

Chapter Seven: Belonging, Exile and George Orwell

Bordering on Exile

Williams employed the trope of ‘border’ and ‘border country’ to stress both shared, mixed and perhaps necessarily conflicting commitments. He also used it to imply a certain active and positive distance from the metropolis, which could carry both frank resistance to central authorities, and an emergent independence from established orthodoxies. It was a means both of figuring a position and of clearing a space for himself, as the son of a family of manual workers, living the life of a teacher, professional literary critic, and novelist. It also enabled him to explore more fully the potential, limitations, and responsibilities inherent in such a position. He could not regard his move into England from Wales, his duty as a captain in one of General Eisenhower’s armies, his academic promotion, or his rise into the upper middle class, as ‘moving on’ or as achieving a new and settled position.¹ Each shift upon which he embarked resulted in the accumulation of commitments and loyalties; no severance was contemplated. Exile from the working class or the related cultural and political commitments was inconceivable. He refused none of the resulting contradictions. He held them all together in the border country from which no departure could be sought because to hold this ground was central to his critical enterprise.

So, Williams was not unaware of the importance of tensions — creative tensions — in which a certain distance from the dominant culture could contribute to a greater capacity for insight concerning experiences that might elude those more firmly entrenched within it. In *The Long Revolution* Williams noted the importance of writers drawn from outside the ruling circles in

¹ It may be objected that a teaching post at Cambridge or even a chair at that university does not constitute a ‘rise into the upper middle class’ any more than appointment to the Arts Council (1976-8), running a car, owning two homes and accumulating a substantial bank balance would have done. Phrases like upper middle class are indeed notoriously difficult to pin down. Suffice it to say, even today, such appointments have very high status and are well-rewarded; during the sixties and seventies of the last century they were much more valuable than they would be today.

England during the period 1870 to 1950.² Here, he cited the contribution of women writers, of male writers who had not been educated at Oxbridge, of Irish poets, novelists and dramatists and of those men, Conrad, Eliot, Thomas, from Poland, America and Wales.³ And, during the early sixties these observations flowed into a wider discussion on the left of the contributions made to British culture by foreigners.

For example, Perry Anderson discussed the role of émigré intellectuals at some length in his 1968 article, 'Components of the National Culture'. Anderson's focus was on European intellectuals settling in Britain from early in the last century. He noted that they were 'fleeing the permanent instability of their own societies'. These 'intellectuals who settled in Britain', Anderson argued, were 'not just a chance agglomeration. They were essentially a 'White', counter-revolutionary emigration' (Anderson 1968: 18). Two years later, with acknowledgement of Anderson, but in fact, in a more direct response to Williams's observation in *The Long Revolution*, Terry Eagleton published his *Exiles and Émigrés* (Eagleton 1970b: 9).

He confined himself to twentieth-century English literature and pointed out that:

If the creative literature of a society is dominated over a specific period by foreigners and expatriates, then it is reasonable to assume that this fact is as revealing of the nature of that society as it is of the writers who approached it from a foreign viewpoint.

(Eagleton 1970b: 9)

There was also an older version of this interest in foreigners

² 'In the period between about 1870 and 1950 . . . It has been widely noted that an unusual proportion of the important imaginative literature of these years was written by people outside the majority English pattern.' (1961a: 265)

³ It is also worth remembering that F. R. Leavis's believed that rootlessness or, at least a sense of rootlessness, was a general condition among those with literary interests: 'Conrad, of course, was a *déraciné*, which no doubt counts for a good deal in the intensity with which he renders his favourite theme of isolation. But then a state of something like deracination is common today among those to whom the question of who the great novelists are is likely to matter.' (Leavis, F. R. 1948: 33)

and expatriates (owing nothing to Williams, Anderson or Eagleton) in which a jaunty idea of exile was presented as an explanation for the bohemianism and obscurity of modern writers and artists.⁴ This was a populist explanation akin to the much more recent descriptions and explanations of artistic hauteur given by John Carey (1992) than anything arising on the left in the fifties and sixties.

