

Chapter Two: Marxist Literary Criticism

Marxism and Marxism(s)

Williams's Marxism was not a product of systematic theoretical analysis. It cannot be adequately approached through any presumption of serious *theoretical* engagement with Stalin's *Problems of Leninism*, with Lukács, with the work of Adorno or Althusser. For Williams Marxism was a set of political ideas.¹ His Marxism was not the product of theoretical enquiry, nor did it produce key conceptual tools with which to erect his criticism. Instead, it had a doctrinal status. For him Marxism was a set of axioms resting upon the belief that being determined consciousness. The veracity of these axioms was, he thought, being perpetually tested in the class struggle and could be discerned in the complex manner in which this struggle had been instantiated in cultural relations and artistic production. Consequently, the reference is not Hegel's *Aesthetics* or even Marx's *Capital*, his *Theories of Surplus Value*, or the *Grundrisse*, nor is it Trotsky's *Literature and Revolution*, but to the writings of Marx and Engels's prefaces and Plekhanov's *Fundamental Problems of Marxism*.

At Cambridge in 1939 and 1940 Williams became familiar with Marxist criticism through the work of Alick West and Ralph Fox and consequently with the kind of speculation on psychology and history that Plekanov had pioneered among Marxists in the opening decades of the twentieth century.² An analysis had been developed in which the bourgeoisie at the height of their revolutionary insurgency were said to be able to produce great art, but paradoxically, as their grip on social and state power strengthened, and they were faced with the rise of the proletariat, their capacity for successful artistic production began to wane. In short, as the bourgeoisie became defenders rather than critics of prevailing social, economic and political arrangements their culture experienced attenuation of its creative powers and the decay of its arts and letters.

¹ See Isaac Deutscher's 'Three Currents in Communism' for a discussion about the relationship between political developments and the proliferation of theoretical engagements. (Deutscher 1964: 3-18).

² See Williams's recollection in *Politics and Letters* (1979b 44).

This state of affairs set up a perpetual tension among artists who, though disgusted by the money-grubbing banality and decadence of bourgeois daily life, were unable to opt for the overthrow of bourgeois society. By the middle of the nineteenth century (1848, to be precise) fear of the proletariat was sufficiently lively to ensure that the ‘haters of the bourgeoisie’ among artists and writers, despite their social hostilities and the stylistic radicalism of the *demimondes* in which they lived, remained loyal to bourgeois society.³

This analysis, lacking the forensic venom of Radek’s 1934 address on the tasks of proletarian literature, or the virulence of Zhadanov’s strictures against ‘petty-bourgeois dissoluteness and individualism’, had considerable appeal to English Marxists.⁴ It was framed in the calm tones of the Second International and imbued with an easy familiarity with the vicissitudes of the unfolding historical process. It appeared to have greater historical depth, richer cultural sources, and, of course, it had evidently not been produced to meet the exigencies of Soviet rule. Indeed, its author, ‘the father of Russian Marxism’, was a contemplative man of letters rather than a Jacobin, a man not fitted for the struggle for power, but capable of great theoretical insight nevertheless.

Plekhanov’s analysis saturates Caudwell’s *Studies in a Dying Culture* and West’s *Crisis and Criticism*. For example, in West’s discussion of the ‘romantic theory of literature’ in 1937 he noted that:

The resemblance between its romantic theory’s achievement and the problems of criticism today is a reason of the attraction felt towards romantic theory now. But the interest is not in the romantic idea of the connection between social and literary activity. It is rather in the philosophical and psychological aspects of the theory, and through them it is especially the idealistic and religious spirit of romanticism which is kept alive.

(West 1937a: 31)

³ This analysis was most fully developed by G. V. Plekhanov (Plekhanov 1896: *passim*; 1908: *passim*; 1908 and 1912: *passim*).

⁴ It must also be acknowledged, of course, that Christopher Caudwell was prepared to adopt the tone and outlook of Zhadanov. See Caudwell 1937: 270-298.

T. S. Eliot and others were, amid the ‘decay of the bourgeois social order’, trapped between their desire to acknowledge *the social* and their hostility towards the political commitments that this would entail. This impasse, despite the strength of their anti-capitalist impulse, could only lead into naked reaction:

The appeal to a supposedly homogeneous mind prior to capitalism may spring from a hatred of capitalism, which is too confused to see that the way to realise what it values in feudalism is not back, but forward. When, however, this appeal is accompanied, as in Mr Eliot’s case, by an attack on romanticism and particularly on Shelley, who saw most clearly the necessity of a workers’ revolution, and on communism as the devil incarnate, then it does not spring from a hatred of capitalism, but from the desire to defend it against revolution by investing it with more absolute authority.

(West 1937b: 46)

This mode of criticism, resting upon analysis of the class position and the social and political attitudes of artists as much as, and in many instances, more than upon close analysis of their books and paintings, consigned Marxist criticism in England to the sidelines. When Williams returned to Cambridge after the war in Autumn 1945 he could not but dissociate himself from this kind of Marxist criticism. However, this dissociation was from a style of Marxist criticism, not from the broader political sympathies associated with it. He continued to support the impulse, if not the settled conclusions, behind the critical work of British communist intellectuals during the thirties.

This *impulse* was the popular and democratic impulse that English Marxist criticism had apparently represented in the thirties. This was remembered as being more important than the almost routine denunciation of writers as desperate members of the petit bourgeoisie who were simply bored and vacuous, like James Joyce, or out and out reactionaries: D. H. Lawrence was a fascist, H. G. Wells a crusader for ‘liberal Fascism’.⁵ More

⁵ See West’s ‘James Joyce: *Ulysses*’ (West 1937c: 104-127), and Caudwell’s *Studies in a Dying Culture* (Caudwell 1938: 44-95)

important than the Plekhanovite certainties that disfigured and misdirected their criticism was their closeness to the millions of working class people in the labour movement, their direct language to which it was thought working-class people could respond, and finally, their consciousness of the progressive aspects of the English literary heritage found in the works of Shakespeare, Milton, Bunyan, the Romantic poets and the nineteenth-century novelists.⁶

Raymond Williams shared this view of the thirties Marxist critics with Arnold Kettle. He valued their work and he would have been in sympathy with Kettle when he wrote:

. . . the impulses that draw students of literature towards Marxism, and lead Marxists to value literature, are essentially the same: a desire to make their lives whole; a desire to identify with the organised working class in the great political and social conflicts of our time; a desire to rescue literature from the pedants and dilettantes; a desire to replace class-divided society by a communist one in which men and women can begin to enjoy in their own lives the fruits of that heightening of consciousness experienced through art.

(Kettle 1975: 3)

It was the political aspirations, the class stamp of their outlook and the popular-democratic tone of their intention that Williams shared with this generation of English Marxist critics.

L. C. Knights's Challenge to Marxism

It had been during the dying days of the Popular Front, in a climate of apparently diverse and free debate, idealism, muddle and accommodation with Stalin's tyranny, that Raymond Williams, at the age of twenty, encountered 'bourgeois' scholarly discipline:

⁶ For a brief but sympathetic description of this outlook among English Marxist critics before the Second World War see Arnold Kettle's 1975 'Foreword' to Alick West, *Crisis and Criticism & Selected Literary Essays* (Kettle 1975: 3).

