

Chapter Three: Drama, Context and History

The Time of Leavis & Bateson

The importance of social environment and of historical conditions in the formation of literature and in other aspects of cultural production had been widely recognised during the twenties and thirties by a range of different non-Marxist critics, including Middleton Murry, L. C. Knights, and M. C. Bradbrook. However, during the late forties and early fifties ‘the retreat from politics’, and most importantly a retreat from historicising literary texts, and the focus upon formal and technical concerns at the expense of judgement and evaluation created unpromising conditions for a man of Williams’s background, interests and commitments. He was acutely aware of working in a critical context and milieu that distrusted focus upon the ‘social dimension of art’; he knew that it was often feared that evaluation of poetry or drama or fiction would come to rest upon extra-literary factors. Consequently, he had a lively appreciation of the difficulties inherent in deploying critical terms in a way that would not violate the complexity and specificity of a work under consideration and yet would facilitate evaluation of it with due regard to its social timbre and the political and historical conditions of its production.

In 1979 Francis Mulhern described the critical period in which Williams was developing the structure of feeling, and the ideas figured by the phrase, in a manner which gives some indication of the scale of the difficulties with which Williams was faced:

The precepts embodied in *Scrutiny*’s critical practice had as a rule been affirmed in polemical disagreement with two complementary deformations of ‘genuine’ literary criticism: one, the positivist concern with literary-historical ‘fact’, in which the question of value was either disregarded or spuriously deferred; the other, the imposition of aprioristic ‘systems’ of analysis and judgment whereby ‘first-hand response’ was stifled by ‘abstraction’. This pattern of argument persisted into the later forties and early fifties, but with largely altered contents. The old

antagonists of the thirties were no longer significant presences in English criticism: all but the most conservative exponents of traditional literary scholarship had reached some kind of accommodation with the 'critical revolution', which was now a full generation in the past; and interest in Marxist criticism was now confined to a dwindling and increasingly isolated minority of intellectuals. Their successors in the post-war period were the unwontedly technical forms of theory and 'explication' made current by the American New Critics, and the doctrinally-motivated criticism of Christian Discrimination.

(Mulhern 1979: 251)¹

It was in this context that any use of the notion of 'social context' provoked exhaustive attention from F. R. Leavis who observed in 1953 'that 'social' is an insidious word' (Leavis 1953a: 295); 'context' did not fare any better. This was during the course of an attack upon F. W. Bateson's article, 'The Function of Criticism at the Present Time'. Leavis made his case with considerable clarity:

The seriousness with which he takes his 'social context' as a fact, determinate and determining, is complete. 'It is to be noted', he tells us, 'that the culminating desideratum, the final criterion of correctness, is the awareness of the appropriate social context.' He goes on:

The discipline of contextual reading, as defined and illustrated in the preceding paragraphs, should result in the reconstruction of a human situation that is demonstrably implicit in the particular literary work under discussion. Within the limits of human fallibility, the interpretation will be *right*. But the process provides no guarantee, of

¹ Mulhern also notes: "'The return of religion as a grouping-force of novelists and critics' was mentioned by a reviewer in the *Times Literary Supplement* as one of the defining features of English literary culture in the later forties; others were a retreat from politics and 'the assimilation and forgetting of Freud' ('Review of Reviews,' January 8, 1949, p. 32)." (Mulhern 1979: 251 n.2)

course, that the reader's response to the essential drama, however correctly that is reconstructed, will be equally correct.

I confess that I don't know what this means; but Mr Bateson would seem to be suggesting that one may reconstruct the 'essential drama' of a poem correctly without responding to it correctly; that the taking possession of it is independent of valuing. That is an error of Mr Bateson's which I remember to have corrected some eighteen years ago. He insists, however, that 'the question of values must not be excluded'. (Leavis 1953a: 294)

Leavis triumphantly notes, that despite Bateson's imperfect grasp of Leavis's point and the resulting danger of backsliding, Bateson has had to comply with his master's injunctions:

I am glad that Mr Bateson took the point. He sums up a discussion thus (*Essays in Criticism*, April 1953, p. 235):

'And the moral? It is, I suppose, that a poem cannot in fact be discussed at any level – above the bibliographical at any rate – unless it has first been read critically. Other people's criticism won't do instead.'

This is what I told him. I regret to have to say that it is wholly characteristic of his work, in its relation to what has appeared in *Scrutiny*, that his grasp of a point he has in a way taken should be so imperfect. (Leavis 1953a: 294 f.n.1)

The temper of these times is further revealed by the tone of Bateson's reply, which he opens with an explanation of the difficulties under which he wrote his offending piece during his stay 'in a public ward while recovering from an operation' which he suggested accounted for the 'passages in it that are ill

considered or clumsily expressed' (Bateson 1953: 303).² This acknowledgement of difficulty and error, which he reiterates at the close of his reply, was evidently part of an elaborate courtesy in which Bateson sought to smooth ruffled feathers rather than concede any ground that he considered vital to his argument:

My mistake, according to Dr Leavis, is that by introducing this notion of context I am abandoning 'something determinate – something indubitably *there*' for something indeterminate. 'The poem', he says, 'is a determinate thing; it is *there*', whereas 'there is nothing to correspond – nothing answering to Mr Bateson's "social context" that can be set over against the poem, or induced to establish itself round it as a kind of framework'. Dr Leavis does not explain, however, in what sense the poem is *there* (wherever *there* is). I imagine he must mean that the poem, as we meet it on the printed page, consists of certain specific words arranged in a certain determinate order. But strictly speaking, of course, there is nothing *there*, nothing objectively apprehensible, except a number of conventional black marks. The meanings of the words, and therefore *a fortiori* the meaning of the whole poem, are emphatically not *there*. To discover their meaning we have to ask what they meant to their author and his original readers, and if we are to recover their full meaning, the connotations as well as the denotations, we shall often find ourselves committed to precisely those stylistic, intellectual and social explorations that Dr Leavis now deplors. There is no alternative – *except to invent the meanings ourselves*. Dr Leavis is in fact opening the door to sheer subjectivism. The degree and intensity of the exploration will naturally depend upon the remoteness of the particular poem from ourselves, but some contextual readjustment is inevitable all the time, even in reading a contemporary. I was trying in my article to analyse this process of adjustment.

(Bateson 1953: 307)

² For a detailed account of the milieu in which Bateson worked through the thirties, forties, and fifties, see Brian Doyle's *English & Englishness* (Doyle 1989: 68-111).

Leavis's response was simply to assert the correctness of his original argument, albeit in meticulous detail, and to firmly reject Bateson's elaborate courtesies:

The apologies with which he incongruously ends his rejoinder are wholly out of place. There is no danger, I assure him, of my being hurt, and if I have found his criticisms deplorable, it is not because they are 'unfair', or damaging to *me*.

(Leavis 1953b: 311)

The Structure of Feeling

It was in this critical climate that Williams had to find a means of expressing the significance of social relationships in the constitution of the experience of a work of art, and in the experience that the successful artist reproduces, in a richer, more rounded manner, than 'context' or 'social context' could convey. He was, in fact, striving for a figure that could do service for the word *sensibility* and, simultaneously, reposition it so as to be able to encapsulate a total response to a historically specific matrix of social experiences, ideas, thoughts and feelings. He thought that the use of the word *sensibility* had become 'equivalent to the formation of a particular mind: a whole activity, a whole way of perceiving and responding' which could not 'be reduced to either 'thought' or feeling' (1976a: 282-3).