Commotion, Settlement and Family Life ⁵

However, the enlistment of foreigners and expatriates by other critics and observers to explain the peculiarities of literary developments in England should not be conflated with Williams's deployment of the trope of exile. This is because Williams was much more concerned with affirmation of the importance of belonging to a society, and of sharing in its most important relationships. Consequently, his struggle to avoid purely individualistic responses is to some degree corroborated by the conventional manner in which women are figured in his novels. They are, on the whole — even Kate Owen — steadfast and reliable, balancing their aspirations and lapses, and their need for life, with the deep-grained commitments into which they have entered with their men folk.⁶

And, of course, in this regard his assumptions about the relations between men and women and about sexuality were those of a conventional heterosexual male socialist who had grown to maturity during the middle of the twentieth century.⁷ He

⁴ For a flavour of this view of the bohemian and the arcane character of modernist works see Chapter One entitled 'Exile' in *Forces in Modern British Literature 1885-1956* (Tindall 1947: 3-26).

⁵ 'The experience of visual and linguistic strangeness, the broken narrative of the journey and its inevitable accompaniment of transient encounters with characters whose self-presentation was bafflingly unfamiliar, raised to the level of universal myth this intense, singular narrative of unsettlement, homelessness, solitude and impoverished independence: the lonely writer gazing down on the unknowable city from his shabby apartment. The whole commotion is finally and crucially interpreted and ratified by the City of Émigrés and Exiles itself, New York.' (Inglis/Williams 1987: 34)

⁶ See the conversation between Kate and her son Peter in *Second Generation* (1964b: 340-3).

⁷ These assumptions extended to his detecting in Modernist and avant-garde opposition to the 'bourgeois family' a 'rejection of all social forms of human

sought no encounter with Freud or Lacan: sexuality did not present any problems, questions or answers, which lay beyond the capacity of artistic expression or conscious, negotiable, social relations and relationships. He believed in the equality of women and in the exercise of tact and consideration in relation to intimate personal relationships. In this respect he remained within the broadly liberal tradition adopted by socialists on gender and sexuality during the preceding hundred years.⁸

And for these reasons, insinuations of what we would now call ‘sexism’ are anachronistic and inappropriate.⁹ The domestic division of labour between Joy and Raymond in which Joy looked after the children and ran the home and Raymond, ‘the breadwinner’, taught and wrote books, would have seemed more or less rational to most people on the left in the forties and fifties. Women with careers at the time could not, by and large, combine them with motherhood.¹⁰ And, profound changes in technology and in economic arrangements were required before the feminist struggle to change conditions, relationships and attitudes was able to re-launch on the new waves of radicalism during the sixties and seventies.¹¹

A ‘Welsh European’ and Nationalism

This historical circumstance probably contributed to the fact that Williams’s critical senses were not particularly acute when it came to considering the reasons why some artists may indeed have felt (or actually had been) exiled from

reproduction’, and a new valuation in artistic circles of homosexuality associated with ‘great resentment and hatred of women’ as constraints upon the expression of individuality and genius (1988: 57).

⁸ See my discussion of the socialist tradition on gender and sexuality in *Sex-Life* (Milligan 1993: 46-62). See also Williams’s insightful comments on the situation of nineteenth century women novelists in *The English Novel from Dickens to Lawrence* (1970a: 62-3), and John Hutchinson’s criticism in his ‘Subdued Feminism: Jane Austen, Charlotte Brontë and George Eliot’ (Hutcheson 1983).

⁹ See Fred Inglis’s comments on the Raymond and Joy’s domestic arrangements (Inglis 1995: 129-130; 274).

¹⁰ The exceptions like Doris Lessing, for example, were all the more remarkable.

¹¹ For a critical feminist engagement with Williams’s work see Jenny Bourne Taylor’s article ‘Raymond Williams: Gender and Generation’ (Bourne Taylor: 1990).

their society. The fact that Virginia Woolf would not have been admitted, in any capacity other than that of a guest, to Williams's Cambridge college, is relevant here.¹²