. . . in my second year I was transferred to Tillyard. . . . We started doing the novel and I promptly produced the Party orientation — that it was necessary to see any bourgeois novel of the past from the perspective of the kind of novel that must now be written, in the present. Tillyard told me this was not a tenable procedure; it was a fantasy. How could you judge something that had been written from the perspective of something that hadn't? (1979b: 50-1)

Williams goes on to report the real intellectual and emotional distress he experienced in the course of May and June 1941, which was to some extent resolved, by the outbreak of war between Germany and the Soviet Union. The unilateral termination of the German-Soviet partition of Poland by the Nazis, and Hitler's invasion of Russia, changed the character of the war for Williams and the Communist Party from an indefensible conflict between German and Anglo-French imperialism to a necessary and legitimate anti-fascist crusade. Although he had decided early in 1940 that he would join up he was now able to enter the army without major political misgivings.⁷

However, the academic hiatus provided by his military training, his role in the war and the occupation of Germany, came to an end in Autumn 1945 when he returned to Cambridge. He was confronted again by the intellectual crisis he had left in 1941:

The whole crisis had an important bearing on my attitude when I returned to academic work in 1945. People often ask me now why I didn't carry on then from the Marxist arguments of the thirties. The reason is that I felt they had led me into an impasse. I had become convinced that their answers did not meet the questions, and that I had got to be prepared to meet the professional objections. I was damned well going to do it properly this time. (1979b: 52)

In the course of completing his undergraduate work he was able to begin to discern the outlines of what he regarded as a viable

⁷ See *Politics and Letters* (1979b: p.53).

alternative both to the Marxist arguments of the thirties and to the forms of critical analysis represented by T. S. Eliot or F. R. Leavis.

In this he was no doubt helped by his growing familiarity with the range and sophistication of *liberal* or *bourgeois* sociological and historical scholarship. This tradition, he learned, was broader than Tillyard's *Elizabethan World Picture*. It included Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* and R. H. Tawney's *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism*. Williams encountered the full force of this tradition of scholarly engagement with capitalism and culture in L. C. Knights's *Drama & Society in the Age of Johnson*. This book, first published in 1937, reprinted in 1951, 1957 and 1962 was 'read and reread' by Williams during the late forties and early fifties. In 1979 Williams remembered it as:

... a sustained attempt to understand a particular period of literature in terms of a specific epoch in the emergence of capitalism. I read and reread it throughout that period. I was dissatisfied with it, but it seemed much nearer to my focus of interest than what Leavis himself was writing.
(1979b: 92)

Indeed, it was very close to Williams's interests. Significantly, Knights challenged the utility of the word 'economic' in discussions of the cultural complexity of particular modes of life in the past. In suggesting that the category 'economic' could be a 'misleading abstraction' Knights was making a point that Williams would subsequently recast in his identification of culture as 'a whole way of life'. In 1937 Knights explained it thus:

... to say that the qualities embodied in Shakespeare's English had an economic base, is to remind ourselves that making a living was not merely a *means*, and that the 'economic' activities which helped to mould that supremely expressive medium fostered qualities (perceptions and general habits of response) that were not 'economic' at all. We remind ourselves, in short, of the dangerous facility with which the word 'economic' tempts us to beg the essential questions.
(Knights 1937: 12)

Confronted by the swift and very large generalisations that characterised Marxist criticism in the 1930s Knights stressed the importance of narrowing the field of enquiry in order to facilitate attempts to demonstrate precise relations between particular ideas, genres and forms, and the prevailing economic arrangements. He did not believe that sufficient work had been done to verify the proposition in Marx's 'Preface to the *Critique of Political Economy*' that 'the methods of production in material life determine the general character of the social, political, and spiritual processes of life.' Knights was dismayed by the vagueness of Marxist argument:

The exasperating haziness of all those who have attempted to make some correlation between economic activities and culture is not due merely to the lack of a satisfactory definition of the latter term. Perhaps it is due (at any rate one may suggest it provisionally) to the fact that 'the materialist interpretation of history' has not yet been pushed far enough. It is one thing to say that 'in every historical epoch, the prevailing mode of economic production and exchange, and the social organization necessarily following from it, form the basis upon which is built up, *and from which alone can be explained, the political and intellectual history of that epoch*', and another to attempt to substantiate the phrase which I have italicised in detail. Methods of production and cultural superstructure may be related in the realm of abstract dialectic, but no one (anthropologists dealing with primitive peoples apart) has yet established the relation in terms of fact and experience.⁸

(Knights 1937: 4-5)

By quoting Engels's 'Preface to the English translation of the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*'⁹ in this way Knights was

⁸ Incidentally, the idea that anthropologists had perhaps succeeded in delineating the relations between methods of production and the cultural superstructure appears to arise from colonial assumptions concerning the relative 'simplicity' of 'primitive' peoples and their societies.

⁹ On p.4 n.3 Knights cites page 6 of the preface to the English translation of the *Manifesto* — the edition is not given. However, the preface that Knights

identifying the range of problems that Williams would later attempt to solve by unfolding the distinction between the economic ‘base’ and cultural and ideological ‘superstructure’. Furthermore, it is evident that Knights’s ironical suggestion that historical materialism had perhaps not been pushed far enough had to be taken seriously by Williams given the manifest failure of Marxist criticism to meet the challenge mounted by *Scrutiny*.

Williams had an unequal but guarded respect for both traditions and this was reflected in his regard for the scholarly discipline and emotional insight made available by close reading and practical criticism, and the social outlook, class credentials and political discipline of those committed to the defence of the Soviet Union and its cultural policy.¹⁰

In the late forties it is evident that Williams veered much more towards mainstream English criticism than he did towards any mode of criticism affiliated to the working class movement or committed to the progress of proletarian politics. In October 1948 he boldly acknowledged his debts to T. S. Eliot, Middleton Murry, I. A. Richards, William Empson, L. C. Knights, and F. R. Leavis, explaining that

As an independent student I have found the work of these critics valuable because it insisted on “the text as the starting-point of criticism”.

. . . And in general the kind of reading which they offer is the kind of reading which, in my view, ought to be the ideal of the ordinary reader.

(1950: ix-x)

This privileging of the text as the starting point of criticism enabled Williams to be explicit in his opposition to the critical practice that had become associated with Marxism. All criticism, Williams insisted,

[. . .] all attempts at correlation, must begin from the fact of the work. It is perfectly possible to believe that *Wuthering Heights* is a statement on emergent class-

used may be found in *The Communist Manifesto, A Modern Edition* (Engels 1888: 79-87).

¹⁰ See ‘Culture is Ordinary’ (1958b: 7).

consciousness and that Heathcliff represents the proletariat (as I have seen recently publicly argued). But it is not possible to believe this if one reads Emily Brontë's novel.

(1950: 103)

Williams goes on to point out that what he calls the 'cruder psycho-analytical' theories of literature, together with certain other political and historical theories represent a failure of reading. He attempts to place what he regards as the outrages and failures of Soviet Marxist literary criticism in a wider context:

On one side can be seen the material distortion which one theory has caused. The Soviet authorities have defined the purpose of literature as being

to aid in the education of the people, especially the youth, to answer their questions, inspire people with courage, faith in their cause, and the determination to overcome all obstacles . . . to reflect the image of Soviet man, brought up by the Bolshevik party, tempered in the fire of patriotic war . . . to represent the finest aspects and qualities of Soviet humanity.

Various works, including most of modern Western literature, have been dismissed as

morbid introspection; sickly admiration of suffering and misery; pessimism and decadence, superficiality and mysticism; tastes inclined towards allegory . . . inflated complexity . . . petty personal feelings; rummagings in little souls.

It is very easy to dismiss this as "totalitarian" and to murmur complacent things about the "creative spirit". The Soviet attitude, which is certainly deplorable, is far from being the only material distortion of literature which has resulted from a failure of reading. In Western civilisation, and particularly in England and America, the whole situation of literature has been transformed by the institu-

tions of mass reading, and of related forms of false or limited response.