However, *sensibility* had retained its associations with *taste* and *cultivation* and the assertion of the personal qualities of cultural and emotional refinement as evident and unexamined social facts. But he needed the other dimensions of the word including the sense of an *organised* response to experience. It is this that necessitates the pairing of 'structure' with 'feeling', because in linking structure with feeling he was able to employ the sense of an elusive, yet discoverable, organisation of feeling, which extended beyond the merely personal aspect of feeling. This was a use of structure that, Williams thought, arose in the shift in linguistics from historical and comparative studies to work

focused upon internal analysis of languages. This use of structure and structural presented difficulties and presaged confusions. However, the word structure, he noted, could be applied to ‘deep internal relations, discoverable only by special kinds of observation and analysis.’ He explained the problem thus:

Structure was preferred to *process* because it emphasized a particular and complex organization of relations, often at very deep levels. But what were being studied were nevertheless living processes, while structure, characteristically, from its uses in building and engineering, and in anatomy, physiology and botany, expressed something relatively fixed and permanent, even hard.

However,

The intensive development of notions of structure in physics, though in themselves demonstrating the difference between *static* and *dynamic* structures, added to the sense of deep internal relations, discoverable only by special kinds of observation and analysis. (1976a: 303)

It was this sense of structure – as a *dynamic form of organisation* – that Williams wanted to link with feeling to produce a figure capable of taking sensibility beyond its associations with the refinement of individuals possessed of superior kinds of emotional responses.

In 1954 when Williams first introduced the phrase structure of feeling in *Preface to Film*³ he was precise about the meaning he attached to the term. He did not, at this time, associate it with the stance of particular individuals, except insofar as their work or outlook could be said to realise some major change in the way human beings understood themselves and their fundamental relationships with each other, with nature, the firmament, and with God. He argued that the shift from the pattern of early miracle plays, in which individual character is said to barely exist

³ Williams refers to the ‘fundamental pattern’ of artworks in *Reading and Criticism* (1950: 74), although it is a moot point whether this is an embryonic form of ‘structure of feeling’. See John Higgins’s discussion of Williams’s early use of ‘structure or pattern’ as the forerunner of ‘structure of feeling’ (Higgins 1999: 19).

to 'the wholly different and more complex pattern of an Elizabethan tragedy, in which individual character, in a particular sense, can be the primary stress', were shifts in conventions which revealed radical changes in the structure of feeling (1954b: 22). Similarly, in the course of a brief discussion in which he contrasted the conventions of the religious drama of the ancient Greeks with those of modern naturalism Williams detected the beginnings of analytical awareness of changes in dramatic conventions which exposed a major shift concerning the gods, God, and the secular, in the writings of Ibsen and Strindberg, which he thought were of fundamental importance because, 'All changes in the methods of an art like the drama are related, essentially, to changes in man's radical structure of feeling.' (1954b: 23)

Such changes of course did not have to be fully conscious or general. They might take root initially only among a small minority, they might be attributed to purely personal originality on the part of the artist or artists involved, but if they genuinely registered real changes in the structure of feeling, they would eventually displace existing conventions and would themselves become the new standard for new conventions.

Consequently, Williams did not believe that words like 'ideas' or phrases like 'general life' were adequate to the task of grasping the role and force of the *relatedness* or consonance of all the products and practices of a given period. He wanted to be able to refer to that element of a culture for which there is no external counterpart. The element, which after everything else has been analysed and accounted for in a particular period, remains ungraspable and unrealisable except through the experience of the work of art as a whole.

This ambition was undermined by the attempt to employ this figure in a manner in which it was detached from a precise enquiry into the nature of what exactly it was that he was seeking to realise: the sensibility of a well-defined historical period. Although, as he had understandably said, it was outside the function of his short essay in *Preface to Film* to chart the detailed changes in convention that revealed profound shifts in the structure of feeling he had not succeeded in doing this in *Drama from Ibsen to Eliot*, and he did not establish the configuration of the structure of feeling or register the changes realised in the

works discussed in subsequent editions, or in *Drama in Performance*.

In 1968 in the introduction to *Drama from Ibsen to Brecht* Williams acknowledged the difficulty caused by the instability of terms and expressions in his writing on drama over the preceding twenty years. He explained that he had ‘become more aware of the theoretical problems’, and of the ‘changing definitions’ associated with the ideas and the vocabulary with which he had developed the studies that made up the book (1968a: 2). He did not, however, discuss in any detail how terms had changed or how his use of them had altered, but he did clarify what he now meant by them. Of structure of feeling he said:

In pointing to what a particular man has done, in a particular style, we are often in the position of learning what that style is, what it is capable of doing. The individual dramatist has done this, yet what he has done is part of what we then know about a general period or style.

It is to explore this essential relationship that I use the term ‘structure of feeling’. What I am seeking to describe is the continuity of experience from a particular work, through its particular form, to its recognition as a general form, and then the relation of this general form to a period. (1968a: 9)

This passage is then followed by a lengthy paragraph, which is for the most part, culled from *Preface to Film*. However, he adds some new comments explaining that the element left after close analysis of a work – for which there is no external counterpart – is the structure of feeling and that:

It is as firm and definite as ‘structure’ suggests, yet it is based in the deepest and often least tangible elements of our experience. It is a way of responding to a particular world which in practice is not felt as one way among others – a conscious ‘way’ – but is, in experience, the only way possible. Its means, its elements, are not propositions or techniques; they are embodied, related feelings. In the same sense, it is accessible to others – not by formal argument or by professional skills, on their own, but by

direct experience – a form and a meaning, a feeling and a rhythm – in the work of art, the play, as a whole.

(1968a: 10)

Williams goes on to explain that it is easier to see this structure in the drama of the past than it is to distinguish it while it is still being lived. However:

It is even possible, though very difficult even by comparison with the analysis of past structures, to begin to see this contemporary structure directly, rather than only in the power of particular works. Many such expositions are too early, too superficial or too rigid, but it remains true that discovery of actual contemporary structures of feeling (usually masked by their immediate and better recognized predecessors) is the most important kind of attention to the art and society of one's own time.

The artist's importance, in relation to the structure of feeling, has to do above all with the fact that it is a *structure*: not an unformed flux of new responses, interests and perceptions, but a formation of these into a new way of seeing ourselves and our world. Such a formation is the purpose of all authentic contemporary activity, and its successes occur in fields other than art. But the artist, by the character of his work, is directly involved with just this process, from the beginning. He can only work at all as such formations become available, usually as a personal discovery and then a scatter of personal discoveries and then the manner of work of a generation. What this means, in practice, is the making of new conventions, new forms.

(1968a: 11)

So, the structure of feeling can be apprehended both in particular works and more generally. Williams continues:

It is in this respect, finally, that I see the usefulness of 'structure of feeling' as a critical term. For it directs our attention, in practical ways, to a kind of analysis which is

at once concerned with particular forms and the elements of general forms.

(1968a: 11)

He also acknowledged the dimension added to this idea of the relationship of the particular to the general by the proliferation of different structures of feeling in the twentieth century. These Williams referred to as 'alternative structures'. Identification of these alternative structures was rendered necessary because of the ways in which the works of numerous influential dramatists disrupted Williams's observation of 'a general historical development, from Ibsen to Brecht, from dramatic naturalism to dramatic expressionism' (1968a: 13-14).