Self-styled late in his career as a 'Welsh European' Williams made his home in the England and in the English institutions in which he prospered. (Even after the purchase of a house 'on the border' in Herefordshire his principal home remained his house in Saffron Walden.) He was not a Welsh nationalist and does not appear to have had any sympathy for Scottish nationalism.¹³ In common with much of the left in England, Irish nationalism did not attract his interest or his active support.¹⁴ Despite his distaste for the 'myth' and 'fancy dress' often associated with nationalism he could be passionate about Wales and the oppression of its people. However, he did not advocate national self-determination; a vague belief in autonomy and self-management had to suffice: 'People have to, in the end, direct their own lives, control their own places, live by their own feelings.' (1975b: 104)

In his fiction, family commitments were his focus and Wales, particularly rural Wales, functioned as a site for the exploration of loyalty and community in the lives of individuals. Changing social status and circumstances and the way that origins continue to make visceral claims upon both those who remain and those

¹² Although women started studying at Cambridge during the 1860s it was not until 1921 that they could attend or give lectures. The archaeologist, Dorothy Garrod, became the first woman professor in 1938 though she could not vote in University gatherings. Women were allowed to graduate from 1948 onwards but a quota restricting women to 20% of the undergraduate body was imposed and remained in force until 1961. In 1954, in addition to Girton and Newnham, two new women's colleges, New Hall and Lucy Cavendish, were founded. Women began to be admitted to the 'men's' colleges from 1972 onwards. However, women undergraduates did not number 20% of the student body until 1977.

¹³ Christopher Hitchens made an interesting observation about the limitation of Williams's awareness concerning nationalism in Catalonia: '... unless he is actually alluding to the title of Orwell's book, he invariably refers to 'Spain' and not to Catalonia. What was distinctive in the stoicism and resistance of the Catalans seems to have entirely escaped this bearer of a second identity.' (Hitchens 1999: 9)

¹⁴ See the scattered references to Ireland and note the absence of any engagement with the armed insurrection, or long war which commenced in 1969, between Irish republicans and the British state (1972e: 163-167; 1972f :168; 1983b: 194-5).

who leave are his focus. Living in the 'Border Country' rather than 'in exile' is the way that he figured his own experience.¹⁵

Consequently, the metaphorical exile of Virginia Woolf or George Orwell or the literal exile of Solzhenitsyn or James Joyce was something quite different from his own relationship to the dominant culture. Williams knew that Joyce was alienated by the Gaelic Revival and by the banning of his major works by a Free State that derived its authority directly from God via London and Dublin.¹⁶ He knew in some detail of Solzhenitsyn and Woolf's predicament, but it did not in any active sense exercise or particularly interest him except insofar as their deracination could be used to explain their failure to engage more fully and more positively with the whole way of life of their own societies. Similarly, in the course of an attack on Cyril Connolly and Edward Upward, he could say:

Not to speak of intellectuals like Auden who had found more convenient ways of being poets, by going to California. I had intense hostility to that sort of self-regarding literary culture.

(1979b: 73)

Clearly, the alienation of Isherwood, Auden, and many other prominent homosexual intellectuals who found life safer as well-to-do foreigners in Europe and then America than at home in England was not a factor worthy of Williams's consideration during the forties, fifties or in any subsequent decade.¹⁷ Neither

¹⁵ For examples of this see 'Decentralism and the Politics of Place' (1984: 238-244), and 'The Politics of Hope: An Interview' (1987b: 176-183).

¹⁶ See the preamble to the Constitution of the Irish Free State (*Saorstát Eireann*) signed at London on 6 December, 1921.

¹⁷ Williams's inability to come to grips with repressive attitudes towards homosexuality was echoed by Alan O'Connor in 1989 when he responded to Williams's weakness with the splendidly evasive opinion that '... issues of sexuality have no easy answer in socialism. What is important is to keep the questions and the discussions open' (O'Connor 1989a: 31). Something of the depth of Williams's ignorance concerning the ambiguous position of the outcast and criminalized can be detected in the tone of his response to the *Threepenny Opera*: 'People buy and sell each other, in the *Threepenny Opera*, with cold hearts and with only occasional covering sentiments. But yes of course, the audience comments; that's life. Never "that shouldn't be life"; never even "that needn't be life"; but the old cold-hearted muck about the warm-hearted crooks and whores who at least are *honest*, who have seen through this nonsense about society and all that earnest moralizing.' (1961c:

does the work of Oscar Wilde as a nineteenth century cultural figure, as a socialist critic or as a playwright, play any part in Williams's criticism except as material for brief asides when discussing Christopher Fry; beyond that Wilde was an intelligent and humane figure who repeated the positions of Arnold 'without the Victorian ballast' which was 'Arnold's moral stability' (1958a: 170-2).¹⁸

