

Chapter Five: Literary Representations of Class

Wordsworth and Clare, Cobbett and Austen

For Williams class was an essential or constitutive aspect of the 'relationships which define writers and readers as active human beings'. However, because of his refusal to give simple or absolute priority to material relations (theorised as the dissolution of the distinction between base and superstructure) he could not simply or bluntly award priority to class considerations:

It is not that literature is not answerable to extra-literary forces. Bad reading may to some extent be due to the fact that a much lower degree of awareness is manifested in the average reader's response to literature than in his directly personal or social living. But a work of literature is a precise and conscious organisation of experience, and it must always primarily be treated as such. All criticism, 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-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: 102-3)¹

He sought to arrive at knowledge of class relations and the processes involved in the formation and decay of classes, their struggles *for* and *against* domination and subordination, by an attempt to establish creative intimacy with the processes involved in the production of art works and through the development of a critical understanding of the vicissitudes of artistic conventions and forms. And, even when this synthetic strategy failed, he eschewed causalities attributed to the direct expression of class interests. However, from time to time, this attempt to develop a

¹ Although he expresses himself in less brutal terms, Williams makes the same point twenty years later regarding the view that 'Heathcliff is the proletariat' (1970a: 65).

synthesis in which all the elements and feelings of a whole way of life would give insight into antagonistic social processes was belied or even obscured by bitter observations concerning the refusal of recognition which he assumed to be inherent in relations between dominant and subordinate classes. He saw this with particular clarity in the tendency of propertied people to overlook the genesis of their wealth in the brutal manual labour of those without *real* property. For example, when discussing the emergence of a greater confidence in nature which, as the eighteenth century moved to its close, gave rise to ‘a broader and more humane confidence in men’ Williams felt compelled to tell us:

But we are bound to remember that most, though not all, of these tours to wild places were undertaken by people who were able to travel because ‘nature’ had not left their own lands in an ‘original elemental state’. The picturesque journeys — and the topographical poems, journals, paintings and engravings which promoted and commemorated them — came from the profits of an improving agriculture and from trade. It is not, at this level, an alteration of sensibility; it is strictly an addition of taste. Like the landscaped parks, where every device was employed to produce a natural effect, the wild regions of mountain and forest were for the most part objects of conspicuous aesthetic consumption: to have been to the named places, to exchange and compare the travelling and gazing experiences, was a form of fashionable society.

(1973c: 128)

Williams clearly relished making his point. And, it is a reminder that leads him on easily to the poetic evidence for Wordsworth’s distrust of the fashion for comparing scene with scene and of being pampered with ‘meagre novelties’. However, it is the kind of reminder that can distract from the subtlety and sophistication of Williams’s engagement with Wordsworth and Clare without enriching our understanding of class relations or their literary presence. The move is made from a swift, unexamined, and necessarily hostile reference to profits from commerce and agriculture to ‘conspicuous aesthetic consumption’. The diverse phenomena of the landscaped park, a folio of engraved Alpine scenes, or a trip to the Lakes are united by the propertied status of

the *consumers*. Differences, acknowledged earlier by Williams, of register, history, social aspiration, and even class circumstances, instanced by the proprietary sweep of a gardened landscape around a great house or the gaze of a leisured traveller upon the wild terrible beauty of crags and waterfalls were effaced or at least demoted by this approach.² Williams's acerbic and cunning observations concerning profits from landed property confer authenticity on the simple assertion that these new artefacts and forms of experience were simply items of consumption; from there the simple assertion that we are in the realm of 'taste' rather than altered 'sensibility' arises quite naturally.³

Williams knew a great deal about the complexity of class relations and he was capable of subtle kinds of analysis concerning the movements *within* classes as well as those *between* classes. Indeed he regarded seeing the interplay between classes as a matter of vital importance: to see only one class was not really to see any class thoroughly at all. He made a useful parallel between class and region in the novel:

Thus to see a class on its own, however closely and intimately, is subject to the same limitations as seeing a region on its own, and then to some further limitations in that certain of the crucial elements of class — that it is formed in and by certain definite relations with other classes — may then be missed altogether.

(1982a: 234)

His view of Austen in this respect was compelling:

We must here emphasise again the importance of Cobbett. What he names, riding past on the road, are classes. Jane Austen, from inside the houses, can never see that, for all the intricacy of her social description. All

² Peter de Bolla notes that '... similarly motivated forms of seeing were generated throughout the various stratifications of eighteenth-century society, and this included not only landowners and dispossessed laborers but all in between as well. Thus for example, in the massive tour literature of the period the increasingly mobile "middling" sort began to stake a claim for their own structures of seeing and feeling.' (de Bolla 1995: 185)

³ The distinction between 'taste' and 'sensibility' is set out by Williams in *Keywords* (1976a: 313-315). See also Wordsworth's 'Preface to Lyrical Ballads' (Wordsworth 1802: 594-611).

her discrimination is, understandably, internal and exclusive. She is concerned with the conduct of people who, in the complications of improvement, are repeatedly trying to make themselves into a class. But where only one class is seen, no classes are seen. Her people are selected though typical individuals, living well or badly within a close social dimension.

(1973c: 117)

The intricate appreciation that Williams could display of formative tensions and conflicts *within* classes was also matched by his understanding of the creative sympathies and delicate transformations that could arise *between* classes. When writing of Wordsworth Williams could note:

There is also continuity in a different dimension: the recognition, even the idealisation, of ‘humble’ characters, in sympathy, in charity and in community. *Michael* is subtitled ‘a pastoral poem’, and it is so in the developed sense of the description of a rural independence — the shepherd and his family who are

as a proverb in the vale
For endless industry

— and its dissolution by misfortune, lack of capital, and final sale:

The Cottage which was nam’d the Evening Star
Is gone, the ploughshare has been through the
ground
On which it stood; final changes have been
wrought
In all the neighbourhood

It is significant that Wordsworth links the ‘gentle agency’ of Nature with the fellow-feeling which binds him to such men as Michael: the link we observed in Thomson. Wordsworth often came closer to the actual men, but he saw them also as receding, moving away into a past which only a few surviving signs, and the spirit of poetry,

could recall. In this sense the melancholy of loss and dissolution, which had been so marked in late eighteenth-century country writing, is continued in familiar terms.