From Yeats's 'failure to understand the real history of Ibsen's dramatic development' (1968a: 124) to Sean O'Casey's 'structure of feeling of the self-exile' (1968a: 166); and, from Eliot's regard for God to Harold Pinter's 'familiar' structure of feeling with its 'precarious hold on reality' (1968a: 371), Williams was certain that important choices had to be made between these 'alternative structures'. Because, although it was the case that despair, contempt, illusion, alienation and rejection had become an orthodoxy along with the preoccupation with violence and degradation that had permeated the theatre and commercial entertainment there was always, in this history of crisis, a possibility for humane values and the passion for truth which inspired great naturalist drama to assume new forms. Indeed:

It is then necessary to emphasize the difficult relation between what are not only historical but socially alternative structures of feeling, and the consequently complex relations between conventions, theatrical methods and audiences. My essential argument is on the relations between a structure of feeling and a convention: the first critical task is always that necessary analysis. This brings to our attention, as the first kind of fact, problems of form and method *which reveal themselves, ultimately, as problems of content and viewpoint*. To clarify these relations is a main critical purpose, for it is then possible to see the choice between structures of feeling, and the

consequent choice of conventions, as a substantial and still active history and experience, rather than a random variation of viewpoints and styles. [My Emphasis]

(1968a: 396)

A Kaleidoscope for Feeling

The structure of feeling continued to function for Williams in four different ways: firstly, as a means of registering epochal shifts in sensibility, secondly, as a way of identifying and naming the sensibility of a particular period that could not be encompassed by the sum of its constituent elements, thirdly, as a means of recognising the contention between different values and emotional responses within the development of modern drama, and finally, as a means of detecting and synthesising the social texture of the biography, views and aspirations which informed the work of particular artists.

The four aspects of the structure of feeling were discerned in two different ways: firstly through changes in convention registered by formal innovation, secondly, through analysis of the problems presented by the content and viewpoint of particular works.

Williams attempted to use the structure of feeling as a kaleidoscope for registering the shifting patterns of feeling, which he thought, were uniquely revealed by close analysis of works of art. Consequently, his use of the figure cannot be properly understood by reference to any one of its aspects or to either of the means by which he sought to detect the metamorphosis of the structure of feeling from one period or sensibility to another.

The structure of feeling retained its role of figuring large epochal changes between Medieval Mystery plays and Elizabethan tragedy, or, for example, the change between renaissance and modern drama. It was also used to trace movements within modern drama, and to figure both the outlook of individual dramatists, and the work of those associated in particular trends or movements.

The structure of feeling could also stand for that element left after close analysis of a work for which there was no external

counterpart. Simultaneously, the structure of feeling could be seen, through an analysis of convention that was capable of bringing to the fore problems of form and method, which in turn revealed problems of content and viewpoint. And, despite Williams's manifest desire to refuse priority to any one of the aspects of the structure the feeling, it was these 'problems of content of viewpoint' that always provided Williams with a ground upon which to assess drama, poems and novels 'ultimately' by how they stood in relation to the positive values of social solidarity and progress and perhaps, more subtly, how they stood in relation to exposing, in a positive manner, the contradictions between realisable aspirations and a thwarting bourgeois environment.⁴

Consequently, structure of feeling could be employed as a way of associating an ideology, a social outlook or a political opinion with a particular artist, as in the case of T. S. Eliot, the phrase 'personal structure of feeling' was employed to refer to the political and social sensibilities of an individual writer:

The power of *Murder in the Cathedral* is that it succeeds in communicating a personal structure of feeling as if it were traditional and even conventional.

(1968a: 204)

This personal structure of feeling could then be held to have been a permanent or even a perpetual and determining aspect of an artist's work:

What Eliot does, in *The Cocktail Party*, is to bring to the level of recognizable action the structure of feeling *by which he had always been determined*, but which had been mainly expressed, elsewhere, as a rhythm or as an image. [My emphasis]

(1968a: 216)

⁴ 'If we see, in its detail, the environment men have created, we shall learn the truth about them. That is one way of putting it, and it is deeply relevant to Ibsen and Chekhov, where the dramatic tension, again and again, is between what men feel themselves capable of becoming, and a thwarting, directly present environment.' (1968a: 386)

What emerges from these difficulties is that the figure structure of feeling became less coherent and more diffuse as the purposes to which Williams felt compelled to put it multiplied. But always, he was striving for specificity and precision.

Encounter with T. S. Eliot

An example of this attempt at a critical realisation of a specific structure of feeling can be found in his assessment of T. S. Eliot in *Modern Tragedy*. In this book, published between the last revised edition of *Drama from Ibsen to Eliot* (1964a) and the hostile revisions of the chapter on Eliot for *Drama from Ibsen to Brecht* (1968a), Williams engaged in a very interesting discussion of martyrdom in which he argued that Eliot's move beyond the Christian tradition of sacrifice and redemption could be revealed by comparison of *Murder in the Cathedral* with *The Cocktail Party*.

Williams thought that Eliot's move beyond the Christian tradition consisted in the belief that tragedy does not reside in the destiny of the martyr but in the unconscious life of the many for whom the martyr dies. And, through a process of attenuation, sacrifice no longer redeems, but is relegated to an act by which resignation towards a trivial and meretricious existence is ratified. That this grows out of the Christian tradition is clearly seen by Williams in *Murder in the Cathedral*:

The blood of the martyr not only fertilises the world, but also cleanses the world of its ordinary filth, and marks the heads of the believers, as a permanent reminder of the sin of their normal condition:

*The sin of the world is upon our heads. . .the
blood of the martyrs*

and the agony of the saints

Is upon our heads.

It is in this movement that we notice the special character of this rhythm of sacrifice, in the Christian

tradition. It is not the act of the body of men, convinced of the need of sacrificial blood for the renewal of their common life. On the contrary, this need has to be brought to the people, by the exceptional man. The need for blood has to be shown by the man who is offering his life. The sacrifice is not only redemption, but conversion. It is in this particular rhythm that the sacrificial victim becomes the redeemer or the martyr.

(1966a: 162)

Through an anti-popular inflection of this tradition Eliot was said to have established his own sense of a 'pattern of sacrifice' by concentrating on the division between those capable of authentic experience and those for whom experience of life is inevitably shallow and unfulfilled if not exactly bestial. Williams's account of Eliot's 'pattern of sacrifice' was that:

It rests on a division of humanity into the many unconscious and the few conscious, in terms similar to the division between unauthentic and authentic man. Yet the pattern is such that it is the role of the conscious not to save themselves but to save the world. Tragedy rests not in the individual destiny, of the man who must live this sacrifice, but in the general condition, of a people reducing or destroying itself because it is not conscious of its true condition. The tragedy is not in the death, but in the life.

(1966a: 162)

Although this pattern is said to be clear in *Murder in the Cathedral* Williams, employing one of his ubiquitous wireless reception metaphors, argued that: 'The essential pattern comes through more clearly, though with a marked lessening of dramatic force, in *The Cocktail Party*.' (1966a: 163) Here, without the formal support of liturgical rhythms or the emphasis upon the martyrdom of Becket, Celia Copplestone's sacrifice reveals the necessity of looking very critically at the idea of sacrifice:

For sacrifice now does not redeem the world, or bring new life to the waste land. Rather, in an obscure way, it ratifies the world as it is. Eliot's Christian action is not tragic redemption, but tragic resignation.