George Orwell: A Cold War Émigré

Williams's use of the trope of exile was perhaps most thoroughly developed in his writing on George Orwell. This sprang in part from his conception of Orwell's class position and in part from Orwell's distance from the 'mainstream' socialist commitments and alliances of his day. These ideas concerning Orwell were not fully formed, or at least, were not fully expressed. They had an illusiveness that enabled Williams to assume a condemnatory tone without criticising specific policies or imposing precise class labels.

The most striking aspect of Raymond Williams's criticism of George Orwell is its attempt to avoid the febrile hostilities of the Cold War. Perhaps surprisingly it was a critical posture adopted during 1956; a year of wholesale defections from Communist parties in Britain and Western Europe: a year in which Orwell's anti-communism would appear to have been triumphantly vindicated. Yet it was at just this moment that Williams attempted to push the assessment of George Orwell well beyond considerations of Orwell's political position. In the short chapter, 'George Orwell', published two years later in *Culture and Society*, Williams developed a critical strategy in which the constitutive importance of Orwell's distinctively English anti-communism was more or less effaced. In its stead the essence of Orwell—the secret of understanding him—was said to reside in a personality predisposed from the start to see 'the

155-6) Despite this, Williams's could stage more sophisticated readings of 'low life' and 'depravity' than those associated with Brecht's work (witness his evident enthusiasm for the exploration of *role play, function and power* in *The Balcony*), but it is unclear from Williams's perspective what could be made of Genet's other plays or his novels. (1968a: 350-4)

¹⁸ The discussion of Fry's work is in *Drama from Ibsen to Brecht* (1968a: 232-3).

dark side of his subject'; a divided self 'temperamentally in his element when he was vituperating causes which in another part of himself he hoped to advance'.¹⁹ However, although it was a critical strategy which was designed to read Orwell through his personality it did allow Williams to give a new lease on life to the view that George Orwell was, despite all evidence to the contrary, in some sense an enemy of socialism, and not, properly speaking, even a man of the left.²⁰ Consequently, Williams's approach to the body of Orwell's work remained within the orbit and understanding of a new left (and, eventually, an *old* new left, and a *new* new left) which regarded all attacks upon the Soviet bloc, *other than their own*, as resolutely bourgeois and pro-imperialist. More importantly perhaps Williams's critical strategy enabled him to engage with at least two or three new generations of readers for whom the visceral hatreds and loyalties of the '30s and '40s could have no direct appeal.

In 1956 Williams wrote:

The total effect of Orwell's work is an effect of paradox. He was a humane man who communicated an extreme of inhuman terror; a man committed to decency who actualized a distinctive squalor. These, perhaps, are elements of the general paradox. But there are other, more particular, paradoxes. He was a socialist, who popularized a severe and damaging criticism of the idea of socialism and of its adherents. He was a believer in equality, and a critic of class, who founded his later work on a deep assumption of inherent inequality, inescapable class difference. These points have been obscured, or are the subject of merely partisan debate. They can only be approached, adequately, through observation of a further paradox. He was a notable critic of abuse of language, who himself practised certain of its major and typical abuses. He was a fine observer of detail, and appealed as

¹⁹ These remarks are quoted from Raymond Williams's interlocutors. They succinctly reproduce the outlook and tone canvassed by Williams though they are not his words (1979b: 390).

²⁰ 'I think the other condition of Orwell's later works was they had to be written by an ex-socialist. It also had to be someone who shared the general discouragement of the generation: an ex-socialist who had become an enthusiast for capitalism could not have had the same effect.' (1979b: 390).

an empiricist, while at the same time committing himself to an unusual amount of plausible yet specious generalization.

