

## ○ REVIEW OF TERRY EAGLETON'S *FIGURES OF DISSSENT: CRITICAL ESSAYS ON FISH, SPIVAK, ŽIŽEK AND OTHERS*

Gerald West

Gerald West reviews *Figures of Dissent: Critical Essays on Fish, Spivak, Žižek and Others*, by Terry Eagleton (London: Verso; 2003).

Gathering the fragments of a notable scholar and placing them alongside one another, in no particular chronological or thematic order and without any connecting commentary, produces a strange kind of book, not unlike the Bible. But I will not develop this analogy, for Terry Eagleton's *Figures of Dissent* is really quite different from the Bible, except to say that like the Bible, what you get out of Eagleton's book depends on where you get into it.

*Figures of Dissent*, like Cornel West's *Prophetic Fragments* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), is a collection of bits and pieces, mainly book reviews, written by Eagleton over a number of years. He has read widely and so the reviews include a host of unlikely companions, ranging from a book by David Beckham (about David Beckham) to books by contemporary scholars about recognisable literary figures, like Oscar Wilde, W.B. Yeats and T.S. Eliot, to books by recognisable contemporary scholars, like Gayatri Spivak, Georg Lukács and Stanley Fish, about a variety of theoretical concerns, to books and films about major theorists, like Ludwig Wittgenstein and Jacques Lacan. It is a veritable supermarket of tempting goodies.

Dipping one's thumb into any part of the book pulls out a plum which is both good to look at and to chew on. Eagleton writes with a wonderful dry wit, and while he is incisive and analytical, he is never sarcastic or destructive. Things he might have read and which he really detested or despised he either never reviewed or those reviews are not included in this collection. The elegance of Eagleton's language and argument enhances our reading pleasure, and his wide-ranging role as a public intellectual creates unusual collocations that provide plenty of food for thought. David Beckham's prose, Eagleton says, 'is as excruciating as one imagines V.S. Naipaul's shots at goal would be'. And yet Eagleton goes on to ponder at the split which Beckham and his book represent, namely the split between 'the sleek, postmodern body' and 'the uncertainly articulate working-class boy'.

Eagleton's engagement with the realities of our contemporary society and the theoretical work which has been brought to bear on understanding it, together with his own commitment to changing our world, permeate every fragment, and so provide multiple perspectives on related matters that matter.