(1950: 103-4)

There then follows a brief reflection on commercialisation and mass advertising that it is said “employs its techniques of exploitation of human irrationality and weakness” to sell books.

This apparently intermediate position between *bourgeois* or ‘high’ literary scholarship on the one hand and proletarian commitments on the other faced Williams with the necessity of creating more than a left-leaning form of practical criticism. The form of criticism promoted by Leavis and others was radical in its hostility to many aspects of capitalist culture, particularly to what Carlyle would have called ‘THE CASH NEXUS’. But it contemplated these elements of modern capitalist society – advertising, journalism, the reading ‘habit’, and commercialised popular entertainments – from the point of view of a cultivated intelligentsia living encircled upon a gradually sinking island perpetually threatened with inundation by a sea of ignorance and vulgarity.

Williams could not accommodate the elitism, wretched snobbery and even racism of the literary milieu around T. S. Eliot and some of those associated with *Scrutiny*.¹¹ The tone and class assumptions of much of this writing were profoundly foreign and even hostile to the realities of working class life during the thirties, forties and fifties. For example, to the question, ‘Why cannot literature be just enjoyed?’, Deny Thompson replied:

It must be agreed at once that there is a great deal of literature, from limericks to light fiction, which can be consumed with as much ease and enjoyment as oysters and champagne; but on the whole it is not that literature which will give lasting satisfaction.

(Thompson 1934: 13)

The refusal of L. C. Knights and others to recognise what Williams regarded as the full import of class and class conflict in

¹¹ For T. S. Eliot’s views on race, religion and tradition see *After Strange Gods* (Eliot 1933: *passim*); for a brief discussion of T. S. Eliot’s social views see (Kettle 1979: 95-113).

English culture made it inevitable that he should seek a way beyond what he regarded as the socially isolated and elitist pessimism represented by the dominant trends in English criticism.

Politics and Letters, Reading and Criticism

Williams had to find an alternative to the impasse offered by this form of criticism; he had to find the route towards a new synthesis in which the ‘masses’ were not figured as a threat to ‘minority’ culture. A new synthesis of critical practices in which serious cultural criticism equipped with the technical sophistication and classical learning available at Cambridge and elsewhere in the academy was held to be inseparable from criticism of (and, *critical engagement with*) the whole way of life and work of the great majority of the people. Williams and his associates made this clear in the editorial of the first issue of *Politics and Letters*:

In short, we must ensure that critical activity continually draws attention to ‘the best that is thought and known in the world’, while at the same time we must recognise that the mechanisms of society, acting by their own laws, must also be examined and reckoned with. No backwater social group can hope to preserve the human values of the arts merely by concentrating on personal cultivation and personal communication. But, on the other hand, the usual ‘progressive, scientific’ assessment leaves no room for anything but the satisfaction of routine appetites in group activity. It is not sufficient to label the significance attached to inwardness as ‘morbid introspection’. Nor, on the other hand, can active social participation be dismissed as a mere escape from the deeper problems of personality and tradition. There is a ‘self’ to be reckoned with at the level at which it finally comes to rest, a level which can have the sanction of our main literary tradition. But at the same time this self remains not only impotent but unexpressed unless it continually interacts with the group. For the survival of the group, diagnosis at every level is needed.

(1947a: 32)

The perspective outlined here is not simply a matter of taking Leavis and the protocols of a disciplined and professional mode of criticism to the left. It is a new position in which literature and criticism were seen as inextricably engaged with society through reflexive interaction between the individual and the group. Earlier Marxist attempts to posit the relative autonomy of culture from a particular mode of production were sidestepped by Williams in the forties.¹² He insisted, instead, on the virtues of avoiding abstraction by a determined focus upon the concrete experience of the individual. It was a political point of view in which the values of introspection — what Williams called ‘inwardness’ — were not counterposed to those of collective life or struggle, but were seen, on the contrary, as essential to it.

There can be little doubt that this point of view was explicitly socialist from the outset. Despite the tact deployed by Williams during the forties in the use of political labels or in the acknowledgement of definite affiliations his position was avowedly hostile to capitalism and actively in favour of the progress of society in a collectivist direction. In 1947 Williams put it thus:

Our precept is clear: we must, negatively, by the application of the strictest critical standards, ensure that inwardness is neither abused (becoming ‘profitable introspection’) nor set up for sale in the commercial market; and positively, we must attempt, however often we fail, to ensure that in our own inevitable development towards a planned, rational, society, the distinctive values of living embodied in our literary tradition are preserved, re-created, expanded, so that ultimately with material may grow human richness.

(1947b: 53)

The ‘planned, rational, society’ was, both in the Communist phraseology of the day and in the Labour tradition, socialist society; a society freed from the anarchy of the market and the pursuit of profit.

¹² See the discussion of the debate between A. L. Morton and F. R. Leavis in (Mulhern 1979: 65-9).

The Caudwell Controversy

Despite his continued commitment to socialism Williams had to turn firmly away from pre-war Marxist practice, yet there was still much in the work of West and Caudwell that Williams found useful in constructing an alternative to the readily available positions commanded by *Modern Quarterly*, *Scrutiny* and *Horizon*.

Indeed, it has been argued that it had been Williams's task in the forties and fifties to end the apparent externality of the debate between *Scrutiny* and Marxism. According to this account *Scrutiny* had been founded to struggle against a form of Marxism that it had created in its own image, 'as that image's negative: its scientific concepts were taken to be the categories of a cultural theory which had capitulated to the dominance of economic values in contemporary civilization.' (Pechey 1985: 65-76) Whatever the merits of this argument it is certainly true that given his politics and his interests in criticism Williams had to do something about Marxism. Williams had to tackle what Leavis had called 'the dogma of the priority of economic conditions' (Leavis 1932: 167), the dogma which had been so concretely addressed in 1937 in Knights's *Drama & Society in the Age of Jonson*. Williams had to find some way of challenging the idea that there were direct causal relationships between modes of production, relations of production, the resulting cultural matrices and particular works of art. Moreover, he had to do this without surrendering to the idea that class relations and material circumstance were anything other than essential in the processes of cultural formation. And, he had to set about this task with the comparatively meagre resources at his disposal.

It is not surprising therefore that his early works eschew explicit association with Marxism. However, it is clear that during the forties and early fifties Williams worked hard at trying to approach many of the difficulties inherent in the Marxist analysis of literary and artistic production in a new way. And, in this work some of the insights, if not the conclusions, of the pre-war Marxist critics suggest a consciousness of the range of difficulties that Williams had to address. For example, Caudwell wrote of the relations between the 'base' and 'superstructure' in the following manner:

Social consciousness is not a mirror-image of social being. If it were, it would be useless, a mere fantasy. It is material, possessed of mass and inertia, composed of real things – philosophies, language habits, churches, judiciaries, police. If social consciousness were but a mirror-image, it could change like an image without the expenditure of energy when the object which it mirrored changed. But it is more than that. It is a functional superstructure which interacts with the foundations, each altering the other. There is a coming-and-going between them. So, life, arising from dead matter, turns back on it and changes it. The process is evident in the simplest use of language. The word is social, representing existing conscious formulations. But to wish to speak, we wish to say something new, arising from our life experience, from our being. And, therefore, we use the Word, with a metaphor or in a sentence, in such a way that it has a slightly fresh significance nearer to our own new experience.