(1958a: 286)

Evidently Williams found Orwell genuinely baffling. As a result he felt compelled to seek the key to this heap of paradoxes; he sought the *determining paradox* and found it in the ‘paradox of the exile’. Orwell was apparently one of those people who, ‘deprived of a settled way of living’, are compelled to ‘find virtue in a kind of improvised living, and in an assertion of independence’ (1958a: 289). Orwell’s affirmation of socialism could not ‘carry him directly through to actual community’ because he was incapable of accepting the social guarantee or the discipline inherent in the socialist project. Having established Orwell as a fearful and distrustful *émigré* Williams was able to explain:

Thus in attacking the denial of liberty he the exile is on sure ground; he is wholehearted in rejecting the attempts of society to involve him. When, however, in any positive way, he has to affirm liberty, he is forced to deny its inevitable social basis: all he can fall back on is the notion of an atomistic society, which will leave individuals alone. ‘Totalitarian’ describes a certain kind of repressive social control, but, also, any real society, any adequate community, is necessarily a totality. To belong to a community is to be a part of a whole, and, necessarily, to accept, while helping to define, its disciplines. To the exile, however, society as such is totalitarian; he cannot commit himself, he is bound to stay out.

(1958a: 291)

Orwell’s alienation from English society resulted from his lack of a sound grounding in community ties and ordinary working class family life. In his later book *Orwell*, published in 1971, Williams returned to this point:

Eric Blair had, moreover, grown up with that characteristic absence of normal family life, in an England which was primarily a home base and a network of

ruling-class schools. When this pattern was broken, in 1927, he found himself in an England where he had spent two-thirds of his life but always within institutions or, more rarely, in a family situation, which defined a particular set of social relationships. The political and cultural dominance of men with similar backgrounds and histories has been so marked, in the first half of the twentieth century in Britain, that Blair's growing-up has been commonly described as normal and orthodox. In any other terms, including those of the lives of most people in Britain, it was in important ways strange and even alien. This needs to be remembered and emphasised as we look at the next nine years of his life. For what these amounted to were the making of a new set of social relationships and the creation, in an important sense, of a new social identity. This is the critical evolution of Blair into Orwell.

(1971b: 8)

In this way Williams was able to incorporate the idea of Eric Blair's invention of Orwell, and the subsequent invention of 'plain honest George' by Orwell into the idea of the exile.²¹ Orwell's rejection of his role in the Imperial Police, his apparently bohemian poverty in Paris and his forays into London's East End and the hop fields of Kent, are all explained as a response to exile which, by its deracinated nature, could do no more than perpetuate feelings of isolation and confirm his status as outsider. Orwell, who had 'only theoretically rejected' his class position (1971b: 17) could not, by the act and nature of that rejection, come to know England because he was 'not, in the most central ways, English' at all (1971b: 18). This is why Orwell had to *consciously join* the nation rather than simply *belong* to it in the manner an of authentic Englishman:

Much of Orwell's writing about England is so close and detailed, his emphasis on ordinary English virtues so

²¹ Richard Hoggart writing about Orwell's style says: 'It has a distinctive kick and energy. One critic, Richard Rees, calls it "debonair." This is not the word that would come first to mind, but when you think about it you realize that it is true and helpful, since it reduces the risk of talking about Orwell's style as though it were only that of a plain honest George.' (Hoggart 1965: 47)

persistent, that he is now often seen as the archetypal Englishman, the most native and English of writers. But it is necessary to remember the real history: the creation of Orwell from Blair. Many of the ways in which he sees England are affected and sometimes determined by his history: born, educated, and taking his first job in a ruling-class network that was in some deliberate ways cut off from ordinary England; rejecting this network and setting out on his own to discover the country for himself. Similarly, many of the ways in which he values English life are affected and determined by this kind of journey. His notable attachment to what he saw as ordinary England is an act not so much of membership as of conscious affiliation.

(1971b: 16-17)

Orwell, coming as he did from the subaltern section of the upper middle class, found himself in a position where he was ‘simultaneously dominator and dominated’. This tension led, in Eric Blair’s case, to a crisis that literally made him into Orwell.

And then the double vision, rooted in the simultaneous positions of dominator and dominated, is at once powerful and disturbed.

