

## *From “the Prose Factory”*

### A Gestalt

A passage from a very well-known reviewer, in a leading British literary-political “paper”:

D. J. Taylor is the most charitable of critics. However absurd, third-rate or pretentious the authors he examines, he can always find something to say in their favour. In this latest study, he even puts in a good word for [the Sitwells], on the grounds that . . . they were at least serious about literature. Too much so . . . one might claim . . . the surreal figure of “Q” [amusing anecdote omitted] . . . is excused for his belletristic . . . waffling . . . by . . .

There is something there at once that stops the eye merely reading “what it says”, that is, what it thinks it is only saying. More there than meets the eye. It is a matter of tone. Noise, in the electrical communications sense: The hum of a set of social assumptions. As in “I really don’t like your tone, old boy.”

It is from a review in one of our top literary papers, *The London Review of Books*, a long-ish review by Professor Terry Eagleton of a longish book (as he points out) by a working journalist-reviewer-writer (D. J. Taylor), with the (excellent) title *The Prose Factory*, a critical history of all kinds of prose writing, fiction and not, in England (specifically not Scotland, Ireland or Wales—odd that, as the Professor is quick to note) since 1918. Good title, good idea, an interesting book, judging from Mr Eagleton’s review—and so in its turn, was the review. Put together the two pieces of writing and the two gentlemen who wrote them, one lying on top of the other, were—are, very interesting and revealing: one of the other, and so many other things too. Of a gestalt so it seemed, seems to a long-time subscriber, and watcher of “the literary world”.

For Mr Eagleton’s manner, (retired from Oxford, now a “distinguished” Professor at Lancaster, says the *LRB* (where he frequently reviews as well as at large, and where his own books in turn might be reviewed) . . . his way with the book is the most interesting thing, perceptible at once in the opening sentences above: a “style” within which statement and tone float together compatibly—so that the reader might almost think that form and content were separable things. And of course, we know (we literary critics): they are not. Although the book is for a general reader, not researcher-academic (praise be for that) still from those first few words “one” would hardly feel the need to buy it. (Well, someone wouldn’t.) Eagleton’s review, itself very “readable”, and true, or rather “true”—just “right for” the *LRB*, as the *LRB* uses the phrase: “tells you” everything about it, and more. The styles of both review and book share common ground, though Terry and D. J. Taylor style themselves, the demotic Professor and the formal author, differently—but actually it’s shifting sand. (There’s more and more common ground like that now: it only seems solid. Sometimes it’s a moral quagmire.) So that where Professor Eagleton, in his manner, does “get” the book . . . by doing so he puts his own foot in it. Something’s not right. (One might say). He comes round to saying that D. J. Taylor (Terry makes much of the old-fashioned literary use of initials . . . what should we think of “Terry”?) has much of the prose-factory in him. It is certainly true, from the examples he gives. But . . .

Professor Eagleton’s qualifications about Taylor’s still “deeply enjoyable” book are neatly and fluently (above all fluently) insinuated by the exhibition of phrases. Eagleton is “good” at it, gets much fun out of it, and so fills his two pages pleasantly: he is “value for money”. The most obviously revealing is “on the other hand” which says the Professor, “crops up regularly”, contriving an amusing parody linked by “though it is true that / one should remember that / this is not to disparage / from another point of view / and at the same time” . . . which rises to a climax with: “when two cases collide, he [Taylor] can be found standing dauntlessly in the middle” (a form of wit itself close to cliché (we have all heard it before) so should it be called wit, or “wit”?) and concluding with “few could balk at his blandly inoffensive opinions, except for those who object to their bland inoffensiveness.”

Both men are products (the Professor's word for them both) of Oxford, and the exProfessor there makes much of it, in a personal vein, with some gossip (which he enjoys, and says he enjoys, in an Oxford-y way, and so do we, it makes his review entertaining, of course): and both, some years apart, are critical of the place (you might just think they dislike it—but, on the other hand . . .)—and both, from what one (and the author of *Morse*, and the script-hacks of Lewis and Endeavour show us of neo-Christminster) are justified . . . though D. J., the Professor quickly notes, finds his even-handedness and on-the-one-hand-on-the-otherness, hardest to maintain when we come to the Other Place: about what the Professor names “Leavisite rigour”. Eagleton, who has had dealings with such in the past, no doubt, says no more. (And the mention of That Name in the *LRB* usually produces plenty of spacefilling copy—see the letters column, always ready to print without comment reminiscence and gossip, pro or con. . . . Is it that Leavis is disliked, or rigour? Moral or argumentative? Editorially, the position is that they don't say if they have a position or not.)

Was that another digression? Not really.

Two more illustrations from ex-Oxford Professor Eagleton of the non-judgmentalism of Mr Taylor. One, when he uses the phrase “this is not to disparage” of Lord David Cecil. (Remember him and Ayer on the old Brains Trust, two Oggsford men if ever, and as Beeby as could be!) How could one not disparage! Two, of Evelyn Waugh: that “ultimately” his prejudices “cease to matter because” . . . he was “always capable of reining them [his snobbishness, malice and airs] in” “because . . . he is funny.” Here Eagleton (one has to admit) has Mr Taylor dead, by saying that it would be worth knowing why . . . one can't find him malicious and funny and snobbish at the same time. A self-reflexive idea, that.

