagleton says that his book 'is designed as an introduction to poetry' will be prepared for his basic distortions and trickery in the discipline of poetics, and they are thus likely to be misled and damaged as a result of reading this book. Mr Eagleton's analysis of the nature of poetry as an art or craft is fundamentally imbalanced; and it is possibly unbalanced. *The book is in many ways a nasty one.*
2. It 'coheres' around an utterly stupid theoretical declaration. In his second chapter, '**What is Poetry?**', after making a brief comparison, in his own terms, of the nature of 'poetry' and 'prose', Mr Eagleton announces that:

**The distinction between the two is ripe for dismantling.**

This is a preposterous assertion, and one which, it may be suggested, is sufficient in itself to condemn and invalidate the book as a serious 'introduction to poetry' *The book is a disgrace.*

3. Mr Eagleton's absurd pronouncement denies the primary, the founding principle of poetics as a discipline – which principle was first expressed in English about thirteen hundred years ago. Then, *fers*, or meter *fers*, was distinguished from those other sorts of literature which in Anglo-Saxon times were generally termed *anfeald gerecednes*. (The *g* in *gewrit* and *gerecednes* was sounded as the 'y' in our modern English 'yet'.) 'Verse', and 'versification', to which other formal and regular patternings were added, have been, from the outset, the primary distinguishing features of what we call 'poetry'.

It may also be noted that in Anglo-Saxon times another word for *fers* was *song*. Any introduction to 'poetry', at any level, should surely seek to present an idea of the 'songness' in poetry. In the technical, temporal matters of measure and rhythm, poetry, as verse, and music, are very much alike.

Further, it is generally acknowledged, as a part of basic literary theory, that '*what is said*' in a poem – its 'semantic import and connotations', shall we say, - and '*how it is said*' - its abstract, formal and sonic characteristics - are complementary 'aspects' of 'poetry' that are as important as each other.

4. Thus a simple, sensible, customary and ever useful analytic distinction has been made in literary studies, particularly in the matter of poetry, between what are termed '*form*' and '*content*'. It may be easily demonstrated to children, and upwards, that for centuries the things that we call 'poems' have had abstract, formal, patterned, sonic and temporal structure. This is evident to ear and eye in their sets of measured, rhythmic *verses*; to which verses are added further regular patterning of alliteration (in our early poetry) and rhyme. The abstract, structured

‘form’ of poems – which may, as has been suggested, be called their ‘songness’ – can be distinguished from the cognitive or semantic nature of the words, phrases and sentences of which they are composed – that is, from their ‘content’.

The technical distinction of ‘form’ and ‘content’ allow us to describe and identify ‘poetic forms’ such as the ‘sonnet’ and the ‘limerick’. These characteristics, of versification and other formal patterning devices in the literary things that we call ‘poems’, provide us with particular intellectual and sensual pleasures, as when we listen to music; they have particular aesthetic effects.

The critical processes or disciplines that are employed in making these observations and distinctions, and which establish the principles of poetry as an art or craft, are termed ‘*prosody*’ and ‘*poetics*’.

5. We may now return to Mr Eagleton’s preposterous pronouncement regarding ‘poetry’ and ‘prose’ (which declaration will henceforth in this critical essay be referred to as ‘**The Pronouncement**’) that:

**The distinction between the two is ripe for dismantling.**

There are two interesting metaphorical elements in that statement which need to be moderated or translated so that **The Pronouncement** may be presented in more neutral terms. The metaphors are somewhat comically ‘mixed’ – which might or might not have been obvious to Mr Eagleton. The word ‘ripe’ might well have appealed to him as expressing, what is to him, one rather thinks, the pleasurable anticipation of the process of attempting the ‘dismantling’ of a distinction that perhaps very few of his readers would think to be susceptible to any such ‘procedure’. (The sort of procedure that Mr Eagleton is asking them to imagine could, metaphorically speaking, be some sort of ‘unbolting’ process.)

Be that as it may; **The Pronouncement** may be re-presented more ‘prosaically’ this way:

**It can be shown that the usual literary distinction made between ‘poetry’ and ‘prose’ is not valid.**

This is just one possible version or ‘interpretation’ of the sentence that might be offered. It will suffice until such time as perhaps Mr Eagleton himself corrects it.

6. Justification of the condemnation of the book as ‘an introduction to poetry’ made at the beginning of this essay is provided when the ways in which Mr Eagleton arrives at **The Pronouncement**, and thereafter supports it, are more fully examined.

*The fact is, that **The Pronouncement** is made without the actual, original, fundamental ‘distinction’ that it says is ‘ripe for dismantling’ **being presented at all**.* Mr Eagleton simply does not introduce and consider that principal aspect of the craft of poetry, *versification*, anywhere in the book; and, accordingly, the term ‘verse’ does not appear in its ‘**Glossary**’ or its ‘**Index**’.

Further, the simple, basic, usual prosodic distinction that has long been made in poetics, between ‘*form*’ and ‘*content*’, is effectively disabled, invalidated and supplanted as a result of Mr Eagleton pursuing new and ambiguous usages of those same terms as ones of *general* literary analysis. The objective, formal nature of such abstract, sonic verse characteristics as metre and rhythm, and of patterns of rhyme or alliteration, are not fully considered and are not given their true significance.

7. **It is from this crass, dangerous and intellectually disgusting position that Mr Eagleton proceeds in his ‘muddling’ and cheating discourse in ‘pseudo-poetics’.**

Michael George Gibson  
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