(1971b: 19)

These powerful tensions and disturbances, not surprisingly, had a direct impact on how Orwell functioned as a writer, because, as Williams insisted, for Orwell, being a writer meant ‘to live “outside” society and to “write”’ (1971b: 32). It was an idea and a position dictated by young Eric Blair’s refusal of success by the standards of his class. Others were to make this observation,²²

²² Regarding success Bernard Crick notes: ‘Success “as a writer” did not for a long time appear to lie in concentrating on political and social themes. Yet Richard Rees, who knew him well in the 1930s and published most of his early essays, reviews and poems in *The Adelphi*, had “Fugitive From the Camp of Victory” as the sub-title of his book, *George Orwell*. He obviously saw much of Orwell in Gordon Comstock and “the cult of failure”: that any kind of success in a capitalist civilization means selling out *both* on others and on oneself (though Gordon mainly feared selling out on himself and Orwell mainly feared selling out on others).’ (Crick: 1980: 108)

but Williams distinctively connected it to the problem of the social position of the artist. He explained it thus:

But there was not only the difficulty of stages—getting from being a writer to being a successful author. There was also the fact that on this projection the writer had no autonomous purposes: his definition of achievement would be shaped from the beginning by an external and alienated standard. i.e., making money. At the same time a growing minority of the same social class made a related but apparently opposite abstraction in reaction to this. If the only orthodox test of achievement was ‘social’ recognition and success, then this could be ‘opposed’ by a simple negation. The ‘writer’, the true writer, had no commercial aims, but also, at root, no social function and, by derivation, no social content. He just ‘wrote’. And then as a self-defined recognisable figure, he lived ‘outside’ society: unconventional, the ‘artist’.

(1971b: 31)

The ‘Invasion’ of Literature by Politics

Williams traced the aesthetic tensions to which Orwell was heir back to the final twenty years of the nineteenth century. He thought by the time that Eric Blair’s artistic outlook was being formed these tensions had become hardened and conventional, lying as they did, at the root of the ordinary modern distinction between form and content. Williams used these observations to highlight Orwell’s admission in ‘Why I Write’, of his having been *forced* by political exigencies into a weighting of his work towards a form which was suitable, and to a large extent, dominated by, its political content and purpose.²³ Williams then extends his observations by quoting at length Orwell’s essay ‘Writers and Leviathan’:

The invasion of literature by politics was bound to happen. It must have happened, even if the special problem of totalitarianism had never arisen, because we have developed a sort of compunction which our

²³ (1971b: 32-3). See also ‘Why I Write’, (Orwell 1946: 23-30).

grandparents did not have, an awareness of the enormous injustice and misery of the world, and a guilt-stricken feeling that one ought to be doing something about it, which makes a purely aesthetic attitude towards life impossible. No one, now, could devote himself to literature as single-mindedly as Joyce or Henry James. (CEJL, IV, 408-9)

(1971b: 34-5)

By using this citation, and by choosing to end it on the name 'Henry James', Williams was able to focus attention upon Orwell's wrong-headed idea of Joyce, and his poorly developed opinions regarding the impossibility, in the face of slump, fascism and war, of a 'purely aesthetic attitude towards life'. Williams was then able to make hay with Orwell's fear of the 'invasion of literature by politics':

This account of invasion is significant. Totalitarianism, active interference with writers, is a special problem, but underlying it is something more general, a social conscience. And that is an invasion? Orwell usually describes his own feelings so accurately that surface analysis is hardly ever necessary; he seems to say very clearly what he means. But here he is saying that the 'social conscience' of the writer, hitherto detached but now necessarily involved, is an invasion of 'literature'.

(1971b: 35)

For some reason Williams altered the opening sentence of the citation from 'Writers and Leviathan' from 'Of course, the invasion of literature by politics was bound to happen.' The *matter of fact* tone imparted by 'Of course' is missing and the sense of Orwell's sentences having belonged to a sequence of arguments about political affiliations and prior commitments to Soviet Russia, Zionism, or the Catholic Church, is diminished if not entirely effaced. This becomes clearer when one reads on from where Williams's citation stops:

. . . or Henry James. But unfortunately, to accept political responsibility now means yielding oneself over to

orthodoxies and ‘party lines’ with all the timidity and dishonesty that that implies.