Indeed:

Eliot, in *The Cocktail Party*, abandons the Christian tradition of sacrifice and redemption. He removes its action elsewhere, and to a minority. He replaces it, as the controlling structure of feeling, with a socially modulated resignation. Yet perhaps he does not altogether abandon sacrifice, in one of its senses. It looks to me very much as if Celia had to die, for the needs of this group. Elsewhere, naturally. Terribly, of course. But in such a way that the blood does not stain or shame, or at least not for long. In such a way that redemption, in any whole sense, is fine but is for others. In such a way that a gesture can be made to her blood, but what will be drunk at the party is the same old cocktail. The darker wine, of an involving crucifixion, is richer and stronger, but we are not in its class. We'll put up with the cocktails, making the best of a bad job.

(1966a: 166)

Without, for the moment, considering whether this is a useful analysis of T. S. Eliot's plays or the texture of his Christian faith, it is evident that Williams's account of the poet's conservatism and even the suggestion of his surrender to nihilism did not arise distinctively from an analysis of the artworks discussed, or from any deep consideration of the challenges presented to Anglo-Catholic witness in the middle of the twentieth century. The structure of feeling Williams discovered in these works was a structure of feeling anticipated by what Williams already felt about Eliot's critical, spiritual, and social commitments. This can be seen in the lengthy and courteous discussion of Eliot's ideas in *Culture and Society*. Here, Eliot is viewed as a somewhat inferior descendent of the political tradition exemplified by Coleridge and Burke:

For what is quite clear in the new conservatism (and this makes it very different from, and much inferior to, the conservatism of a Coleridge or a Burke) is that a genuine

theoretical objection to the principle and the effects of an ‘atomized’, individualist society is combined, and has to be combined, with adherence to the principles of an economic system which is based on just this ‘atomized’, individualist view.

(1958a: 242)

Eliot was trapped in a contradictory commitment to the ‘free economy’ and hostile to the cultural products and social circumstances created by the more or less unregulated economic relations of capitalist society.⁵ This rendered his outlook inevitably bleak:

The triumphant liberalism of contemporary society, which the practice of conservatives now so notably sustains, will, as anyone who thinks about a ‘whole way of life’ must realize, colour every traditional value. The progress which Eliot deplores is in fact the product of all that is actively left of the traditional society from which his values were drawn. This is the root, surely, of that bleakness which Eliot’s social writings so powerfully convey.

(1958a: 242-3)

Williams’s hostility towards Eliot’s political and spiritual ideas naturally informed his criticism of the poet’s social writings and, despite fluctuations in tone, provided a firm platform upon which his criticism of the poetry and drama rested. Eliot’s ‘personal structure of feeling’ was clearly identified before Williams moved beyond discussion of Eliot’s formal innovations to a more fully developed criticism of the plays.

Williams expressed something of what he felt about Eliot as early as 1946 and 1947 when he said in the interviews with *New Left Review*:

⁵ There is some inconsistency here because Williams, of course, upbraids Burke in *Culture and Society* (1958a: 12) in very similar terms in relation to his support for enclosure of common land while defending the ‘organic society’.

The *Four Quartets* completely dominated reading and discussion in Cambridge at the time. I did not succeed in articulating my rejection of the way in which they were being treated. But I recall coming out of one of these discussions, not with enemies but with friends who considered themselves active socialists and yet were endorsing Eliot's work. There must have been some radical lack of confidence in me that I didn't have the argument fully through with them. Instead I said to myself – a ridiculous expression that must have been some echo of an Eliot rhythm – 'here also the class struggle occurs'. Looking across at the university church and doing nothing about it. But my perception was itself a perfectly correct one. There was a class struggle occurring around those poems and that criticism. Because if you were to move into the world not just of Leavis's criticism, which contained radical, positive, energetic elements, but into the universe of the *Four Quartets*, then you were finished. You were then in the totally conventional post-war posture of the inevitability of failure, the absurdity of effort, the necessity of resignation –

(1979b: 67-8)

It is interesting that Eliot is arraigned not simply for anti-working class sentiments like resignation, and belief in the absurdity of effort, but also for the rhythm of the 'ridiculous expression' with which Williams framed his own thoughts on Eliot's poetry. In an echo of Socialist Realism the implication is clear: hope, optimism and positive action are required in the struggle against the dismal and certain ending predicted for those who fall into universe of the *Four Quartets*.⁶

⁶ However, although Williams could frame his criticisms of negative or dismal presentations of society with demands for positive thinking, when talking about the decay of the labour movement in the early eighties he presented the need for film makers to produce positive images of working class resistance in a much more careful and tentative vein. He cautioned against vanguardism and against those who simply reiterated the traditional verities of the labour movement as if nothing had changed, and concluded: 'Often, as I say, they are a block to this much sadder recognition of what the real shape of the problem is. Maybe then you need different figures who are not only the people suffering at the end of this process, but the people — however small a minority — who are reactive and fighting about it. Maybe

Religion as a Whole Way of Life

It is doubtful that Eliot's resignation in the *Four Quartets* can be fully experienced without giving time to the time of The Book of Daniel or The Revelation of St John the Divine.⁷ It is also true that an encounter with *The Divine Comedy* and the miracle of the mass would provide further means of access into the faithful world of Eliot's poetry and to the nature of Christian resignation and preparation for death. Williams's disregard of these aides in favour of an attempt to keep the discussion of Christianity firmly within the historical realm of policy, sociological speculation and class relations dulled the edge of his criticism and led him towards a position in which optimism, social solidarity, and progress were pitted against the inevitability of death and the revelation of the promise of life everlasting in the world to come. An aesthetic in which emancipation was figured as emancipation from an earthly life that could be achieved only through divine intervention and death had no appeal to Williams.

He seems to have had profound difficulty in accepting the fullness of Christian belief and this appears to have narrowed his understanding. For example, in the discussion of sacrifice in *Modern Tragedy* he wrote:

The simplest form of sacrifice, in which a man is killed so that the body of men may live or live more fully, we have almost abandoned. We know the idea, from other cultures and periods, but it retains emotional significance in one case only: at the centre of Christian belief. There, the manner of its retention proves the distance we have moved away from the idea as such, since the man Jesus is also, for believers, the Son of God, and the action, if it is to be significant, must be seen as part of a divine rather than a merely human history. Other apparently comparable cases, deprived of this sanction, are seen as essentially primitive – the scattering of the

you need that, if you were to tell the whole story.' (Aspinall 1982:152) For the full context of this discussion see Jane Clarke's "'So that you can live", I' (Clarke 1982) and "'So that you can live", II' (Aspinall and Merck 1982).

⁷ 'And he shall speak *great* words against the most High, and shall wear out the saints of the most High, and think to change times and laws: and they shall be given into his hand until a time and times and the dividing of time.' *The Holy Bible*, Authorised King James Version, Daniel 7:25.

body for fertility, the sharing of the blood of the man who died. If it is not a divine action, it is a primitive magical action, and flat comparison of one with the other is even offensive. Here the decisive importance of context is most ironically proved.

(1966a: 156-7)

Evidently, Williams wanted to set the question of sacrifice into a historical context and to challenge the priority of Christian belief. In the course of this exercise he actually counterposed the divine history of the death of Christ against a ‘merely human history’. This is a formulation which tends to obscure the fully human person and nature of Christ within which the full significance of his suffering and abandonment by God can alone be understood. For, of course, if Christ had not been fully human his suffering would be incommunicable and incomprehensible. In his perfectly reasonable desire to establish the historical specificity of particular forms of sacrifice Williams unravelled the sacrifice at the root of Eliot’s belief.⁸

Williams’s deployment of *context* as the figure both for circumstance within a plot and for historical specificity also effaces Eliot’s particular understanding of historical time when he notes that:

The action of *Murder in the Cathedral* is based on an historical martyrdom, but in all essentials is taken out of its particular context and made part of an ‘eternal design’:

Even now, in sordid particulars

The eternal design may appear.