(1973c: 130)

In ‘charity and in community’; the second term in this pair is clearly positive but Williams’s use of the word ‘charity’ is ambiguous due to the deployment of the word and its related institutions from the late eighteenth century and what Williams refers to as the class-feelings ‘on both sides of the act’ (1976a: 54-5). However, both fellow-feeling and loss could also be said to have linked the gentleman poet, Wordsworth, to the labourer poet, Clare. And, yet:

Clare goes beyond the external observation of the poems of protest and of melancholy retrospect. What happens in him is that the loss is internal.

(1973c: 141)

This distinction is not made to indicate merely the personal poverty and suffering embedded in Clare’s work. A fuller sense of the distinction intended is made by Merryn and Raymond Williams in their critical comparison of Wordsworth’s *Gipsies* (Wordsworth 1807: 201) and Clare’s *The gipsy camp* (Clare 1841: 165). Wordsworth’s ‘bombast’ is attributed to the thought that ‘he is clearly not writing about the gipsies themselves but about his own reactions to them, based on two brief sightings from horseback’ (1986a: 202). Clare by contrast is said to impress ‘by its quiet objectivity’ concerning squalor passively endured:

‘Tis thus they live — a picture to the place;
A quiet, pilfering, unprotected race.

(Clare 1841: 165)⁴

⁴ This poem was written circa 1840-1 and shares its name with ‘The Gipseys Camp’, written circa 1819-21 (Clare 1821a: 65-6).

This last line in *The gypsy camp* — A quiet, pilfering, unprotected race — is admired by both Williams and his daughter for the way it balances the gypsies' negative qualities — pilfering — with their status as an outcast minority for whom the social order provides no protection. This desire for balance in relation to a manifestly oppressed group is not, however, welcomed by Raymond Williams when applied to the wider community of labourers or to the working class as a whole.

Clare and Tressell's impatience with the Parochial and the Reactionary

The difficulty Williams experienced in accepting any criticism of the lower orders was considerable and appears to have been general in his writing. What Merryn and Raymond call Clare's 'distancing complaint' concerning the bustling vacuity of his neighbours is attributed to his 'alienated individual consciousness' (1986a: 16). And, it is difficult to doubt the necessity of Clare's separation from his neighbours: his joyous blundering with his books 'round Crusoe's lonely isle'. He did have to seek respite from:

Old senseless gossips, and blackguarding boys,
Ploughmen and threshers, whose discourses led
To nothing more than labour's rude employs,
'Bout work being slack, and rise and fall of bread,
And who were like to die, and who were like to wed:

Housewives discoursing 'bout their hens and cocks,
Spinning long stories, wearing half the day,
Sad deeds bewailing of the prowling fox,
How in the roost the thief had knav'd his way
And made their market-profits all a prey.
And other losses too the dames recite,
O chick, and duck, and gosling gone astray,
All falling prizes to the swopping kite:
And so the story runs both morning, noon, and night.

Nor sabbath-days much better thoughts instill;
The true-going churchman hears the signal ring,
And takes his book his homage to fulfil,

And joins the clerk his amen-task to sing,
 And rarely home forgets the text to bring:
 But soon as service ends, he 'gins again
 'Bout signs in weather, late or forward spring,
 Of prospects good or bad in growing grain;
 And if the sermon's long he waits the end with pain.⁵

Clare's pain is palpable. Yet in *The Shepherd's Calendar* Merryn and Raymond Williams noted that 'there is no sense of separation between the poet and the people he is writing about' (1986a: 218). His origins and sympathies are said to result in identification with the village artisans and labourers. They developed a complicated account of Clare's alienation from his original life as a landless labourer and villager. His separation from a community, which apparently treated him with suspicion, was absolute:

Even in the very early 'Helpstone', we can see that he felt he was searching in vain for a 'better life', and that his beloved village was the home of 'useless ignorance'. So his feelings were highly ambiguous. He became extremely depressed when he moved away from his birthplace, yet he needed to leave it occasionally, to meet other poets and to make contact with educated people. Having left his own class, it was not possible for him to join another; the people who had bought his first book of poems because it was by a Northamptonshire peasant ignored his later and much better work.

(1986a: 218)

This seems to be a plausible account. Yet it appears to have embedded within it the idea that it was the process of Clare's deracination, perhaps brought on by his own social ambitions, which provoked his criticism of the stupefying dullness of life among rural labourers. The trope of exile, applied to the writer stranded and cut off from nourishing social roots, was employed on several occasions by Williams to explain what lay behind their views concerning the moral probity or the intellectual and political capacity of labouring people. Williams expressed little sym-

⁵ Extract from 'The Village Minstrel', written circa 1819-21, (Clare 1921b: 69-70).

pathy for such observations. He was always more interested in explaining the reasons writers had for making them. It was not that he was incapable of admitting to prejudice and stupidity among the lower orders it was that it either didn't interest him or, when it did, he wanted to explain it as a function of the local conditions of class formation.

Consequently, Mugsborough is identified as a town in which the heterogeneous nature of economic activity and employment militated against the development of self-conscious movements aimed at strengthening collectivity among working men and women.⁶ Owen's pain, which is as palpable as Clare's, in his struggle with the preoccupations and outlook of his workmates in Mugsborough is attributed by Williams to what he calls Tressell's 'difference'. That difference resided in the fact that he had travelled, lived abroad, and had, 'from the beginning, a different perspective':

I mean also what it was very important to know, as the biography was eventually assembled, that this was, in many ways, a very literate man; that his command of languages was very wide; that he was a man capable of sustained reading and of assessing statistics. And then there was this double situation, that he was coming home day by day, from hard slog to earn his bread, doing his job and yet with a mind which had reached a different perspective, having read and having seen other parts of the world.