(Orwell 1948b: 409)²⁴

Orwell was not writing about some abstract notion of politics that had invaded literature, nor was he talking about a notion of politics that could be read simply as ‘social conscience’. Yet Williams proceeded to miss his point:

Reading Orwell’s account quickly, one might never remember the English novelists from Dickens and Elizabeth Gaskell to George Eliot and Hardy: those contemporaries of ‘our grandparents’ who were indeed aware of ‘the enormous injustice and misery of the world’ and who in different ways made literature from just this experience. There is nothing especially new about social awareness in writers, and indeed in the nineteenth century it had been widespread and growing, especially among the novelists.

(1971b: 35-6)

It is evident from reading Williams’s account *quickly* that one might never remember that Orwell was not writing about ‘social awareness’. This becomes clear if one continues slowly with the Orwell passage cited above:

. . . that that implies. As against the Victorian writers, we have the disadvantage of living among clear-cut political ideologies and of usually knowing at a glance what thoughts are heretical. A modern literary intellectual lives and writes in constant dread — not, indeed, of public opinion in the wider sense, but of public opinion within his own group.

(Orwell 1948b: 409)

In this piece of writing Orwell continued to consider the destructive and difficult implications of political labelling: ‘pro-

²⁴ The page number given here is that cited by Williams to Volume IV of the 1968 edition of Orwell’s *Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters*. The relevant page in the Penguin edition of 1970 is Volume IV, 464.

gressive', 'democratic', 'revolutionary', 'bourgeois', 'reactionary', and 'Fascist'.

However, as Williams developed his case concerning the social, aesthetic, and political tensions bound up in the life of the deracinated upper class intellectual he was not without sympathy. He noted that Orwell had tried hard and seriously to reject the thinking of his class and education, and he even conceded that Orwell had, in 'a number of ways and at great personal cost', succeeded (1971b: 37). However, he concludes that Orwell's sad sense that in another place and time he might have been a different sort of writer, less concerned with mass killings and political murders, and more able to dwell upon the state of his garden, is highly significant.²⁵ Williams evidently sees something haunting in Orwell's sense of mourning for another kind of writing life:

An image of what he might have been under some other name (the renaming is crucial) is there and persists, while what he is and has chosen to be is very different. And the stress falls, necessarily, on 'chosen'. What Orwell consciously made of himself under very real pressures can be seen as an invasion of his nature: not only because of the difficulty of the choice and its break from what he has been intended to be; but also because he felt, against much of the evidence, that he would in any case fail; that he would be dragged back, reabsorbed, into the powerful orthodox world. 'Being a writer', in one definition, had been a possible way out. But being the writer he was, the real writer, led him into every kind of difficulty, every tension that the choice had seemed to offer to avoid.

(1971b: 39-40)

What Williams presented his readers with was a writer exiled from society who, despite the most heroic efforts, could not escape from his choice to stand outside the class allegiances of his birth, and yet could not embrace the circumstances, commit-

²⁵ See the poem on the subject that Orwell published in *The Adelphi*, December 1936. Republished in 'Why I Write' (Orwell 1946: 27-28). See also Bertolt Brecht's poem, *An Die Nachgeborenen* (Brecht 1936-8: 318-320).

ments, and loyalties of the great majority of his fellow countrymen. It was a writer whose artistic failure, in the novels of the 'thirties, resides in the failure of their principal characters to express fully the personality of their creator: George Orwell. Consequently:

All of Orwell's writing until 1937 is, then, a series of works and experiments around a common problem. *Instead of dividing them into 'fiction' and 'documentaries' we should see them as sketches towards the creation of his most successful character, 'Orwell'*. It would not be so successful if it had not been so intensely and painfully lived. The exposure to poverty and suffering and filth and waste was as real as it was deliberate, and the record of the exposure is a remarkable enlargement of our literature. But in and through the exposure a character is being created, who is real in the precise sense that he becomes this writer, this shaping presence. Flory and Dorothy and Comstock, or the later Bowling, are aspects of this character but without its centrality. The only literary form which can contain the full character at this stage is the 'non-fiction journal' of an isolated writer exposed to a suffering but unconnecting world. The need to intervene, to force active connections, is the road away from Wigan Pier, back to an indifferent and sleepy and uncaring world, which has to be told about the isolation and suffering. [My Emphasis]