(1966a: 159-160)

This insistence that the ‘particular context’ of *Murder in the Cathedral* was the murder of Thomas Becket at Canterbury in 1170 AD, and that this context was ‘in all essentials’ removed by

⁸ For an example of where historical specificity is sought without unravelling its object see the discussion of eschatological predictions in Frank Kermode’s essay, ‘The End’ (Kermode 1965: 3-31).

Eliot's situation of Becket's death within the timeless law of the eternal design reveals Williams's disregard for the importance that Eliot attached to history and of the manner in which he understood the nature of his or any other writer's specific insertion into it. Eliot had a sense of the timeless, as well as the temporal, and of the timeless and of the temporal together:

. . . the historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence; the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order. This historical sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and of the temporal together, is what makes a writer traditional. And it is at the same time what makes a writer most acutely conscious of his place in time, of his contemporaneity.

(Eliot 1919: 49)

Evidently, discussion, in the course of criticism of an artist who wrote and thought like Eliot, of the changes wrought by history in forms of human experience required a much more carefully modulated employment of historical specificity than Williams was prepared to countenance.

It is in this spirit that Williams encountered Eliot's phrase 'a whole way of life' in his discussion of culture. It is a phrase that Williams welcomed and was to make great use of in his own path-breaking analysis of culture. However, the manner in which he appropriated it from Eliot was accompanied by a shearing away of religion. In *Culture and Society* this is done without acknowledgement of the excision:

Eliot's emphasis of culture as a whole way of life is useful and significant. It is also significant that, having taken the emphasis, he plays with it. For example:

Culture . . . includes all the characteristic activities and interests of a people: Derby Day, Henley Regatta, Cowes, the twelfth of August, a cup final, the dog races, the pin table, the dart board, Wens-

leydale cheese, boiled cabbage cut into sections, beetroot in vinegar, nineteenth-century Gothic churches, and the music of Elgar.

This pleasant miscellany is evidently narrower in kind than the general description which precedes it. The ‘characteristic activities and interests’ would also include steelmaking, touring in motor-cars, mixed farming, the Stock Exchange, coalmining and London Transport. Any list would be incomplete, but Eliot’s categories are sport, food and a little art – a characteristic observation of English leisure.

(1958a: 233-4)

Part of the ‘general description which precedes it’ is in fact the sentence in which Eliot first introduced the phrase *whole way of life* into his discussion of culture:

Yet there is an aspect in which we can see a religion as the *whole way of life* of a people, from birth to the grave, from morning to night and even in sleep, and that way of life is also its culture.

(Eliot 1948: 31)

This view sprung from Eliot’s rejection of a ‘relation’ between religion and culture; he thought that they were both aspects of the same thing.⁹ However, Williams wanted the idea of the ‘whole way of life’ as his own term for culture. This can be seen more clearly if we compare the ‘pleasant miscellany’ cited by Williams with what T. S. Eliot wrote:

Taking now the point of view of identification, the reader must remind himself as the author has constantly to do, of how much is here embraced by the term *culture*. It includes all the characteristic activities and interests of a people: Derby Day, Henley Regatta, Cowes, the twelfth of August, a cup final, the dog races, the pin table, the dart board, Wensleydale cheese, boiled cabbage cut into sections, beetroot in vinegar, nineteenth-century Gothic churches and the music of Elgar. *The reader can make his*

⁹ See *Notes towards the Definition of Culture* (Eliot 1948: 29, 33).

own list. And then we have to face the strange idea that what is part of our culture is also part of our lived religion. [My Emphasis]

(Eliot 1948: 31)

By omitting the final two sentences of the paragraph Williams was able to cite Eliot's categories as 'sport, food and a little art' without becoming entangled in the *lived* religion that had led Eliot to figure culture as well as religion as a *whole way of life*. It is also curious that Williams feels able to upbraid Eliot for not including, among other things in his list, the Stock Exchange and London Transport when he knew well of the presence of the Stock Exchange Gazette, the Directory of Directors and a journey on London Underground in *Four Quartets*.¹⁰ This is consistent with the procedure by which Williams sought always to dispense with ideas that threatened to disrupt the progress of his analysis towards assessments congenial to his endorsement of collective endeavour, progress and social solidarity; he was able to appropriate a partial account of the whole way of life from Eliot and developed a habit of ascribing a particular structure of feeling to particular points of view.¹¹

In arriving at the figure *structure of feeling* Williams was working broadly within an established critical tradition which apart from employing technical methods like practical criticism also sought ways of figuring informed generalisations that would function independently of facile applications of psychology or,

¹⁰ (Eliot 1939-42: 199-201). This attempt by Williams to ignore the efforts made by other critics to see aspects of culture not normally recognised by the literary elite is seen again in his failure, apart from the briefest of comments in *Culture and Society* (1958a: 286) and in 'Cinema and Socialism' (Britton 1991: 126), to acknowledge Orwell's attempts to view English society through a broader understanding of culture in essays like 'Boys' Weeklies' (Orwell 1940a), 'Charles Dickens' (1940b) and 'The art of Donald McGill' (1941b). See also Marshall McLuhan's comments concerning the study of the 'language' of popular culture at Cambridge in the thirties. McLuhan acknowledges that Wyndham Lewis did various studies in popular culture, and notes the interest in popular speech idioms in the work of T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound (McLuhan 1967: 303). For a more recent and interesting engagement with Williams's work see Jon Thompson's essay 'Realisms and Modernisms: Raymond Williams and Popular Fiction' (Thompson: 1993).

¹¹ This habit of attributing a particular mode of feeling because of a combination of biographical and political factors in the life of the artist can be seen in Williams's treatment of, for example, Gissing, Orwell, Solzhenitsyn or Virginia Woolf.

more traditionally, of expressions of emotions by emotional people. T. S. Eliot explained the problem thus:

Appreciation in popular psychology is one faculty, and criticism another, an arid cleverness building theoretical scaffolds upon one's own perceptions or those of others. On the contrary, the true generalization is not something superposed upon an accumulation of perceptions; the perceptions do not, in a really appreciative mind, accumulate as a mass, but form themselves as a structure; and criticism is the statement in language of this structure; it is a development of sensibility. The bad criticism, on the other hand, is that which is nothing but an expression of emotion.

(Eliot 1920: 15)

In this essay, 'The Perfect Critic', Eliot was rejecting both the kind of criticism which described poetry 'as the most highly organized form of intellectual activity' and also its antithesis, 'aesthetic' or 'impressionistic criticism', represented by Arthur Symons. He was striving for modes of criticism that could assess works in ways that would mobilise precise facts about a work and as a principal means of avoiding what he regarded as ill-informed 'interpretation' disrupting the task of evaluation. Eliot cited his experience of adult education in this respect:

We must ourselves decide what is useful to us and what is not; and it is quite likely that we are not competent to decide. But it is fairly certain that 'interpretation' (I am not touching upon the acrostic element in literature) is only legitimate when it is not interpretation at all, but merely putting the reader in possession of facts which he would otherwise have missed. I have had some experience of Extension lecturing, and I have found only two ways of leading pupils to like anything with right liking: to present them with a selection of the simpler kind of facts about a work – its conditions, its setting, its genesis – or else to spring the work on them in such a way that they were not prejudiced against it. There were many facts to help them with Elizabethan drama: the poems of T. E. Hulme only needed to be read aloud to have immediate effect.

