

Eagleton's Error, or Terry the Trot has a go at Lewis

Terry Eagleton had a go at Lewis in the *TLS* when reviewing a collection of twentieth-century manifestos. He could only do so by misquoting Lewis.

Eagleton wrote:

Some manifestos, as [Alex] Danchev notes, came to resemble modernist poems, full of typographical high jinks and obscenity-sprinkled obscurantism. "Tragic humour is the birthmark of the North", Wyndham Lewis wrote, meaninglessly, in a manifesto in his journal *Blast*".

Lewis didn't of course. He wrote that "Tragic humour is the birthright of the North", and that is how it appeared both in *Blast* 1 and in the collection of manifestos under review, so Eagleton has no excuse: Lewis's "meaningless" remark is his own invention.

Terry's double Freudian slip exposes him as desiring to mark, or stain, Lewis's thought – at the same time as altering the *Blast* text so that it does indeed become meaningless. Elsewhere in the review he refers dismissively to a "Deleuze-like cult of desire". Perhaps he should look to his own desire, the desire to damage and misrepresent a writer whom he believes he must, as a Marxist, disagree with.

But what kind of Marxist is Eagleton these days?

In his review (*Times Literary Supplement*, 25 March 2011) Eagleton refers to something called "**ultra-leftism**". Immediately following his invented quotation from Lewis he writes:

Ridiculing all this **ultra-leftism**, however, is as risky as it is easy.

What does he mean by **ultra-leftism** here? And why would Lewis be an **ultra-leftist**, when you would expect him to be denounced as on the political right?

The answer lies in Eagleton's interest in Trotskyism. His Wikipedia entry tells us that he has been a member of two Trotskyist groups, the International Socialists and the Workers' Socialist League, neither of which now exists. In his autobiography he admits to membership of a Trotskyist group when he was in Oxford, selling the party's newspaper at the Cowley motor works. Despite

pretending there that he's given it all up, he has maintained a sympathetic interest in Trotskyist thinking, as recent articles in the *London Review of Books* show.

Eagleton is a Catholic and a Trotskyist; both are authoritarian systems: the Roman Catholic Church in ways that do not need to be explained, and the Trotskyists because they make a claim to be the vanguard party that will lead the working class towards revolution. The workers need revolutionary leadership because they cannot conceive or organise the necessary revolt themselves.

For Trotskyists, “ultra-leftism” is anathema. It embodies everything they hate.

The term originates with Lenin's *Left-Wing Communism: An Infantile Disorder*, from 1920. This pamphlet is essential to Trotskyist thinking. It denounces any communists who are so far to the left (“Left-Wing”) that they *refuse* to work with non-revolutionary organizations, such as trades unions or parliament. It is the business of disciplined revolutionaries to join trades unions, for example, and transform them from within. (This is known as “entryism”.)

“**Ultra-leftists**” are denounced for engaging in political spontaneity. Political organizations must be hierarchical to be effective. It is wrong to be egalitarian or libertarian. Anything that brings political organisation close to anarchism is wrong. Anarchism is a particular Trotskyist *bête noire*.

We are now in a position to understand why Eagleton should describe Wyndham Lewis as an “**ultra-leftist**”. It has nothing to do with there being any left-wing content (as usually understood) in Lewis's writing. It has everything to do with the extravagance of *Blast*, which was a spectacular avant-garde intervention, with its anarchic vision, its spontaneity, and its comprehensive opposition to the culture of its time.

Vorticism – and Futurism, and Dadaism – lacked discipline, and that is a libertarian fault, intolerable to an authoritarian Marxist-Leninist such as Terry Eagleton.

That is why he describes Lewis as an “**ultra-leftist**”.

Sources

Terry Eagleton, "Fast Forward", *Times Literary Supplement*, 25 March 2011, 3-4.

Alex Danchev (ed.), *100 Artists' Manifestos*. London: Penguin, 2011.

Vladimir Lenin, *Left-Wing Communism: an Infantile Disorder*. 1920. London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1935.