(1982b: 248)

As with Clare this seems to be a plausible account.⁷ Yet the irony of the title, *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists*, and the hatred

⁶ This point is made by Williams in 'The Ragged-Arsed Philanthropists' (1982b: 246-247).

⁷ Alan Sillitoe reported: '... Reading *Tressell of Mugsborough*, by F. C. Ball, I found the following sentence from a letter written by a relation of Tressell's: 'I have told you quite truthfully that Robert was *not* born into the working class. He would have had a very much happier life, no doubt, had he been. It is useless to argue about what 'class' a man was born into, but it is interesting to know that Tressell was a person grafted on to working-class life through family misfortune. Little is known about his early years, but one account says that his father was an Inspector in the Royal Irish Constabulary.' (Sillitoe 1964: 8)

of ignorance and deference expressed by Tressell were attributed to the peculiarities of his social circumstance. Prejudices that favoured and celebrated an identity of interests between the British Empire and the British Worker — between capital and labour — common throughout the working class during the early years of the last century are not denied by Williams. However, Tressell's bitter focus upon them apparently resulted in a book that lacked the substance of those that adopted what Williams regarded as a more positive stance:

Then, from this double vision, the bitter irony of the title — Ragged-Arsed and Philanthropists — is the best way of reminding us that the book has advantages which the most positive, realist novels from inside the working-class communities don't usually have. It also (inevitably because it has other things to do) has less of the sustained substance of that other fiction at its best.

(1982b: 248-9)

The substance Williams is referring to here is that found in the 'affections of family life' which in those positive novels extend outwards 'from kindness to neighbours to loyalty to mates to loyalty to the union to loyalty to socialism' (1982b: 249). This was the problem for Williams, despite Tressell's considerable achievement, the book was written from outside a working-class community by a man with a *different* perspective from those reared amidst the more or less homogeneous working class regions and neighbourhoods clustered around mining, docks, shipyards and heavy industry:

Among the ragged-arsed inhabitants of that deliberately named Mugsborough, the structure of feeling is very different, and there is a bitterness which could only have been let out in any tolerable way by a man who was also earning his bread directly as a working man.

Indeed there are parts of this book which, taken on their own — which is quite wrong to do, but analytically you can hypothesize it — have such savage things to say about so many working-class people, about the general conditions of ignorance and misunderstanding and cruel-

ty, that there is hardly a line between them and a certain kind of reactionary rendering of the working class and working people as irredeemably incapable of improving their conditions. (1982b: 249)⁸

Sean O’Casey and ‘endless, bibulous, blathering talk’

What Tressell has to say is only tolerable because he had to work for his living as a painter and decorator.⁹ And, that other painter and decorator, Sean O’Casey, evoked a remarkably similar though somewhat guarded response from Williams when he encountered moments of intense suffering overridden with the ‘endless, bibulous, blathering talk’ of the Dublin slum:

This is, of course, an authentic structure, but it is not that which is usually presented. It is always difficult to speak from outside so intense and self-conscious a culture, but in the end we are bound to notice, as a continuing and determining fact, how little respect, except in the grand gestures, the Irish drama had for the Irish people. It was different when the people were remote and traditional, as in *Riders to the Sea*. But already what comes through the surface warmth of *The Playboy of the Western World* is a deeply resigned contempt — a contempt which then

⁸ In this respect another novel, also from the socialist tradition, is of interest: Bernard Shaw’s *An Unsocial Socialist*. It is built around the character of Sydney Trefusis, a wealthy man who early in the novel sets out to proselytise for socialism amongst the benighted labouring class by masquerading as an exceedingly ‘umble’, forelock tugging, ‘common’, working man (Shaw 1884: *passim*).

⁹ In this response Williams was ignoring considerable evidence of hostility towards socialism amongst the poor and a reciprocal hostility among working class socialists towards the poor. See the excellent essay by the socialist historian James D. Young, ‘The Labour Movement and “the Poor”, 1883-1914’ (Young 1989:19-35). Young pointed out: ‘In *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists*, Robert Tressell articulated the anti-working-class prejudices of the SDF with great brilliance. What is frequently overlooked in discussions of the SDF’s Marxism and Tressell’s socialism is their shared belief in the imposition of the socialist revolution from above. The pages of *Justice* were full of observations that socialism would ultimately be imposed on a hostile working-class population by a ‘compact minority’ of revolutionary socialists.’ (Young 1989: 25)

allows amusement for these deprived, fantasy-ridden talkers. Synge got near this real theme, and O'Casey is continuously dramatically aware of it. But it is a very difficult emotion to control: an uneasy separation and exile, from within the heart of the talk. And because this is so, this people's dramatist writing for what was said to be a people's theatre at the crisis of this people's history, is in a deep sense mocking it at the very moment when it moves him.

(1968a: 163-64)

It is interesting that Williams thought of Sean O'Casey, a man active in the formation of the Irish Citizen Army and secretary to the Army Council, as lacking respect for the Irish people and as being in some sense separated and exiled 'from within the heart of the talk'.

It may be that Williams did not know that P. O Cathasaigh of the Citizen Army was indeed Sean O'Casey,¹⁰ or it may be he was passing some kind of judgement on O'Casey's politics. Whichever it was, his response to O'Casey's writing was more than guarded. He sought to grasp the complexities of the situation in which the working class writer was placed and how this became involved in fashioning the artwork. As with Tressell, direct involvement from within the working class, could make a general view sustainable and even humane:

His strength is in the anonymous, collective, popular idiom through which a working world is strongly, closely, ironically seen. What is then interesting is that despite this vigour the final judgment is ironical: the ragged-trousered philanthropists — those who in the end accept exploitation; the inhabitants of Mugsborough. It is a generous irony, from within the working class, and as such humane.