(Eliot 1923: 32)

Eliot argued that comparison and analysis of literary facts were the chief tools of the critic and he believed that ‘opinion or fancy’ were the real corrupters of the critical process. However, he deftly avoided utilitarian certainties by arguing that it was no part of his purpose to define truth, fact, or reality.¹²

Middleton Murry’s Modes of Feeling

Despite Eliot’s perhaps necessary evasions critics had to find ways of figuring elusive and difficult thoughts concerning feelings and their organisation in ways which went beyond the organisation, or the structuring, assumed with the use of words like sensibility or style. Critics had to avoid failing because, as Middleton Murry put it,

... when they are failing, their invariable gesture is to use general terms as a prop to their own defective achievement. Instead of giving their general terms a full and particular content, they use them rather to give an appearance of weight and authority to misty and undecided perceptions.

(Middleton Murry 1921a: 8)

In striving to avoid this effect of failure, Middleton Murry, like Williams, sought to specify exactly what he meant. Citing Buffon, Chekov, Gorky, and above all, Flaubert, Middleton Murry explained, for example, what he meant by ‘a true style’:

Perhaps we may use this vague notion to turn the flank of the general confusion on the subject of style, which was manifested in the three different meanings of the words which are current. By accepting the view that the source of style is to be found in a strong and decisive original emotion we can get a closer grasp of the intention that lies under the use of the word as meaning a writer’s personal idiosyncrasy. An individual way of feeling and seeing will compel an individual way of using language.

¹² See ‘The Function of Criticism’ (Eliot 1923: 34)

A true style must, therefore, be unique, if we understand by the phrase 'a true style' a completely adequate expression in language of a writer's mode of feeling.

(Middleton Murry 1921a: 13)

The quality of this idiosyncrasy was entirely dependent upon whether or not it was the expression of 'genuine individual feeling' or not:

We may put the whole question briefly in this way. A style must be individual, because it is the expression of an individual mode of feeling. Some styles will appear more peculiar than others, either because the writer's mode of feeling is unusually remote from the normal mode, or because the particular emotional experiences he is seeking to convey are outside the ordinary range of human experience, or, finally, because the writer, inspired by some impure motive such as vanity or the desire to astonish the bourgeois, has deliberately made his language *outré* and bizarre.

Consequently,

The test of a true idiosyncrasy of style is that we should feel it to be necessary and inevitable; in it we should be able to catch an immediate reference back to a whole mode of feeling that is consistent with itself.

(Middleton Murry 1921a: 14)

Middleton Murry in his essay 'The Psychology of Style' goes on to deploy the figure mode of experience in order to attempt to grasp the full potentiality alluded to by *mode of feeling*. This mode of experience was a kind of condensation of feeling made available to the artist by the nature of his activity:

From them all emerges, at least in the case of an artist destined to mature achievement, a coherent emotional nucleus. This is often consolidated by a kind of speculative thought, which differs from the speculative thought of the philosopher by its working from particular to partic-

ular. The creative literary artist does not generalize; or rather, his generalization is not abstract. However much he may think, his attitude to life is predominantly emotional; his thoughts partake much more of the nature of residual emotions, which are symbolized in the objects which aroused them, than of discursive reasoning. Out of the multitude of his vivid perceptions, with their emotional accompaniments, emerges a sense of the quality of life as a whole.

(Middleton Murry 1921b: 24)

For Middleton Murry, a writer's emotional bias or predisposition was his 'mode of experience'. This mode of experience was determined by the writer's philosophy or his 'attitude', which gave unity to his work as a whole, providing the ground upon which to erect an emotional structure:

Lucretius used the philosophy of Epicurus, Dante the mediaeval conception of the Aristotelian cosmogony; but both those great poets used those intellectual systems as a scaffolding upon which to build an emotional structure. A great satirist like Swift uses the intellect, not to reach rational conclusions, but to expound and convey in detail a complex of very violent emotional reactions; and I would even say that Plato used a tremendous logical apparatus in order to impart to posterity an attitude towards the universe that was not logical at all.

(Middleton Murry 1921b: 27)

It is evident that by using the figures *mode of feeling*, *mode of experience*, and *emotional structure* Middleton Murry was attempting to grasp the relationship of artists to their ideas and their emotions, and to their capacity to reproduce or provoke authentic experience.

Consequently, these figures are not being set the same range of tasks as Williams set the structure of feeling. Williams's usages cannot be assimilated into those of Middleton Murry's, or Eliot's, or Q. D. and F. R. Leavis's, or William Empson's. The leading critics between the world wars and during the post war period figure a variety of different literary qualities and achievements in

similar ways. However, their arguments and differences were often complex and frequently not unimportant. For this reason it is necessary to avoid the sort of sentimental synthesis proposed by Fred Inglis between the works of T. H. Green, the Leavises, and Richard Hoggart.¹³

It is true that Williams wanted to do something similar to that argued for by Middleton Murry, but for him emphasis upon the social nature of the processes at work within these ideas, emotions and experiences, was imperative because these dynamic processes and relationships, did not merely furnish the impulse for artistic activity, nor merely provide the context in which the artwork was created, but were in a myriad of complex ways constitutive of the artwork, both of its structure of feeling, and of the social practices employed to produce the artwork. Indeed, society is neither complete, nor fully present, Williams argued, until the distinctive artwork of a period has been created. Of prose Williams said:

In its most general sense, the writing of prose is a transaction between discoverable numbers of writers and readers, organized in certain changing social relations which include education, class habits, distribution and publishing costs. At the same time, in its most important sense, the writing of prose is a sharing of experience which, in its human qualities, is both affected by *and can transcend the received social relations. It is always so, in the relation between literature and society: that society determines, much more than we realize and at deeper levels than we ordinarily admit, the writing of literature; but also that the society is not complete, not fully and immediately present, until the literature has been written,* and that this literature, in prose as often as in any other form, can come through to stand as if on its own, with an intrinsic and permanent importance, so that we see the rest

¹³ (Inglis 1993: 48-9) Inglis's practice of finding the common thread between strikingly different writers can become even more positive and emphatic than that cited above: "Leavis, Adorno; Williams, Debord; Geertz, Irigaray; Naipaul, Said: another queer gang, in camouflage if not in motley. But they have in common an absolute resistance to the transfiguration of life into money, of culture into commodity, or happiness into buying, and of the vague milling of people in their patterns into ordering by numbers." (Inglis 1993: 242)

of our living though it as well as through the rest of our living.

[My Emphasis] (1969a: 24-5)

It was because Williams believed this that he was bound to stress the historical formation of the individual's experience.

Muriel Bradbrook's Historical Criticism

Williams's different uses of the structure of feeling do not form a settled pattern, nor do they indicate a line of development in his thinking apart from, perhaps, an attempt to multiply the registers and determinations that had accompanied his introduction of the phrase in *Preface to Film* (1954).