(Caudwell 1938: 25-26)

This process of interaction between the base and superstructure in which Caudwell attributes a dynamic material role to consciousness and the products of culture is suggestive of a position lying some way beyond simple economic determinism in which it might be supposed that economic relations are always prior. Flowing from this kind of observation it is clear Caudwell could conclude that:

Man himself is composed like society of current active being and inherited conscious formulations. He is somatic and psychic, instinctive and conscious, and these opposites interpenetrate. He is formed, half rigid, in the shape of the culture he was born in, half fluid and new and insurgent, sucking reality through his instinctive roots. Thus he feels, right in the heart of him, this tension between being and thinking, between new being and old thought, a tension which will give rise by synthesis to new thought. He feels as if the deepest instinctive part of him and the most valuable is being dragged away from his

consciousness by events. The incomplete future is dragging at him, but because instinctive components of the psyche are the oldest, he often feels this to be the past dragging at him.

(Caudwell 1938: 26-27)

Caudwell wrote in a similar vein about art. All art he believed was the product of the tension between changing social relations and outmoded consciousness. This perpetual conflict perpetually gave rise to new art, expressive of the new consciousness of the newly emergent 'system of social relations', in a process that perpetually absorbed and resituated the art of the past (Caudwell 1938: 54).

Now, whether intended or not, Caudwell's position was a challenge to the idea of materialism that had arisen within the official communist movement. This view held that thought and consciousness was merely a reflection of the material world and of material circumstances. As Stalin put it:

Further, if nature, being, the material world, is primary, and mind, thought, is secondary, derivative; if the material world represents objective reality existing independently of the mind of men, while the mind is a reflection of this objective reality, it follows that the material life of society, its being, is also primary, and its spiritual life secondary, derivative, and that the material life of society is an objective reality existing independently of the will of men, while the spiritual life of society is a reflection of this object reality, a reflection of being.

Hence the source of formation of the spiritual life of society, the origin of social ideas, social theories, political views and political institutions, should not be sought for in the ideas, theories, views and political institutions themselves, but in the conditions of the material life of society, in social being, of which these ideas, theories, views, etc., are the reflection.

(Stalin 1938: 15)

Stalin, of course, did not deny a degree of 'reciprocity' between ideas and the material conditions of social life but it was pretty

clear that the emphasis lay with the priority and primacy of material and economic conditions.¹³

The tension between Caudwell's understanding of these issues and the official line came to a head during 1950-1 in the pages of the Communist Party's literary journal *Modern Quarterly*. Curiously, Williams implied in 1979 that he had not known of this dispute within the Communist Party at the time:

I have just read Edward Thompson's paper on Caudwell, in which he describes the inner party arguments about Caudwell in the late forties. My most immediate response was: 'Why weren't you writing about this at the time in *Politics and Letters*?'

(1979b: 77)

The journal *Politics and Letters* had gone out of existence two years before the Caudwell Discussion in the pages of *Modern Quarterly*.¹⁴ Although Williams remembers withdrawing from political and social engagement for a time after the collapse of *Politics and Letters* in 1948, it is unlikely that he was unaware of this debate at the time, both because during the early fifties he had many informal and professional associations with leftist and communist critics, adult educators, historians, and activists, and because the 'Caudwell controversy' had, as E. P. Thompson put it, broken 'the surface of the British Communist Party's normally monolithic press': it was, despite being trimmed by editorial caution and dishonesty, a *public* debate.¹⁵ It was a public debate about literary criticism and would have been of interest to Williams and to most of his professional associates at the time.¹⁶

¹³ For Joseph Stalin's thoughts on reciprocity see *Dialectical and Historical Materialism* (Stalin 1938: 16)

¹⁴ The 'Caudwell Discussion' ran through an entire year's issues of *Modern Quarterly* with contributions from fourteen critics: Maurice Cornforth (Winter 1950-1); George Thomson (Spring 1951); Alan Bush, Montagu Slater, Alick West, G. M. Mathews, Jack Beeching, Peter Cronin (Summer 1951); Margot Heinemann, Edward York, Werner Thierry, G. Robb, J. D. Bernal, Edwin S. Smith, Maurice Cornforth (Autumn 1951). See also Hynes 1970: 20-23.

¹⁵ (Thompson 1977: 232). For Williams's informal associations with Communist Party members at the time see Williams (1979b: 92). See also (Inglis 1995: 107-135).

¹⁶ Certainly, Williams knew of this debate by the completion of *Culture and Society* in March 1956. Issue numbers 3 and 4 of *Modern Quarterly*, 1951,

Raymond Williams was also aware of other useful questions arising from the work of pre-war Marxist criticism. For example, the chapter 'Form and Content' in Alick West's *Crisis and Criticism* reveals West striving towards a materialist approach to culture and criticism that, like Caudwell's, was expressive of a move beyond the confines set by Lenin's *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* (Lenin 1908), and the Communist Party of the Soviet Union's dogmatic reading of it.¹⁷ In 'Form and Content' West discussed the role of art in a dynamic way and the role of formal changes in both indicating and instantiating the actual process of social change. It was an impressive position straining at the boundaries of contemporary Marxist 'reflection' theory:

The artist not only feels the social energy producing man and his world, as we tried to show in the examination of the sonnet, as far as we took it. He also feels the change in the form of its organisation. Literature gives us not only the sense of the social organism, but of the changing social organism.

Just as in general literature does not use words as given things to describe objects as given things, but expresses through them the life which has made them, so literature does not merely assert the fact or the desirability of the change from one social form to another. That kind of statement necessarily assumes the existence of what is changing. But literature conveys a sense of the subject of the change by showing different phases of the movement of the change. As idiom appeals directly to the bodily activity and not only to reason, so literature gives not the abstract, general formulation of the change, but the actual process of its achievement.

(West 1937d: 95)

Alick West believed that in the expression of social change literature 'employs the contrast between the change and the continuity of what changes, the end of the old and its permanence in the new'. This position is considerably more than a pious

are cited in connection with an evaluation of Caudwell in *Culture and Society*, in endnotes to pages 277; 279 and 282 (1958a: 353-4).

¹⁷ See the *History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Bolsheviks)* (CPSU 1938: 105-131).

reiteration of ‘the dialectic’ and the ‘reciprocity’ that Stalin was prepared to endorse, it is an attempt to work out the significance of the creative process in a manner that does justice to the complexity and difficulty of the enterprise.

While it is, of course, true that Williams was very unhappy about the employment of notions like instinct and, in the case of Caudwell, of ‘genotypes’,¹⁸ there is much in these pre-war books that is familiar. In their tone, and in their striving to articulate difficult, and almost untheorised relationships, they anticipate some of the concerns of Williams in *Preface to Film, Drama in Performance* and *Culture and Society*. Consequently, it is difficult to believe that they played no part in the development and introduction of ideas like *the structure of feeling* and the ‘materiality of culture’ in Williams’s oeuvre and in his sustained rejection of the distinction between ‘base’ and ‘superstructure’.

Constructing An Alternative Tradition

It is evident that Williams could not simply employ the insights of Caudwell or West without an enormous amount of new work and rigorous analysis. Their confusion at times led to a kind of self-contained circularity and to ‘idealism’ in their conception of an economy of energy, activity and feeling which they thought gave rise to the power to create and recreate the world. For example, West argued:

The energy attached to our basic social experiences is available for the perception – which is an act, not a passive event – of the particular content. It comes alive for us, because for the moment we see, like the writer, with our full social being. The resulting sense of beauty makes us feel the power to create a human world.

The basis of this interpretation of the value of literature is, as already said, Marx’s development of romanticism. It attempts to use Marx’s work to give material meaning to the ideas of Shelley and Coleridge that a poem and a society are organic in the same way, that relations in society constitute beauty in art.