(1970a: 155)

But whether the writer was in Helpstone, Hastings, Hoxton, Clerkenwell, Wigan, or Dublin, if their work touched in any powerful manner upon the *general* failure of working class people to

¹⁰ See: O'Casey 1919; Lyons 1971: 285; Boyle 1969: 53-7.

act responsibly towards society, towards themselves or towards each other, the problem appears to have been the deracination of the artist. In such cases Williams resorted to the trope of exile:

The paradoxical force of the language, endlessly presenting and self-conscious, at once to others and to the audience, drives through the play, but not as richness: as the sound, really, of a long confusion and disintegration. A characteristic and significant action is repeated: while the men are dying, in the Easter rising, the people of the tenements are looting, and lying about themselves. It is an unbearable contrast, and it is the main emotion O'Casey had to show: of nerves ragged by talking which cannot connect with the direct and terrible action. The use of random colour, of flags, of slogans, of rhetoric and comic inflation, of the sentimental song, of reminiscences of theatre (as in Nora repeating the mad Ophelia) is a rush of disintegration, of catching at temporary effects, which is quite unique: in a way, already, the separated consciousness, writing from within a life it cannot accept in its real terms yet finds endlessly engaging and preoccupying: the structure of feeling of the self-exile, still within a collective action, which can be neither avoided nor taken wholly seriously; neither indifferent nor direct.

(1968a: 166)

Williams knew that individual working men and women could behave badly, could be dissolute and disloyal. As he said, 'it does not come as news to anyone born into a poor family that the poor are not beautiful, or that a number of them are lying, shiftless and their own worst enemies' (1958a: 177). He did not distrust the presentation of Sir John D'Urberville or his wife Joan Durbeyfield as feckless tipplers at *Rolliver's* or *The Pure Drop*. And, he does not object to the presentation of dismal misconduct or even rapacious criminality in the lives of working people as individuals. But, presentations that addressed the problem of proletarian conduct or morality in *general* terms, terms that sought to characterise whole communities or sections of communities as ignorant, unreliable, disloyal or feckless, he refused absolutely. He did accept the existence of such general phenomena:

The General Strike of 1926 was a high-point of working-class self-organization and protest. It was strong in many places and indeed present and active in most. But look also at that less convenient memory of 1926: at that organization for strike-breaking against the organized working class: the OMS, the Organisation for the Maintenance of Supplies, one of those things we've half-forgotten although we may see its like again. Look where that was recruited. It was not, as some of the books tell you, all undergraduates and their debutante friends. It really was not.

In certain parts of the country, where the problems of social self-definition, of class-consciousness in that hard, arresting, challenging form, are in fact quite different, there was significant recruiting of poor men against what was objectively their own class.

(1982b: 245-6)

However, novelists or dramatists could not safely or accurately present this objective recognition of the widespread existence of what he could only regard as reprehensible conduct among the working class unless they presented it through the experience and feelings of particular participants in the life and the available choices depicted. And this view was, if anything, underlined by Williams's somewhat grudging recognition of the value of statistical modes of analysis which, from the 1830s, facilitated the construction of general views of behaviour and social conditions among the poor.¹¹

For Williams accepting a life and writing from it in 'real terms' meant addressing the precise circumstances of individuals within it. Generalisations concerning the lives of working people given their, at best, 'emergent' circumstances and more usually their 'subordinate' position, could only lead to intrinsically ambivalent and misleading abstractions:

¹¹ Williams echoed Dickens and others in thinking of the 'statistical mode' of studying society as 'destructive and hateful'. 'But without it, nevertheless, much that needed to be seen, in a complicated, often opaque and generally divided society, could not, as a basis for common experience and response, be seen at all.' (1973c: 222)

For the sense of the great city was now, in many minds, so overwhelming, that its people were often seen in a single way: as a crowd, as ‘masses’ or as a ‘workforce’. The image could be coloured either way, for sympathy or for contempt, but its undifferentiating character was persistent and powerful.

(1973c: 222)¹²

Moreover, the very act of fashioning such abstract observations of whole groups of people and their relations with each other and society at large required that the writer step outside the community of which he or she was writing. The establishment of distance between the writer and those written about was a necessary condition for the creation of these abstract general views of the labouring classes. Self-exile was the condition and the cause of the resulting distortion of vision.

These distorted, ‘abstract’, ‘distanced’ presentations of working people did not call forth a general or unmediated response from Williams. The predicament of the particular artist was always a matter of some importance to him as was the particular structure and tone of their individual works. Williams clearly feels differently about the circumstances of Clare compared to those of Tressell. He was exercised by the historical specificities of the situation of each individual writer and this historical consciousness played a large part in determining the inflection and register of his response. Consequently, his view of O’Casey’s engagement with Dublin’s slum proletariat is precise:

‘... already, the separated consciousness, writing from within a life it cannot accept in its real terms yet finds endlessly engaging and preoccupying: the structure of feeling of the self-exile, still within a collective action, which can be neither avoided nor taken wholly seriously ...’

(1968a: 166)

He is in sympathy with O’Casey and with O’Casey’s predicament. This sympathy is sustainable because O’Casey, like Tressell, does not attack socialism or present the fecklessness of

¹² For a discussion of the term ‘masses’ see: (1958a: 295-312; 1976a: 196-7).

the labouring or unemployed poor as a fundamental barrier to their participation in the struggle for the improvement of their own conditions. The presentation of the failure of a Dublin tenement's residents to regard the struggle for national independence as something of relevance to their immediate circumstances, like the presentation of the failure of the painters and decorators of Mugsborough to regard the 'The Oblong' as a relevant description of their social circumstance, was not regarded by Williams as inimical to the struggle for social improvement.