In proposing a relationship between dramatic conventions and the structure of feeling of a particular historical period Williams was working broadly within a well-established tradition of historical criticism. He acknowledged this in a general way in the introduction that he wrote for the *Festschrift* for Muriel Bradbrook in 1976. Here, he identified three features, which along with practical criticism informed the work of the Cambridge English Faculty. They were: the correlation of literature with social history, enquiry into the relation between imaginative literature and moral and philosophical ideas, and work in the study of dramatic forms and their conditions of performance. He then went on to note the contribution made by Bradbrook:

In one of these kinds, the history and analysis of dramatic forms and their conditions of performance, the work of Muriel Bradbrook has been defining and pre-eminent. Over her whole working life she has contributed very generally to the work of the Faculty, but the most significant thread is the work which began with *Elizabethan Stage Conditions* in 1931 and was continued with the remarkable *Themes and Conventions of Elizabethan Tragedy* in 1935. The titles of these early works sufficiently indicate the position and interests from which her work on drama was begun. They have influenced successive generations of students and scho-

lars, and beyond this properly academic influence have provoked and helped in defining and sometimes solving more general questions of dramatic form and performance.

(1977b: p.ix)

Despite the generosity of this piece Williams does not acknowledge engagement with Bradbrook's work in his own writing apart from passing references to her *Ibsen The Norwegian, A Revaluation* (Bradbrook 1946) in his *Drama from Ibsen to Eliot*,¹⁴ and in the listing of a number of her works in the 'Select List of Books for Reference and Further Reading' at the end of the 1968 edition of *Drama in Performance*. However, the coincidence of their interests over a number of years in the field of drama generally and, more specifically, in the relationship of conventions to particular historical conditions is evident.¹⁵ The coincidence of interests between Bradbrook's field of work and Williams's is similar to that between his interests and those discussed by L. C. Knights's *Drama & Society in the Age of Johnson*, and even to those expressed by Middleton Murry's call for an 'Economic History of English Literature' (Middleton Murry 1921c: 62-63).¹⁶ However, Bradbrook's notion of historic criticism had a much more direct bearing on Williams's field of interest. In her 1931 essay she argued that:

The value of the study of Elizabethan stage conditions lies in this elucidation of the author's methods. It will largely

¹⁴ The passing references to Muriel Bradbrook in the chapter on Ibsen in the 1964 edition of Williams's *Drama from Ibsen to Eliot* are reduced to one short illustrative quotation grouped with other quotations in order to facilitate his discussion of symbols and symbolism in the 1968 edition of *Drama from Ibsen to Brecht*. There is also a passing acknowledgement of Bradbrook's 'generic analysis' in *Politics and Letters* (1979b: 191). For an interesting discussion of the relationship between *Drama from Ibsen to Eliot*, *Modern Tragedy*, and *Drama from Ibsen to Brecht*, see (Sharratt 1989).

¹⁵ I am not insinuating any element of plagiarism here with regard to any coincidence between aspects of Williams's work and that of Bradbrook. Fred Inglis regarded these similarities as 'a bit rum . . .'. The ellipses are Inglis's. (Inglis 1995: 139) This allusion to plagiarism tends to narrow and obscure the complex influences at work in Williams's writing.

¹⁶ Indeed, the entire essay, 'Poetry and Prose', is relevant to the discussion of the relationship between literary, social, and economic forms (Middleton Murry 1921c).

be negative; it will prevent the interference of the unconscious preconceptions of our own age, the most fruitful source of irrelevant criticism. (The absorption of Elizabethan materials is bound to be conscious, but the learning of Shakespeare's technique, since it is primarily a poetic one, i.e. dependent on his use of words, will usually be unconscious.) A study of his age will also discourage the purely personal and appreciative criticism which consists of the creation of an inferior kind of private poem.

Historic criticism is a reversal of the synthetic creative process; its duty is to disentangle and unravel all the knit-up feelings, to split the compound into its elements. What is left is not the play; but it tells us a great deal about the play. This kind of work is not appreciative criticism; the two studies are complementary, and therefore necessary to everyone who would approach Shakespeare, but they must be kept apart, or a bastard criticism like the scientific-stylistic efforts of Robertson¹⁷ result. The critic must know something of the history of the *Hamlet* as a play to understand it, but he must not use his knowledge in his final judgment, though it may have limited the field over which his judgment is extended.

(Bradbrook 1931: 148-9)

From this work it is clear that she was a pioneer in the field of considering precisely what stage conditions, conventions, and formal innovation could tell us about both the intellectual milieu of the artist and the relationship of this to their society and time.¹⁸ However, this early study includes a good review of the changing nature of Shakespeare criticism and an account of the shift in Shakespeare studies during the early years of the twentieth century towards consideration of the different elements of the

¹⁷ Bradbrook is probably referring to, *The Problems of the Shakespeare Sonnets* (Robertson 1926).

¹⁸ See also Muriel Bradbrook's discussion of the relationship of an intellectual and artistic circle to its society and time in her book, *The School of Night: A study of the literary relationships of Sir Walter Raleigh* (Bradbrook 1936: *passim*).

historical conditions that produced Shakespeare's stage.¹⁹ She was concerned to recover what she called the Elizabethan point of view:

It is very necessary to approach the Elizabethan drama without any of the preconceptions about the nature of drama which are drawn from reading Ibsen, Shaw, Racine, Dryden's *Essay of Dramatic Poesy* or Aristotle's *Poetics*. It is necessary to regain the particular angle (even the particular limitations) of the Elizabethan point of view.

(Bradbrook 1935: 1-2)

Consequently, she studied conventions of presentation, acting, action and speech, and Elizabethan habits of reading, writing and listening before embarking upon specific studies of the work of Marlowe, Tourneur, Webster, Middleton, Massinger and others. Despite the range of her studies of Elizabethan and Caroline poetry and drama her focus was tighter, and in some respects less ambitious than Williams. She did not, like Williams, credit her analysis of any particular work of art with a potentiality for the realisation of a structure of feeling.

This was Williams's ambition, but the range and reach of his analysis was often more limited than he hoped for. For example, in his discussion of Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* in *Drama in Performance*, he was able to do much, but he did not succeed in realising the structure of feeling in the precise terms that he struggled to define. However, this chapter-length essay is a very interesting consideration of the structure of the play, the conditions of performance, its language, and the way in which these were related to the 'essential reality which the text embodies' and 'the performance will manifest':

In this play, where the essential action is in the poetry, there can be no ordinary summary. But the form allows us to see the logic of the general action. The dominant element is movement, rather than a simple isolable pattern. The action ranges in space over half the Mediterranean, and has been calculated, in historic time, as

¹⁹ (Bradbrook 1936: 19-28) Incidentally, Bradbrook also cites the work of numerous predecessors.

covering ten years. But these considerations are wholly external. Space is an element in the play, emphasizing its magnitude, but the primary agent of this is the acted speech, the spoken action, which is the vital pattern. The action which Shakespeare creates, and which his stage could so readily perform, is a movement governed by the tragic experience. The rapid and varied success of scenes is a true sequence; we shall wholly misunderstand it if we separate the scenes, and think of them as making their effect singly. The construction of the play has often been condemned, on the grounds of its frequent shifts and apparent disintegration. But this is to look for integration in the wrong place: in the realistic representation of time and place which have little to do with this kind of drama. The measure of time in the play is the dramatic verse; the reality of place is the reality of played action on the stage. The dramatic integration – like the movement employed to realize it – rests in the structure of feeling which the dramatic verse, as a whole organization, communicates. This structure of feeling is the essential reality which the text embodies, and which the performance will manifest.