But neither could many object to any too-great offensiveness in the objections of Professor Eagleton to the inoffensiveness of D. J. Taylor. He also has his own way (but it is not really his own, it's now planted in the English language) of not being critical. Not really. Not to hurt his fellowwriters' feelings too much. Of “engagingly” encircling him in clichés that are not quite clichés, a more “acceptable” jargonising, itself a form of but-on-the-other-hand-edness.. Egalitarian, still Oxford-y: Oxfordy-Beeby-hack-ademic-y. Democratically Bloomsbury-ish. Blandly offensive, might one call it? One might even think one was being charming. If one had ever been an Oggsford man, one would have found it very bad manners; patronising, among people well-equipped to patronise. If one was D. J. Taylor one would be insulted and injured. Can't you just hear it, here? “[D. J.] even manages to imply that . . . he is not, to be sure, quite as even-handed as . . . [he is] by no means as uncritical as . . .” A social tone governs the phrases (“to be sure”) which allow him to pass from disdain, to (on the other hand), the praise of exemplary blurb-wording. He can do both: Mr Taylor is bright, splendidly readable, impressively erudite, [it is] a book full of fascinating stuff, crammed with intriguing chunks of information, skilful, not-glib, nor obscurantist . . . which allows him nevertheless (veering back) to end by saying, and very well, it is true—let's repeat it—that Taylor is something of a prose-factory himself.

Except, and of course, on the other hand!, that Eagleton is busy-busy producing on another production-line.

What “stuff” is it that Terry doesn't see he is working on—though as a former Marxist you might think he would? And why can't he see? This stuff, by means of which the English educated classes are kept informed and amused? Because he can't. If he could he'd have to deny himself—and put a lot more work into his work. It is true of nearly all hacks. . . . He might not meet his deadlines. And even the *LRB* reader might be unblanished once he saw that if there is a factory, Terry is in it too. Practically every phrase in his piece is worn with the dull repetitiveness of the everyday hack-use of every media-medium, now digitalised into the infinity of cyberspace: thin, production-line productivity-phrased, designed and spun to fill up a determined lot between the ads . . . like all hacks, decent jobbing writers like Taylor, and aca-hacks like Eagleton. We are at once dropped into economics, the new writing-economy, economy, economy, for the better, the worse, as never before.

(The economy of economies—to which all politics now refers, in a state of continual unrest and confusion, the one mode of thought in a language of conflicting language and opinionatre, that hardly allows you to think. The daily furnace of words, as St Augustine called it.)

Here, this economy also creates a new snobbery, judging from Eagleton's tone, the tone, the hum of it, which has displaced the old class-snobbery, though that is still mingled with it: the new-model modified egalitarian democratic classless class-consciousness. And the Professor—a new form of Q, even?—but he was a gentleman (said That Man again)—Professor Terry, compared to the honourable jobbing writer, journalist, or weekly ready-writer, only writes a less-obvious cliché, social collocations. He and D. J. are forms of the same thing, one more the hack, one more the academic, making a living within the same culture (or “culture”—sociologically speaking). And there are many etceteras at it. E.g. Professor John Carey (a person of “asperity and abrasiveness” who writes for *The Sunday Times*: author of *The Intellectuals and the Masses*, and more recently *The Unexpected Professor*, which has “put its petty-bourgeois boot into” “patrician dons” and “raised literary hackles” . . . . What a cultural moment we are living through, to be sure as Terry would say, who continues:

For all his readiness to rebuke his alma mater however, Taylor shares its uneasiness with ideas. *The Prose Factory* is really a work of lightweight literary sociology, full of vivid cameos /of obscure 20th-century writers and lightning sketches of groups and periodicals but rarely standing far back enough to map deeper intellectual currents. Nowhere is this more obvious than in its cursory treatment of modernism, another blind spot of traditional Oxford English Taylor has inherited. It is a prejudice apparent as late as Carey's *The Intellectuals and the Masses*, but Oxfordians like C. S. Lewis assailed modernism from a conservative standpoint and Carey does it from a populist one.

Eagleton's superior view of not-only-Taylor-but-also, is made possible by an unthinking confident flow of well-worn prepositional collocations from hack-ademia. Any thesis must be full of them, the language is so worn. Though in his own “well-assembled” piece he does not quite practise the same inert even-handedness of the jobbing journalist, he's not far off it; likewise handing out the occasional sop to Mr Taylor to “re-balance” the condescension. Taylor is said to offer “vivid cameos” and elsewhere is “rich in literary chit chat (first-class chit-chat, to be sure)”—oh to be sure; and doing an “excellent job” in “retrieving the Georgian period from the enormous condescension of posterity”. Mr Taylor will hardly be able to retrieve all his thoughtful work from “the enormous condescension” of Eagleton, who himself ends by having something else both ways (but round the other way): D. J. “steers a skilful course” between the popular and the intellectual, is neither “glib” nor “obscurantist”, is “deeply enjoyable”—(BUT) . . . he just “isn't very deep.”

Professor Eagleton's depth, or his own sense of his “depth”, or again his idea of what depth is— is given in his use of the word “idea”. What's wrong with D. J. and Oxford since when, is their “uneasiness” with “ideas”. And Terry's idea of ideas we know from his “intellectual history”—starting from his “old fashioned” Catholicism, according to Taylor himself—to Terry's amiable amusement—who states the fact that he is also called “jaunty”. Would that be the Catholicism of a certain period (doctrinal, “dogmatic”, catechisms learnt by rote) shared with others (in France even more so) who like Terry “lost their faith” and transferred it to Marxism (with its own nets of doctrine) back in those old sixties and seventies, and next on and into affiliations of different kinds with theory and structuralistic half-truths. (Such fun because so contrarian!) Professor Eagleton went from one to the other, and now, all of that having ended in its own deconstruction is in the present state of post-modern hack/ademicism.

Reading the one about the other, you can see how they belong together, overlay each other (“one” prefers the one underneath) run together for two full pages (minus the ads, wouldn't exist without the ads) in another too-long review in the organ of a neo-Bloomsbury with bookshop, coffee shop and cakeshop, poets, novelists, travel writers, critics, Professors, courses, workshops, lectures, meetings— “discussion” attached or semi-detached. A telling little gestalt.

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