Gissing and Brecht: The Individual Against Society

While a certain distance, alienation, or exile may be the condition and the cause of a writer's presentation of the poor as a benighted mass it did not, in itself, mean that their presentation was without merit or artistic integrity. For this to occur the writer had to imply or propose a situation rendered hopeless by the graceless ignorance and amorality of the labouring poor:

There are two points here. First, it does not come as news to anyone born into a poor family that the poor are not beautiful, or that a number of them are lying, shiftless and their own worst enemies. Within an actual social experience, these things can be accepted and recognized; we are dealing after all with actual people under severe pressure. A man like Gorki can record the faults of the poor (in his *Autobiography* and elsewhere) with an unflinching and quite unsentimental alertness. But Gorki would not suppose that this was an argument against change, or a reason for dissatisfaction with the popular cause. He was never subject to that kind of illusion because that was not the material of his attachment, which grew within a whole reality. Second, the faults of the poor, as they are seen from within a whole situation, are different — more individualized, and related to different standards — from those seen by the rebel whose identification is merely negative.

(1958a: 177)

The ‘rebel’ is question here is George Gissing. This distrust of the ‘artist as rebel’ should not be confused with individuals who find themselves opposed to society. The presentation of such individuals could be entirely positive. Indeed it could be the basis of transformation, of innovation, of great art:

To see the open action of *Mother Courage* or *Galileo* — the sequence of scenes which are ‘for themselves’, sharp and isolated, yet connect in a pattern that defines the action Put one way, Brecht’s drama is that of isolated and separated individuals, and of their connections, in that capacity, with a total historical process. He is hardly interested at all in intermediate relationships, in that whole complex of experience, at once personal and social between the poles of the separated individual and the totally realized society. His dramatic form, isolating and dialectic, serves this structure of feeling exactly; it is his precise development of an expressionist mode, and the dimension of social realism is absent in his work, both in substance and in any continuing contemporary experience, because the structure is of that kind. Put another way, Brecht’s expressionism is unusually open, is a development of possibilities and even at times a transformation of effective conventions, because he took up the position of explaining rather than exposing an overall critical-objective position, rather than the intensity of special pleading on behalf of an isolated figure.

(1968a: 330-1)

The individual against society could be wholly seen, but only if this struggle was seen in the course of realising the individual’s connections with a total historical process. The suffering isolated individual — the individual opposed to society — is seen as a characteristic figure in a world that suffers. They are symptomatic of society and can reveal more of its nature. Consequently, the presentation of such individuals is not necessarily in any direct way an affirmation of the possibilities presented by resistance. On the contrary, with Brecht:

The dramatic form is not oriented to growth: the experiences of transforming relationship and of social change are not included, and the tone and the conventions follow from this: men are shown why they are isolated, why they defeat themselves, why they smell of defeat and its few isolated, complicit virtues. (1968a: 331)

In this valuation Williams made clear that he was not insisting upon positive or optimistic presentations of the capacity of individuals to participate in processes aiming at improving conditions.¹³ However, he did require a high level of integration between the formal means used by the artist and the character of the historical and social processes being realised.

Gissing's Prejudices

In acknowledging the predicament of Reardon, and the commercial activity of Milvain and Whelpdale, Williams refuses full recognition of what was *emergent* in Gissing's *New Grub Street* or *The Nether World* concerning the exposure and vulnerability of individuals entirely dependent upon the oscillations of the market. It was more important to see Gissing as the spokesman of 'the despair born of social and political disillusion' (1958a: 175). He appears to have thought that those who wrote about the circumstances of the poor and presented narratives and characters pessimistic about the positive contribution to social advance that might be expected from that quarter were fashioning their dramas and fictions from their own fears and prejudices. He thought that Gissing's creativity was flawed by just such a conflation:

We do not learn from *Demos* that social reform is hopeless; we learn about Gissing's prejudices and difficulties. (1958a: 178)

Williams could be sympathetic towards Gissing, but it was sympathy for a divided self. It was sympathy for an artist who, faced with the urban crowd, tried to seek out the individuals who

¹³ See also 'The Achievement of Brecht' (1981c: 153-162), and Chapter 7 of *Modern Tragedy*, 'A Rejection of Tragedy' (1966a: 190-204).

composed it while simultaneously drawing back in fervid recognition of the necessity of his own isolation:

He is the humane observer describing the urban landscape and its social experience, trying to individualise beyond it. He is also the man who enacts in himself the alienation he is witnessing; who sees in the despair of others not only his own despair but the shapes of recoil: the drawing back, do-not-touch-me kind of exile.

(1970: 160)

This sympathy, however, is very limited and the limitation applies as much to Gissing's characters as to the author himself.

What terrible barracks, those Farringdon Road Buildings! Vast, sheer walls, unbroken by even an attempt at ornament; row above row of windows in the mud-coloured surface, upwards, lifeless eyes, murky openings that tell of bareness, disorder, comfortlessness within. One is tempted to say that Shooter's Gardens are a preferable abode. An inner courtyard, asphalted, swept clean, — looking up to the sky as from a prison. Acres of these edifices, the tinge of grime declaring the relative dates of their erection; millions of tones of brute brick and mortar, crushing the spirit as you gaze. Barracks, in truth; housing for the army of industrialism, an army fighting with itself, rank against rank, man against man, that the survivors may have whereon to feed. Pass by in the night, and strain imagination to picture the weltering mass of human weariness, of bestiality, of unmerited dolour, of hopeless hope, of crushed surrender, tumbled together within those forbidding walls.

Clara hated the place from her first hour in it. It seemed to her that the air was poisoned with the odour of an unclean crowd. The yells of children at play in the courtyard tortured her nerves; the regular sounds on the staircase, day after day

repeated at the same hours, incidents of the life of poverty, irritated her sick brain and filled her with despair to think that as long as she lived she could never hope to rise again above this world to which she was born.

That is the authentic and powerful note of Gissing: the indignation and despair, but also the ragged nerves, the whine, of the separated frustrated life-carrying individual, not only aware of but against 'the weltering mass'. It is almost contemporary with *Tess* and *Jude* but the voice could hardly be more different.