¹⁸ See *Politics and Letters* (1979b: 183).

The relation of literature as art, distinguishable from other literary matter, to the social and economic development that determines all literary production, good, bad and indifferent, is through the fact that the economic basis is not an automatic machine, but living men and women, whose energy has to be organised. Good literature contributes to that organisation and to the changing of it; bad literature consumes its products, and debases them.

(West 1937d: 99)

Indeed, this kind of speculation led Williams to observe sourly that it was 'saying much less than it seems' (1958a: 276). In *Culture and Society* by citing short passages from the chapter, 'Form and Content', and the following chapter, 'The Relativity of Literary Value', Williams decided to focus upon the dangers of direct intrusion of political affiliations into criticism arising from West's position:

From this it is only a step (although West, to do him justice, does not take it, insisting on the reality of aesthetic judgement) to the kind of literary criticism which has made Marxism notorious: 'Is this work socialist or not in tendency? is it helping forward the most creative movement in society?' where literature is defined solely in terms of its political affiliations. Marxists, more than anyone else, need to repudiate this kind of end-product, in practice as firmly as in theory. But one can see how a potentially valuable argument is distorted, throughout, by an assumed need to arrive at this kind of conclusion, or at one resembling it. It is a conclusion, moreover, with which there seems no need for Marx to be saddled.

(1958a: 276)

It is understandable that Williams emphasised these political dangers at the time and chose to reiterate and underline them in the conclusion to his discussion of Marxism in *Culture and Society*. However, he also chose to inflect his criticisms of the aspirational bent of pre-war Marxist writers in a way that attempted to open a debate on the nature of Marxism:

It is still Marxist to find this ‘the desired, the possible’ in emergent social forces, which are already active and conscious in the social process. But there has been a distinct tendency, in English writers, to find ‘the desired, the possible’ in terms of the ‘inner energy’ of the individual, of which Caudwell wrote. This, while it may be an improvement of Marx, would seem to deny his basic proposition about ‘existence’ and ‘consciousness’. In fact, as we look at the English attempt at a Marxist theory of culture, what we see is an interaction between Romanticism and Marx, between the idea of culture which is the major English tradition and Marx’s brilliant revaluation of it. We have to conclude that the interaction is as yet far from complete.

(1958a: 279-280)

In making this point regarding *interaction* Williams is also referring back to a discussion of interaction earlier in the chapter where, by quoting Plekhanov, he was able to emphasise that *by itself* interaction explains nothing. The important matter was to ‘ascertain the attributes of the interacting forces’ (1958a: 268). Indeed, Williams had set out in 1953 to develop a thorough understanding of one of these interacting elements with his essay, ‘The Idea of Culture’;¹⁹ and with the publication of his chapter, ‘Marxism and Culture’, in *Culture and Society* in 1958 he opened work on another of these interacting elements. Despite the deft manner in which he placed distance between himself and Marxism he was able to identify and foreground the important issues concerning the employment of the binary opposition ‘base’ and ‘superstructure’ arising from Marx’s ‘Preface to the *Critique of Political Economy* (1859)’. It was a debate that was to continue for many years and Williams sustained its principal terms and the concerns upon which it centred throughout the shifting political circumstances and affiliations in the decades that followed. In 1956 he explained it thus:

¹⁹ Williams (1953a: 239-266). See also (Eliot 1948: 227-243) and Williams’s discussion of Eliot’s conception of culture as ‘a whole way of life’ in Williams (1958a: 227-243).

In all these points there would seem to be a general inadequacy, among Marxists, in the use of ‘culture’ as a term. It normally indicates, in their writings, the intellectual and imaginative products of a society; this corresponds with the weak use of ‘superstructure’. But it would seem that from their emphasis on the interdependence of all elements of social reality, and from their analytic emphasis on movement and change, Marxists should logically use ‘culture’ in the sense of a whole way of life, a general social process. The point is not merely verbal, for the emphasis in this latter use would make impossible the mechanical procedures which I have criticized, and would offer a basis for more substantial understanding. The difficulty lies, however, in the terms of Marx’s original formulation: if one accepts ‘structure’ and ‘superstructure’, not as terms of a suggestive analogy, but as descriptions of reality, the errors naturally follow. Even if the terms are seen as those of an analogy, they need, as I have tried to suggest, amendment.

(1958a: 282)

He continued to put distance between himself and what he called, variously, pseudo-Marxists and Party-Marxists and he was prepared to express solidarity with those who had been in the Communist Party and to explain and defend their tardiness in leaving it.²⁰ Despite considerable pressures in that direction Williams did not become an anti-communist, least of all an anti-Marxist. He was prepared to attack and to defend as he thought occasion and argument demanded. In 1961, for example, he approvingly quotes Caudwell in discussion of the manner in which the body and the environment are in perpetually determining relations; he associated Caudwell’s ideas with those

²⁰ Williams, because of his high regard for loyalty, continued to be sympathetic to those who valued their membership of the Communist Party. He made this explicit in his essay ‘The New Party Line?’ for *Essays in Criticism* (1957: 68-76). He repeated these sentiments two years latter in ‘The New British Left’ for *Partisan Review* (1960b: 341-347), and does not appear to have expressed views to the contrary in subsequent years. For an interesting discussion of the complex relationships between the Communist Party and its former members during the nineteen-fifties and sixties see Michael Kenny’s essay ‘Communism and the New Left’ (Kenny: 1995b).

of Coleridge when he wrote of ‘the primary imagination’ as ‘the living Power and prime Agent of all human perception . . . a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation’ (1961a: 36-37).²¹

Theory: Williams’s Independent Course

The nature and texture of Williams’s socialism saturated every aspect of his criticism. It resulted in a set of ideas concerning literature, artistic production in general, and the future of society that I have called the ‘aesthetic of emancipation’. This is not a name that Raymond Williams used to characterise the intention of his work. In Williams’s writing the words ‘aesthetic’ and ‘emancipation’, and their conjunction, would probably have been the occasion for a storm of qualifying clauses that would have swept away the utility of the phrase. However, it is a phrase that gives coherence to the critical strategies that Williams developed. It has the virtue of not loading them down with theoretical perspectives foreign to their composition, it indicates the inextricable unity he proposed between sensibility and politics, and by combining the word *aesthetic* with the word *emancipation* it perhaps echoes the distinctive conjuncture he staged between *structure* and *feeling*.

Apart from a passing reference in *Keywords* in the entry on ‘Aesthetic’ Williams does not discuss the work of Alexander Baumgarten or Immanuel Kant. His aesthetic ideas were not concerned with the transcendental. Similarly, references to Adorno, Benjamin and Marcuse are sprinkled lightly across his oeuvre after the mid-sixties never amounting to sustained engagement or serious studies; a less well-known figure like R. G. Collingwood escapes his notice altogether. Karl Marx, Georg Lukács, Antonio Gramsci, Bertolt Brecht, Lucien Goldmann and Rudolf Bahro fare somewhat better but recourse to these thinkers is also eclectic. In Williams’s work reference to these writers is broadly determined by the need for augmentation, intellectual lustre, or illustration that arose directly within his own analysis rather than in thorough or sustained attempts at explication,

²¹See also (1979b: 127). For an interesting valuation of Caudwell’s *Illusion and Reality* against the Caudwell texts favoured by Williams, *Studies in a Dying Culture* and *Further Studies in a Dying Culture*, see (Mulhern 1974: 37-58).

critique or even polemic. Terry Eagleton made a similar point when he noted that Williams's deep rootedness in the literary and political heritage of Britain had 'partly closed him to intellectual evolutions elsewhere' (Eagleton 1976: 35).