(1968e: 61-2)

Williams did not establish in this discussion, except by assertion, the connections between the conditions of performance, the dramatic verse, and the essential reality embodied in the text; it is unclear how he hoped that description of the early seventeenth century conditions of performance would relate to the present tense in which he believed that the text *will manifest* the play's reality.²⁰ Muriel Bradbrook, who also believed that Shakespeare's technique was primarily a poetic one was perhaps clearer about how the physical and technical restrictions of the stage in 1607 made it possible for the vast canvas of *Antony and Cleopatra* to be realised:

Antony and Cleopatra is the most Elizabethan of all Shakespeare's plays from the point of view of construc-

²⁰ See Arnold Kettle's discussion concerning the continuing currency and relevance of Shakespeare's play in his article 'Antony and Cleopatra' (Kettle 1983: 125-144), and Cicely Palser Havelly's consideration of Kettle's reading in her article 'Changing critical perspectives' (Palser Havelly 2000: 145-153). See also (Granville-Barker 1930); (Dollimore 1984); (Neill 1994).

tion. Its whole effect depends upon the sense of the world-wide nature of the struggle. (See Miss Spurgeon's pamphlet, which decides that "world" is the characteristic image of the play.) This effect is gained not only by imagery but by the rapid shift of the scenes, the cinematograph method of showing Antony in Rome and Cleopatra in Egypt, as the cinema shows alternate shots of the struggling heroine and the hero galloping to the rescue. Shakespeare's theatre was very near to the cinema in technique: his trick of showing a series of short separate actions, each one cut off before it is finished (e.g. the battle scenes of *Julius Caesar*) which gives a sense of merged and continuous waves of action is a common habit of Eisenstein and Pudovkin. (Bradbrook 1931: 48-9)
21

Despite considerable difference in tone Williams's mode of analysis does not, on the face of it, add anything that could not be achieved by Bradbrook's procedure. Even when presenting the movement of the play, Williams is able to do little more than describe the action. For example:

We have seen how, through the formal arrangement and contrast of the verse, a complex pattern of feeling has been clearly enacted. The verse has enforced this pattern, but there is also something else, which in reading the scene may not be realized but in Elizabethan performance is clear. This is the necessary magnificence of both Antony and Cleopatra, as they appear to us: a magnificence against which the elements of ruin and of baseness are set in the necessary tension which is the dramatic movement of the whole play. There is no doubt that in performance this magnificence is constant, even while the other conflicting elements sound.

(1968e: 66-7)

²¹ Incidentally, Bradbrook's evident enthusiasm for the methods of the cinematograph run counter to the hostility of the *Scrutiny* group towards the cinema noted by Francis Mulhern (Mulhern 1979: 52).

He goes on to demonstrate Cleopatra's magnificence by quoting the play to that effect. But he does not establish how specifically, 'in Elizabethan performance', the necessary magnificence of Antony and Cleopatra is achieved. It was achieved in the text, of course, but this was available to audiences in 1954 and 1968. It was achieved in movement, colour, music, but these elements were similarly available to audiences at the time Williams published his essay.

The full significance of what he might have intended is not entirely clear from reading *Drama in Performance* in isolation. It has to be read in relation to the body of his work. Graham Holderness gave some indication of how to read this text in his introduction to the Open University edition. Here he explained how Williams's particular kind of performance analysis differed from the empiricist procedures of traditional scholarly 'theatre history' and from the detailed description of actual productions practiced by modern 'theatre studies'. He argued we could understand Williams's procedure as one that placed emphasis 'on the semiotic value of the physical action required or implied by the text'

(Holderness 1991: 5).

While not overcoming the difficulties of reading *Drama in Performance* Holderness was, by distinguishing the arrangement and scope of the book from the tradition represented by Bradbrook and others, able to focus upon what he regarded as the novelty of Williams's approach.

Williams: ‘a delegate from the future’?²²

Williams remained fascinated throughout his life by social sensibilities instantiated within particular cultural patterns that he thought could only be fully realised through works of art. But, although he often sought this realisation in particular artworks, the synthetic unity of his social assumptions and his political aspirations resulted in a procedure confined by his prior commitments; it was a procedure in which he discerned in the work of a particular artist, or group of artists, an outlook or structure of feeling which was evidently available to him through the reading of their criticism or cultural manifestos prior to any serious critical engagement with the poems, novels or plays in question.

Clearly, Williams, was striving for something that could not be realised by obedience to the ordinary protocols of scholarly procedure. Despite, the coincidence of interests revealed by comparison of Williams with Bradbrook, the encounter is in danger of leading to an impasse in which Williams’s manifest inadequacies begin to unravel any sense of his distinctive contribution. What is missing, of course, is Williams’s sense of the relationship between his own work and the active striving for a future shaped by the ethos of solidarity and community.

Williams did not possess a blueprint of the future, nor did he believe that one was possible, but he did believe that a positive properly human future would have to be constructed out of emergent sensibilities that needed to be identified, valued, nurtured, and encouraged. This was the purpose of his criticism. Consequently, writers hostile to socialism, or those sceptical about the creation of a new dispensation in which the population at large would actively determine society’s cultural and economic priorities, were viewed with suspicion. The detail and nuance of such writers’ work could be disregarded or even obscured because their *essential* outlook was already clearly understood.

²² Bernard Sharratt uses the phrase, “a delegate from the future”, to describe Williams (Sharratt, 1989: 149). This phrase is similar to one used by Sol Funaroff in his poem *The Bellbuoy*: ‘I am that exile / from a future time / from shores of freedom / I may never know, / . . .’ See Alan M. Wald, *Exiles from a Future Time* (Wald 2002: iv; 204-214).

And, it was the *essence* of their work and the experiences that it provoked which needed to be presented by Williams as an *essentially* reactionary structure of feeling in the course of his active opposition to negative views concerning the future of society.

From this point of view Williams was making connections between the capacity of drama to enable us to recover forms of experience – the particular structures of feeling of a specific historical period – and the positing of the emergent structures of feeling of a necessary future. This process of anticipation in which future relationships may be posited in the present and fed by the past is, in principle, little different from that posed by Nikolai Bukharin when he argued that ‘socialist realism does not merely register what exists, but, catching up the thread of development in the present leads it into the future’.²³ Of course, the tone, lacking the heroic urgency of 1934 and the ventriloquism in which a party elite speaks on behalf of the working class, is profoundly different, but in the expression of the desire for the artistic imagination to anticipate forms of feeling appropriate to future social relationships the similarity is striking.

Williams’s responsibilities to the future, resulted in a critical strategy in which political contingency often determined the course of his writing and rewriting, from moment to moment. It is ‘less a matter of getting the history ‘right’, in some impossibly positivist sense of scholarship, as of tracing the movement of which he sees himself as part’ (Sharratt 1989: 133).

In this active sense Williams’s work did not clear a path for new processes of imaginative writing or for new types of imaginative drama. It did, however, immeasurably strengthen the aesthetic of emancipation, ensuring that political modes of criticism were popularised in ways that linked analysis and judgement in the consideration of artworks to their capacity to recover experiences

²³ Nikolai Bukharin explained this more fully: “In our circumstances romanticism is connected above all with heroic themes: its eyes are turned, not on the heaven of metaphysics, but on the earth, in all its senses — on triumph over the enemy and triumph over nature. On the other hand, socialist realism does not merely register what exists, but, catching up the thread of development in the present, it leads it into the future, and leads it actively. Hence an antithesis between romanticism and socialist realism is devoid of all meaning.” (Bukharin 1934: 254)

or realise feelings, useful, or in some manner congenial, to a broadly socialist perspective or, more ambitiously, to the structure of feeling regarded as appropriate to the anticipated modes of future social relationships.