(1970: 161-2)

It was evidently difficult for Williams to empathise with characters who wanted to rise above the circumstances into which they had been born. Similarly an author, who presented this frustration as a condition of being trapped amidst the unredeeming squalor of the impoverished masses, could not be regarded with anything but suspicion. However, the paragraph (complete with paragraph indent) which commences 'What terrible barracks, those Farringdon Road Buildings! Vast, sheer walls...' in Williams's long quotation in *The English Novel from Dickens to Lawrence* begins in Chapter XXX of Gissing's novel, *The Nether World*:

The economy prevailing in to-day's architecture takes good care that no depressing circumstances shall be absent from the dwellings in which the poor find shelter. What terrible barracks, those Farringdon Road Buildings! Vast, sheer walls . . .

(Gissing 1889: Ch.30: 273-4)

Williams's omission of the paragraph's opening sentence robs it of the full force of its social criticism. And, it is interesting that the observation of 'an army fighting with itself, rank against rank, man against man, that the survivors may have whereon to feed' should have drawn no supportive comment from Williams given the conditions prevailing in casual day labour and in the sweated trades in the last two decades of the nineteenth century. An

indication of his possible reason is given in *The Country and the City*, where he cites Engels:

For Engels it was changing:

That immense haunt of misery is no longer the stagnant pool it was six years ago. It has shaken off its torpid despair, has returned to life, and has become the home of what is called the 'New Unionism'; that is to say, the organization of the great mass of 'unskilled' workers.

These were the days of the organisation of the gasworkers, of the matchgirls' strike, of the great dock strike of 1889. And, as Engels argued, these new unions and struggles were in a different dimension from the craft unionism of an earlier period.

(1973c: 231)

It is this difference of political tone and the different register of competing historical perspectives that gives the final shape and force to Williams's criticism of Gissing. George Orwell probably put his finger on the problem best when he pointed out in a piece written in 1948 for *Politics and Letters* that:

Gissing would have liked a little more money for himself and some others, but he was not much interested in what we should now call social justice. He did not admire the working class as such, and he did not believe in democracy. He wanted to speak not for the multitude, but for the exceptional man, the sensitive man, isolated among the barbarians.

(Orwell 1948a: 487)

For Williams, Gissing's bleak view of the prospects for socialism could be read only as a projection of his own prejudices and problems:

We do not learn from *Demos* that social reform is hopeless; we learn about Gissing's prejudices and difficulties. The case he sets himself to prove is instructive: that a

socialist working man, Richard Mutimer, on inheriting a fortune by what amounts to an accident, will inevitably deteriorate personally, and will end by diluting his principles. This does not surprise me, but it is interesting that Gissing thought this an analogue of social reform — the book is sub-titled *A Story of English Socialism*. Mutimer's destiny is always predictable, down to the point where, poor again, and seeking only to serve the working people, he is, in part through his own carelessness, in part through real error, stoned to death by those whom he sought to help. We do not need to ask whose martyrdom this is, and in terms of the structure of feeling we return it to *Felix Holt*: if you get involved, you get into trouble.

There remains, finally, a more general line to be drawn. After *New Grub Street*, Gissing returns to his proper study, that of the condition of exile and loneliness; but both before and after the change there is a significant pattern: the disillusion with social reform is transmuted to an attachment to art.

(1958a: 178-9)

Evidently, Williams wants his readers to assume that Mutimer is really Gissing being martyred by the very people he is trying to help. He goes on to describe the relationship of the attitudes to art of some of Gissing's characters — the spiritual value apart from the world's tumult — to the 'new aesthetics' and to the rural values of an older order uncorrupted by commercialism, science and industry:

Hubert Eldon, the squire, saves the beautiful Wanley valley from the coarse, industry-spreading Socialist, Richard Mutimer. Within this old order, guaranteed by the Englishman's love of 'Common Sense . . . that Uncommon Sense', and his distrust of abstractions, virtue can reside. It is a matter of opinion, I suppose, whether one finds this a convincing peroration, or, in the world's tumult, the desperate rationalization of a deeply sensitive, deeply lonely man.

(1958a: 179)

Here we must now assume the novelist's identification is with Eldon and it seems reasonable to conclude that the 'deeply sensitive, deeply lonely man' is neither Mutimer nor Eldon nor any other of his characters, but Gissing himself.¹⁴

The Case of Felix Holt

This critical conflation of characters with their authors has evident dangers. Even so, Williams's comparison of the structure of feeling of Gissing's *Demos* with that of George Eliot's *Felix Holt* is interesting. His observation that both novels carry the negative message: 'if you get involved' in the struggle for reform 'you get into trouble' is plainly absurd. It is historically true (and Williams knew this) that involvement in struggles for reform on behalf of the working class got radicals 'into trouble'. Williams's difficulty is really the nature of the trouble into which Richard Mutimer and Felix Holt get themselves. Both of them got into trouble and found themselves the victims of violent *mobs* of the very people that they were trying to help. In Mutimer's case it was death by a stone hurled at him by a member of the mob and Felix Holt landed in gaol for leading a riot when the reader is aware that despite appearances Felix was attempting to lead the roaring crowd of drunk and enraged labourers and miners out of harm's way. Neither of them got into trouble in any *direct* sense because of actions or intentions of those in authority to deal with radical troublemakers. The author of one man's death and the cause of another's imprisonment were the savage, misdirected and incontinent rage of gatherings of vulgar, uneducated roughs.

Williams draws out these difficulties further in his consideration of *The Address to Working Men*:

Felix Holt himself is not so much a character as an impersonation: a rôle in which he again appears in the *Address to Working Men, by Felix Holt*, which George Eliot was persuaded to write by her publisher. Here the dangers of active democracy are more clearly put:

¹⁴ No doubt Williams would have agreed with Q D Leavis when she wrote in 1938: "Gissing's life and temperament, with the problems that they raise, are the key to both his many failures and his single success as an artist." (Q D Leavis 1938: 179)

The too absolute predominance of a class whose wants have been of a common sort, who are chiefly struggling to get better and more food, clothing, shelter, and bodily recreation, may lead to hasty measures for the sake of having things more fairly shared which, even if they did not fail . . . would at last debase the life of the nation.