To put it bluntly, Williams ploughed his own furrow, developed his own analysis and arrived at his own provisional and settled conclusions without much regard to wider intellectual currents.²²

Consequently, there is in Williams's work no equivalent to *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, (Eagleton 1990) no serious engagement with the European discourse on aesthetic. Indeed, there was at times an almost irascible tone (or perhaps it was an attitude of proletarian *ressentiment*) in his thoughts about European luminaries:

The argument will continue, and in some areas – most notably, I think, his sustained critique of 'objectified' capitalism – Lukács will remain an important point of reference. But in another sense that whole phase is ended, or ought to be ended: that movement of high intellectuals, with their own curriculum and preoccupations, towards the labour and democratic movements. Their memory can be honoured as a way of understanding and beginning to reverse the relationship, until 'the return to everyday life' is not a categorical conclusion but a hard and contested starting-point.

(1983c: 273-4)

Despite this grumpiness he could, however, be open and generous concerning European intellectual influences. In the introduction to *Marxism and Literature* he enthusiastically described his encounter with the work of French, German and Italian communist and radical intellectuals, with Marx's *Grundrisse* and other newly translated works, during the sixties and early seventies. However, he also made clear that his work, founded on his own detailed practical research and writing, was

²² For a critical but affirmative discussion of the singularity of Williams's voice see David Simpson's essay, 'Raymond Williams: Feeling for Structures, Voicing "History"' (Simpson 1992: 29-50).

to be viewed as an integrated whole from the mid-fifties to the early seventies:

To sustain analysis, discussion, and the presentation of new or modified theoretical positions, I have had to keep the book in a primarily theoretical dimension. In many quarters this will be well enough understood, and even welcomed. But I ought to say, knowing the strength of other styles of work, and in relation especially to many of my English readers, that while this book is almost wholly theoretical, *every position in it was developed from the detailed practical work that I have previously undertaken*, and from the consequent interaction with other, including implicit, modes of theoretical assumption and argument. I am perhaps more conscious than anyone of the need to give detailed examples to clarify some of the less familiar concepts, but, on the one hand, this book is intended as in some respects a starting-point for new work, and, on the other hand, some of the examples I would offer are already written in earlier books. Thus anyone who wants to know what I ‘really, practically’ mean by certain concepts can look, to take some leading instances at the exemplification of signs and notations in *Drama in Performance*; of conventions in *Drama from Ibsen to Brecht*; of structures of feeling in *Modern Tragedy*, *The Country and the City*, and *The English Novel from Dickens to Lawrence*; of traditions, institutions and formations, and of the dominant, the residual, and the emergent in parts of *Culture and Society* and in the second part of *The Long Revolution*; and of material cultural production in *Television: Technology and Cultural Form*. I would now write some of these examples differently, from a more developed theoretical position and with the advantage of a more extended and a more consistent vocabulary (the latter itself exemplified in *Keywords*). But the examples need to be mentioned, as a reminder that this book is not a separated work of theory; it is an argument based on what I have learned from all that previous work, set into a new and conscious relation with Marxism. [My Emphasis]

(1977a: 6)

The turbulent decade, 1965-1975, certainly resulted in an encounter between Williams and European theoretical writing and with currents of Marxism with which he had hitherto been unfamiliar.²³ John Higgins in his book, *Raymond Williams, Literature, Marxism and cultural materialism*, echoed Eagleton's observation when he described Williams's imperturbable response to European influence in the following manner:

Though he is now able to refer to a European-wide range of work in what he termed 'Marxism's alternative tradition', what is most notable is the way the arguments of this tradition are seen as supporting Williams's own emphases on the importance of culture to social and political reproduction, with all the strengths and weakness of that emphasis.

(Higgins 1999: 122)

These foreign influences did not disturb Williams's empirical procedure of doing the practical work and then deriving his theories and theoretical modifications from it. He was sanguine about the relationship between his work and those of people who might be regarded as having a more precisely articulated mode of inquiry or argument, or indeed a more theoretically sophisticated outlook. He adopted a kind of *balance of respective weaknesses* view, generously seeing the advantages and disadvantages of different kinds of work. Comparing his style of work with that of Lucien Goldmann he said:

Looking at our work it could be said that we lacked a centre, in any developed philosophy or sociology. Looking at

²³ For reference to his discovery of Lukács and Goldmann during the sixties see (Williams 1971a: 20). Antonio Gramsci is not mentioned in this essay of 1971 as Williams does not engage with Gramsci's work until later in the 1970s. Although six volumes of his works were published in Italian in Turin between 1948 and 1951, an English translation of some of his works, *The Modern Prince and other Essays*, translated and edited by Louis Marks, (London: Lawrence and Wishart) was not published until 1957. It took several more years for discussion of Gramsci's writing to become widespread among new left intellectuals. The influential, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, edited and translated by Quentin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith, London: Lawrence and Wishart, was not published until 1971.

his work— and for all his differences he was representative of the whole other tradition – it could be said that he had a received centre, at the level of reasoning, before the full contact with substance began.

(1971a: 22)

Williams could sustain this relaxed empiricism because a more dynamic interaction between highly articulated theoretical positions and the modalities and assumptions of his practical enquiries were not, given his fixed aesthetic commitments, deemed necessary. Williams certainly did not share Perry Anderson's angry dismay at 'The Absent Centre': the 'mediocrity and wizened provincialism' of intellectual life in England (Anderson 1968: 3-57). He evidently felt at home within the intellectual habits and assumptions, if not the institutional structures, of 'our' national tradition.²⁴

Marxism Reasserted

Williams had not 'broken from Marxism' in the years 1941-1945. He had left the Communist Party some time in 1941 and thereafter refused the Party's guidance in literary and political matters.²⁵ Neither did he respect the apostolic succession from Marx running through Engels,

²⁴ See 'The Peculiarities of the English', (Thompson 1965) and 'The Poverty of Theory: or An Orrery of Errors', (Thompson, 1978). This relaxed approach towards empiricism and a general suspicion of theory was shared from the left to the right. Roger Scruton remarked in 1985: 'Every reader of *The Poverty of Theory* must feel grateful for the existence of a left-wing thinker who is determined to retain both common sense and intellectual honesty.' (Scruton 1985: 15) Williams shared Thompson's hostility to what he always called 'abstraction' and, although always less irate than Thompson on the matter, he did not value the theoretical procedures of continental Marxists. Williams's ease with the garden variety of English empiricism (rather than the coherent philosophical outlook) can be extended to his sanguine approach to matters of race and gender and sexuality, and to his quietism on the war in Ireland (1972e: 163-167; 1972f: 168; 1983b: 194-5). These issues did not in any active sense inform his view of socialism or influence his cultural or political agenda.

²⁵ Williams did not recollect 'leaving' the Communist Party. However, he was an active member during 1939 and 1940 and continued to think of himself as a Communist throughout the War. But his membership did not survive his entry into the army in 1941 — it was apparently never explained to him that it was possible to maintain active Party membership in the army (1979b: 53-54).