Reform must proceed

not by any attempt to do away directly with the actually existing class distinctions and advantages . . . but by the turning of Class Interests into Class Functions. . . . If the claims of the unendowed multitude of working men hold within them principles which must shape the future, it is not less true that the endowed classes, in their inheritance from the past, hold the precious material without which no worthy, noble future can be moulded.

George Eliot, in this kind of thinking, is very far from her best. Her position, behind the façade of Felix Holt, is that of a Carlyle without the energy, of an Arnold without the quick practical sense, of an anxiously balancing Mill without the intellectual persistence.

(1958a: 107-108)¹⁵

This difficulty is compounded by his method of citation. The first sentence cited above — ‘The too absolute predominance of class. . .’ — does not exist in George Eliot’s text. What she wrote is this:

Just as in the case of material wealth and its distribution we are obliged to take the selfishness and weakness of human nature into account, and however we insist that men might act better, are forced, unless we are fanatical

¹⁵ In *Culture and Society* (1958a: 344) Williams gives his source as: ‘*Address to Workingmen, by Felix Holt*, George Eliot; Blackwood’s, 1868; repr. *Essays and Leaves from a Note-book*, Blackwood, 1884; pp. 341-342.’ and ‘pp. 333 and 348.’

simpletons, to consider how they are likely to act; so in this matter of the wealth that is carried in men's minds, we have to reflect that *the too absolute predominance of a class whose wants have been of a common sort, who are chiefly struggling to get better and more food, clothing, shelter, and bodily recreation, may lead to hasty measures for the sake of having things more fairly shared, which, even if they did not fail of their object, would at last debase the life of the nation.* [Material quoted by Williams is in italics]

(Eliot [1868] 1884: 341-2)

This passage belongs to an argument concerning the way in which learning and the accumulated treasury of knowledge is bound up with the prevailing conditions 'which have much evil in them'. Eliot is arguing that considerable caution is required in the struggle to effect reform in such a way that the classes which at present 'hold the treasures of knowledge — nay, I may say, the treasure of refined needs' are not driven from public affairs or even destroyed (Eliot [1868] 1884: 342).¹⁶

The second part of Williams' citation presents yet more difficulties. The opening part of the first sentence is missing and Williams has connected the quote ending '. . . life of the nation.' from page 342 with the quote commencing '. . . not by any attempt' from page 333 with his own phrase 'Reform must proceed'. The second ellipsis covers 27 words. And, the explanatory sentence immediately following is altogether missing:

Now the only safe way by which society can be steadily improved and our worst evils reduced, is *not by any attempt to do away directly with the actually existing class distinctions and advantages*, as if everybody could have the same sort of work, or lead the same sort of life (which

¹⁶ This concern was echoed some 25 years later by Oscar Wilde in his essay 'The Soul of Man Under Socialism': 'It is clear, then, that no authoritarian Socialism will do. For while, under the present system, a very large number of people can lead lives of a certain amount of freedom and expression and happiness, under an industrial-barrack system, or a system of economic tyranny, nobody would be able to have any such freedom at all. It is to be regretted that a portion of our community should be practically in slavery, but to propose to solve the problem by enslaving the entire community is childish.' (Wilde 1892: 9)

none of my hearers are stupid enough to suppose), *but by the turning of Class Interests into Class Functions* or duties. What I mean is, that each class should be urged by the surrounding conditions to perform its particular work under the strong pressure of responsibility to the nation at large; that our public affairs should be got into a state in which there should be no impunity for foolish or faithless conduct. [Material quoted by Williams is in italics]

(Eliot [1868] 1884: 333)

By ending the sentence ‘. . . Class Functions’ Williams loses ‘or duties’.

The third ellipsis: ‘Class Interests into Class Functions [quoted from page 333]. . . . If the claims of the unendowed multitude [quoted from page 348]’, represents eight pages, or well over 3,000 words, and, incidentally, contains within it the passage from pages 341-2 with which Williams opened his quotation.

Williams’s difficulty was the strong emphasis that Eliot placed upon the *duty* which radicals and reformers had towards society as a whole. This duty demanded — for the long-haul — a patient toleration of injustice and inequality while gradual improvements were put in place to increase democratic participation and to improve the general conditions.

Williams’s overriding concern was to demonstrate that Eliot through her presentation of Felix Holt was an opponent of what he called ‘active democracy’:

Almost any kind of social action is ruled out, and the most that can be hoped for, with a hero like Felix Holt, is that he will in the widest sense keep his hands reasonably clean. It is indeed the mark of a deadlock in society when so fine an intelligence and so quick a sympathy can conceive no more than this. For patience and caution, without detailed intention, are very easily converted into acquiescence, and there is no right to acquiesce if society is known to be ‘vicious’.

(1958a: 109)

It was as a consequence of this sustained belief that Williams could not hear Felix Holt when he asked:

For what else is the meaning of our Trades-unions? What else is the meaning of every flag we carry, every procession we make, every crowd we collect for the sake of making some protest on behalf of our body as receivers of wages, if not this: that it is our interest to stand by each other, and that this being the common interest, no one of us will try to make a good bargain for himself without considering what will be good for his fellows? And every member of a union believes that the wider he can spread his union, the stronger and surer will be the effect of it. So I think I shall be borne out in saying that a working man who can put two and two together, or take three from four and see what will be the remainder, can understand that a society, to be well off, must be made up chiefly of men who consider the general good as well as their own.

(Eliot [1868] 1884: 329-330)

The Working Class: Deadlock or Incorporation?