Plekhanov, Lenin, and Stalin to the Communist Party's official literary and cultural journals. Consequently, it is unsurprising that he should react with indifference to those new claimants of Marxist orthodoxy in the sixties and seventies who, incidentally, with little or no connection with working class organisations in Britain, had a less secure grasp on the mantle of orthodoxy than their predecessors. He made his attitude clear in 1971 when he explained his development in the sixties in the following manner:

This being so, it is easy to imagine my feelings when I discovered an active and developed Marxist theory, in the work of Lukács and Goldmann, which was exploring many of the same areas with many of the same concepts, but also with others in a quite different range. The fact that I learned simultaneously that it had been denounced as heretical, that it was a return to Left Hegelianism, left-bourgeois idealism, and so on, did not, I am afraid, detain me. If you're not in a church you're not worried about heresies; it is only (but it is often) the most routinized Marxism, or the most idealist revolutionism, which projects that kind of authoritative, believing, formation. The only serious criterion was actual theory and practice.
(1971a: 20)²⁶

The political shifts indicated by the dismay and disappointment at the character of Harold Wilson's government led to the formation of the May Day Manifesto Committee in 1966. The

²⁶ These assertions concerning the nature of Williams's uncertain and tenuous relationship with Marxism were to continue for some years. Terry Eagleton argued that 'experience' had a special role in Williams's thinking; that it supplied 'at once' its formidable power' and its 'drastic limitation', leading to 'Left-Leavisism' and much else that undermined the development of 'a Marxist aesthetics' (Eagleton 1976: 22-44). In 1991 Francis Mulhern was more subtle when he said of Williams: 'Expressly at odds with the perceived positivism of historical-materialist tradition and unconcerned to claim the title of Marxist, deeply attentive to Romantic and other ethical lineages of social criticism and particularly engaged with the positions of F. R. Leavis, Williams's earlier writings are indeed a part of this mid-century constellation Adorno, Sartre, Goldmann, et.al.. But the ulterior logic of his work led beyond its common terms, as was to become apparent in the new phase, whose opening may be marked by the symbolic date of 1968.' (Mulhern 1992: 11-12)

following year the *New Left May Day Manifesto* was published by ‘a group of socialist workers, writers and teachers’ and was endorsed by 66 named individuals from the new left. It was a list crowded with the names of professional writers and academics in which ‘workers’ were, perhaps inevitably, inconspicuous. Stuart Hall, Raymond Williams and Edward Thompson edited it. This was followed by an expanded version edited by Raymond Williams and published as a Penguin Special under the title, *May Day Manifesto 1968*. In both documents the most damning analysis of Labour policy was followed by a reticence characteristic of the British left actually to endorse a serious break from the old Labour Party. They threw down the gauntlet:

The purpose of any new Left must be to end this compromise. We therefore declare our intention to end the system of consensus politics, by drawing the political line where it actually is, rather than where it might be thought convenient for elections or traditional descriptions.

(Hall 1967:41)

However, the line was not drawn all that clearly, plenty of room was left for compromise and fudge:

In this necessary process, we mean, like our opponents, to keep our options open. The existing party structure is under great strain, and the pressures can be expected to increase. We do not intend to make any premature move, which would isolate the Left, or confuse its actual and potential supporters. At the same time, we mean what we say when we declare an end to tactics and to allegiances which are wholly enclosed within traditional organisational forms. If our analysis is right, then socialists must make their voices heard, again and again, not only in committee rooms and in conference halls, but among the growing majority of the people who feel no commitment to these forms.

(Hall 1967: 43)

The attitude towards the Labour Party became ever more indistinct and elliptical in the 1968 edition edited by Williams.²⁷ The Labour Party represented compromise between left and right; it was figured as an ersatz kind of coalition between the ‘traditional power structure’ and those committed to ‘working class objectives’ (1968b: 156). It was argued that the resulting consensus was ‘built around the policies of the leadership’, and:

At some critical points, as the consensus forms, the influence of the Left can be felt; assurances, at least, have to be given. But a consensus of that kind, with a bureaucratic machine behind the leadership, is very much easier to run than any real coalition. The final power, in negotiation, would be of withdrawing from the coalition, and thus affecting its strength. But when the machine, effectively, is the whole party, there is nowhere to go but out of the party, even if the policy you stick on is that approved by the majority in a constituency or at conference. Within the system, that kind of threat, which in a real coalition would be effective, can seem a kind of suicide; indeed it is much more often offered as an option by opponents than by friends

In so intractable a problem, with so much at stake, there is of course no easy answer. But the only possibility of an answer comes from telling the truth: describing the incorporation, in terms of policy and of procedures; refusing those spurts of temporary confidence which would show it other than it is; and then, in that mood, following the argument through, taking the necessary action, wherever it leads.

(1968b: 161)

This cautious truth telling was overtaken by the imaginative impact among the British left of events in Paris, Prague, Saigon, Hue, and Da Nang. Yet, the recoil from what Williams had dubbed, revolutionism, inherent in the perspective outlined by both the manifestos was accompanied among large numbers of young people on the left by a corresponding adoption of revolutionary phraseology and a commitment to the reworking of

²⁷ See §45 entitled ‘The Labour Party’ (1968b: 155-161).

communist theory. It is in these circumstances that Williams, genuinely appalled and angered by mainstream Labour politicians and the return of the Tories to government in 1970, moves to associate himself more firmly with Marxism. In 1972 he explained the tension between the new popularity of Marxism and his own student memory of it thus:

In the student generation of the last ten years there has been an active rediscovery of Marxism, but this has been little understood by their elders: for many reasons, social and political, but in part at least because most of their interested elders already know, or think they know, what Marxism is, from memories of the thirties.

(1972c: 375)²⁸

This was not ‘political opportunism’ in its corrupt or venal sense. However, Williams did take the opportunity provided by the emergence of Marxism among students and others on the new left to engage more directly with Marxist theory. This Marxism had an entirely different register from the Marxism defined by Stalin’s network of communist parties and it enabled Williams to develop his attitude to Marxism in a more sustained manner throughout the seventies. At the close of the decade he remembered:

I notice it so clearly looking back – that when I referred to this or that Marxist position, sometimes fairly and sometimes unfairly, sometimes adequately and sometimes inadequately, I was talking about the people and ideas I first focussed as Marxism when I was a student. That specific kind of Marxist milieu, which among other things did dismiss rural life, no longer exists today. It was a deficiency of my own generation that the amount of classical Marxism it actually knew was relatively small; it was also, as it happened, selected from what to me are now often the least important parts of the tradition. This is no excuse, but it is an explanation. The modifications in the intellectual milieu in England over the last ten years

²⁸ For discussion of Williams’s phrase ‘Marxism’s Alternative Tradition’ see, *Raymond Williams*, (Higgins 1999: 110-112).

have been of decisive importance to me. For now I wouldn't want to write on any question without tracing the history of it in Marxist thought and seeing where I stood in relation to that.

(1979b: 316)

With this characteristic belief in his own powers Williams reiterated and developed the ideas that he had first raised in the mid-fifties. In the essays 'Literature and Sociology' (1971a) and 'Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory' (1973b), and in his book, *Marxism and Literature* (1977a), he once again stressed the need for totality and was able to deploy his arguments with great confidence against those who favoured forms of Marxism in which linguistic and economic structures were held to be determining, confining cultural possibilities and circumscribing the range of conscious social action available to individual men and women and to the communities in which they lived:

As with 'determination', so 'overdetermination' can be abstracted to a *structure* (symptom), which then, in complex ways, 'develops' (forms, holds, breaks down) by the laws of its internal structural relations. As a form of analysis this is often effective, but in its isolation of the structure it can shift attention from the real location of all practice and practical consciousness: 'the practical activity. . . the practical process of development of men'. Any categorical objectification of determined or overdetermined structures is a repetition of the basic error of 'economism' at a more serious level, since it now offers to subsume (at times with a certain arrogance) all lived, practical and unevenly formed and formative experience.