The historical record shows that no ‘deadlock’ had been reached in January 1868. On the contrary, an extension of the franchise had just taken place, adding almost a million working men to the electorate,¹⁷ and within two years parliament and the state had embarked upon the project of establishing a universal system of elementary education. The institutional and cultural incorporation of the industrial working class into society was seriously under way. Williams surely knew this yet he felt compelled to conclude his discussion of ‘The Industrial Novels’, *Mary Barton*, *North and South*, *Hard Times*, *Sybil*, *Alton Locke*, and *Felix Holt* in the following terms:

¹⁷ Indeed, it is worth remembering that this extension of the franchise had been the subject of debate and struggle for fifty years. Jeremy Bentham, who Marx described as the ‘pedantic, leather-tongued oracle of the ordinary bourgeois intelligence’, anticipated the Chartists by some three decades in calling for universal suffrage, secret ballots, annual parliaments, and equal electoral districts in his Parliamentary Reform Catechism, 1809 (Hart 1982: 2; 24; 70).

These novels, when read together, seem to illustrate clearly enough not only the common criticism of industrialism, which the tradition was establishing, but also the general structure of feeling which was equally determining. Recognition of evil was balanced by fear of becoming involved. Sympathy was transformed, not into action, but into withdrawal. We can all observe the extent to which this structure of feeling has persisted, into both the literature and the social thinking of our own time.

(1958a: 109)

His difficulty was that all of these texts expressed the belief that the working man could only be trusted with directing influence on the course of reform when he was rendered fit to do so by the process of cultural and moral improvement which in their particular ways all these writings endorsed.

Williams's difficulty was compounded by his inability to directly contradict their view of the unreliable and potentially violent poor.¹⁸ He could not believe that the great mass of working people in the middle decades of the nineteenth century were ignorant and intemperate and consequently unfit to engage in any reliable or sustainable manner in their own emancipation. And he could advance no evidence for this belief. Instead, he clung to Cobbett's finer feelings but it was not a dependence that could convince:

Once again Cobbett is a touchstone, and his conduct at his own trial after the labourers' revolts of 1830 is a finer

¹⁸ For a description of mob violence and the retribution to be expected from soldiers and mill owners see *The Autobiography of Samuel Bamford* (Bamford 1848-9: 295-307). Bamford, in a similar vein to Eliot's Felix Holt, tempered his radicalism with due regard to the difficulty of feeding and accommodating big demonstrations, the unpredictable nature of large crowds, and a thoroughgoing respect for the law. He thought '... that *some* of the most prominent leaders of Reform in Manchester, were men whose prudence suffered much from their zeal . . .' (Bamford 1817: 327). See Williams's consideration of limits, resignation and reconciliation in his 'Forms of English in 1848' (1977c: 287-290). For a reading that to some extent echoes Williams's dismay at the attitudes expressed by Eliot's Felix Holt see Bernard Sharratt's discussion of Samuel Bamford's 'groping in a mental and political twilight' (Sharratt 1982: 241-264).

demonstration of real maturity than the fictional compromises here examined. Cobbett, like nearly all men who have worked with their hands, hated any kind of violent destruction of useful things. But he had the experience and the strength to enquire further into violence. He believed, moreover, what George Eliot so obviously could not believe, that the common people were something other than a mob, and had instincts and habits something above drunkenness, gullibility and ignorance.

(1958a: 105)

Williams knew something of the shifts of Cobbett's political outlook and his caution in relation to the enfranchisement of 'mere menial servants, vagrants, pickpockets and scamps of all sorts' (1983d: 17). Moreover, his hatred of violent destruction did not result in outright condemnation of rick burnings and of rural riots. As Williams tells us:

Cobbett did not advocate or support the burnings; he wanted to channel the protest towards the parliamentary reform movement. But he was indignant that the military were sent in against these starving and desperate fellow-countrymen. Moreover, with typical bluntness, he recognised what the fires were doing to the cold indifference of the rich and powerful. Even while the labourers were being repressed by military force, the terror of fires had produced attention, and the beginnings of change: 'Without entering at present into the *motives* of the working people, it is unquestionable that their acts have produced good, and great good too' (11.12.1830). It was for this dangerously honest recognition that Cobbett was again prosecuted. His trial in July 1831 took place within the continued reform agitation; the jury split, and the prosecution was dropped.

(1983d: 26)

However, Cobbett died in 1835 and the process of reform which had begun in earnest in 1832, together with changes in the nature and scale of industrial production, had by 1850, altered the terms of the struggle forever. The social world addressed by the 'Industrial Novels' was profoundly different. Reformers and

novelists alike were aware that a small minority of the labouring poor were articulate, morally upright, and capable of establishing well-directed institutions. And, it is surprising that Williams should have been tempted to assert, against his own proper understanding, that the creator of *Adam, Seth, Dinah, Silas Marner, Bob Jakin, Felix, and Mr Lyon* ‘so obviously could not believe, that the common people were something other than a mob, and had instincts and habits something above drunkenness, gullibility and ignorance.’ It is evident that in the process of populating the ‘Industrial Novels’ with credible characters Gaskell, Dickens, Disraeli, Kingsley, and Eliot portrayed people and relationships of great complexity. It is true, as Williams indicates, that *Sybil* or *Esther* turns out to be of noble birth, that *Felix and Jem* are wrongly accused, and that plots are resolved by inheritance or emigration. But it is equally true that the ‘structure of feeling’ represented by these novels does not dismiss the working class as uniformly benighted or as incapable of reform or development. However, and this was Williams’s principal difficulty, this process was seen as a process of reform — institutional, economic, moral — in which well-disposed people from the middle and upper middle classes would assist sober and upright workmen in the struggle to bring about reform by raising the moral and cultural level of the entire working class. It was not thought credible that more than a small minority of exceptional individuals from amongst the labouring class would be able to rise above the poverty of their circumstances without radical improvements in working conditions, public hygiene, housing, and education. This was not conceived as a process in which the working class could, in any sense, act in an independent or properly autonomous manner and consequently, was not one that Williams could from any particular critical vantage point endorse.