(1977a: 88-89)

The rebarbative prose employed in *Marxism and Literature* is not the product of uncertainty or confusion; it is used in the interests of both completeness and brevity. This can be seen from the tight structure of the book, which has barely 200 pages. It is divided into three parts: Basic Concepts, Cultural Theory, Literary Theory and the reader is forced-marched through the

relevant concepts, theories, forms and practices section by section. The distinction between ‘Base’ and ‘Superstructure’ is effaced in the declaration of their indissoluble unity in the process of production, political and cultural activity, and in consciousness. The ‘productive forces’ are restored to their fullness: not only the piano is *produced*, so also is the music. Williams’s entire project is codified in terms he thought suitable for the theory-addicted young in a way that boldly challenged what he regarded as the more pessimistic aspects of structuralism. At the end of the process we are left in no doubt that the self-activity of mankind and the capacity of men and women to make and remake their world lies at the centre of Williams’s view of socialism and his view of Marxism. The two, if not synonymous, are never allowed to breathe separately:

Creative practice is thus of many kinds. It is already, and actively, our practical consciousness. When it becomes struggle – the active struggle for new consciousness through new relationships that is the ineradicable emphasis of the Marxist sense of self-creation – it can take many forms. It can be the long and difficult remaking of an inherited (determined) practical consciousness: a process often described as development but in practice a struggle at the roots of the mind – not casting off an ideology, or learning phrases about it, but confronting a hegemony in the fibres of the self and in the hard practical substance of effective and continuing relationships. It can be more evident practice: the reproduction and illustration of hitherto excluded and subordinated models; the embodiment and performance of known but excluded and subordinated experiences and relationships; the articulation and formation of latent, momentary, and newly possible consciousness.

(1977a: 212)²⁹

²⁹ See John Higgins’s interesting discussion of *Marxism and Literature*, in Chapter 6 of his *Raymond Williams*, ‘Towards a cultural materialism 1977-81’, (Higgins 1999:125-144). For a succinct expression of the meaning and reach of Williams’s cultural materialism see Francis Mulhern’s ‘Introducing Raymond Williams’ (Mulhern 1989: 3-9).

Williams did not employ Marxist theory to analyse the existing or prevailing relations in society and he was not concerned if a particular insight or innovation threatened the theoretical coherence of Marxism in any systemic sense. His approach to Marxist theory was entirely practical. If the offerings of Althusser or Lukács or Goldmann did not assist in the creation of a clear view of the potential of people for positive social action then their arguments had to be discarded or reworked and re-interpreted in a manner more congenial to expressions of hope regarding the capacity for agency residing in the people and their communities. In 1972 he explained his procedure thus:

I have put these ideas in my own words. At some point, I know, Goldmann would have wanted to put them differently – has already put them differently, in *The Hidden God*, in *Towards a Sociology of the Novel*, in another tradition and language. But this difference is less important than the ideas themselves. Goldmann's emphasis on form goes along with an emphasis on what he called 'the transindividual subject': a way of describing what I see as the social process of creation, in many activities from art to institutions, in which we can't properly speak of individual and society, individual and class, in separate ways, as if these were two abstractions confront each other: Individual and Society; Individual or Society.

In most things that matter the process of our living is beyond these abstractions. We are true subjects, bearers of consciousness, making as well as reflecting our society, and we can act together, as ourselves, or as groups against other groups, in decisive ways: often most deeply in ourselves when we are acting, thinking, feeling with others. What we can make is ours and yet goes beyond us, as indeed it often preceded us: a form we have made, often not knowing we were making it, often in temporary isolation, until others see what we have done.

(1972c: 376)

By translating the translations into his own prose, identifying their essential meaning, and supplying his preferred emphasis, Williams was able to employ much contemporary Marxist

thought for the promotion of his own critical and political enterprise. And, he remained ambivalent in his attitude towards the words ‘Marx’ and ‘Marxism’ as a flag or badge of affiliation (1975a: 65-6).³⁰

As always Williams preferred his own solution to the problems presented by political affiliation and identification. However, he never settled for the anodyne vagaries and hopes of more recent socialists;³¹ hopes which looked forward to developments ‘through which the working classes will increasingly acquire a broad emancipatory outlook’ enabling them to ‘fully realise’ their ‘potential power’ (Panitch/Leys 1998: 42).³² Williams was more explicit: the working class retained its central, even it’s determining, role. Indeed, he had his own creed in which the principal tenets of twentieth century communism concerning the role of the working class in the struggle for socialism were reshaped and reinserted into the revolutionary process in a way that radically effaced orthodox distinctions between ‘gradualism’ and ‘revolutionism’.

³⁰ See also Dennis Dworkin’s discussion of Williams’s development in relation to Marxism and to the work of Richard Hoggart, E. P. Thompson and Stuart Hall from the perspective of cultural studies in his essay ‘Cultural Studies and the Crisis in British Radical Thought’ (Dworkin: 1993).

³¹ For example, the writers of the Preface to the *Socialist Register 1998*, figure the appeal of communism as an appeal for the necessity of a ‘democratic and egalitarian social order’ without reference to the struggle for working class power: ‘The fact that this 150th anniversary of the publication of the Communist Manifesto falls within less than a decade of the collapse of Communism with a capital ‘C’, and of the parties associated with it, in no way diminishes the appeal and necessity of a cooperative, democratic and egalitarian social order. This is what might be called communism with a small ‘c’, and it poses and will always pose a threat to capitalism.’ (Panitch/Leys 1998: vii)

³² It is interesting to note the limited and anachronistic conception of culture with which Panitch and Leys sentimentally conclude their essay, ‘The Political Legacy of the Manifesto’. Here they recommend emulation of the course taken by the German Workers’ Educational Society founded in London during the 1840s: “We could do worse today than emulate their efforts, as advertised in one of the Society’s posters:

The main principle of the Society is that men can only come to liberty and self-consciousness by cultivating their intellectual faculties. Consequently, all the evening meetings are devoted to instruction. One evening English is taught, on another, geography, on a third history, on the fourth drawing and physics, on a fifth, singing, on a sixth, dancing and on the seventh communist politics.” (Panitch/Leys 1998: 43)

I believe in the necessary economic struggle of the organized working class. I believe that this is still the most creative activity in our society, as I indicated years ago in calling the great working-class institutions creative cultural achievements, as well as the indispensable first means of political struggle. I believe that it is not necessary to abandon a parliamentary perspective as a matter of principle, but as a matter of practice I am quite sure that we have to begin to look beyond it. For reasons that I described in *The Long Revolution* and again in *The May Day Manifesto* I think that no foreseeable parliamentary majority will inaugurate socialism unless there is a quite different kind of political activity supporting it, activity which is quite outside the scope or the perspective of the British Labour Party or of any other likely candidate for that kind of office. Such activity involves the most active elements of community politics, local campaigning, specialized interest campaigning: all the things that were the real achievements of the politics of the sixties and that are still notably active. But finally, for it is the sphere in which I am most closely involved, I know that there is a profoundly necessary job to do in relation to the processes of the cultural hegemony itself. I believe that the system of meanings and values which a capitalist society has generated has to be defeated in general and in detail by the most sustained kinds of intellectual and educational work. This is a cultural process which I called 'the long revolution' and in calling it 'the long revolution' I meant that it was a genuine struggle which was part of the necessary battles of democracy and of economic victory for the organized working class.

(1975a: 75-6)

By conceiving of the *long revolution* as a process in which the sustained struggle against the ideological hegemony of capital took place Williams was able to situate cultural struggle at the heart of the striving for proletarian power.