(1971b: 52-3)

Necessary Killing and the Fact of Murder

This point of view leads on to further confusions regarding Orwell's precise relationship with his fictional characters that I will return to later. However, at this critical juncture, in reference to the year 1937 in the writing life under analysis, it becomes clear that Williams could not avoid an explicit encounter with what he had called the 'merely partisan debate' concerning the political positions and commitments of George Orwell. Yet, despite all its potential for trouble Williams did manage to move through the 'minefield' with considerable care. While not himself

taking up a definite position towards the events reported in *Homage to Catalonia* he was able to report that ‘most historians’ took a view contrary to that of Orwell, the POUM, and the ILP.

Most historians have taken the view that the revolution—mainly anarcho-syndicalist but with the POUM taking part—was an irrelevant distraction from a desperate war. Some, at the time and after, have gone so far as to describe it as deliberate sabotage of the war effort. Only a few have argued on the other side, that the suppression of the revolution by the main body of Republican forces was an act of power politics, related to Soviet policy, which amounted to a betrayal of the cause for which the Spanish people were fighting.

(1971b: 57)

This opinion polling approach — ‘most historians have’—enabled Williams to glide silently over his own opinions and commitments at the time of writing and, of course, to distract attention from his own outlook and actions towards Soviet policy during his late teens and early manhood. It also enabled him both to acknowledge Orwell’s position in 1937/8 as that of a revolutionary socialist, and to compare his ‘ultra’-leftism in *Homage to Catalonia* favourably ‘to similar accounts of the struggles in Budapest 1956 or in Paris 1968’ (1971b: 60). However, the combination of fulsome praise with this tactic of studied neutrality concerning the historical record could not be consistently applied. And this, in its turn, resulted in a failure of critical poise.

This was sometimes revealed during asides in which Williams clearly agreed with the substance of what Orwell was writing, but felt an insistent need to attack; a need to distinguish himself from so dubious an ally. For example, during the criticism of an aspect of Brecht’s view of revolutionary morality in *Die Massnahme* Williams says:

The complicated issues of revolutionary violence cannot be settled by a simple formula, either way. The weight of the choice of killing is, in experience, tragic. But its reduction to a hard formalised gesture is merely wilful. Indeed, the most important thing to be said about such a

gesture is not political but cultural. This brittle literary voice, which can set a tone towards killing that appears anti-romantic, is simply the perverted romanticism of the earlier uncommitted decadence. As a literary line, it follows directly from the bittersweet amoralism, sharing with it a persuasive capacity to keep real experience at a distance. *The literary revolutionary, with his tough talk of necessary killing, turns out in fact to be our former acquaintance: the honest criminal or the generous whore.* This connection between the decadence and what was supposed to be a positive response to it has been widely and dangerously overlooked. [My Emphasis]

(1966a: 196)

It is evident from this that Williams did not want to adopt an attitude towards the presentation of ‘necessary murder’ that was greatly at variance with Orwell’s. In fact immediately before this passage Williams was moved to quote Orwell with some approval:

We must say of this play *Die Massnahme* what Orwell said of Auden’s line in *Spain*:

The conscious acceptance of guilt in the necessary murder. . . . It could only be written by a person to whom murder is at most a word.

However, there then follows immediately an explanatory and corrective footnote:

There are other things to say about Auden’s line and Orwell’s description of it. Murder is usually either a personal act or part of a specifically criminal pattern. There are, of course, political murders, but these are only one aspect of the general fact of political violence. Auden is simplifying, perhaps deliberately, to the norms of his own world, but so, in another way, is Orwell. It is interesting to imagine the line rewritten as ‘the conscious acceptance of guilt in the necessary killing’ and then ask how many people, in reality, dissent from this. Most people I know, and most humane liberals I have heard of, accept killing in this sense again and again: from Dresden

to Hiroshima, and from Stanleyville to Da Nang. If Auden got his commitment too easily and cheaply, Orwell and others have got their humane dissent on much the same terms.

(1966a: 195 n.1)

Auden did in fact revise the offending ‘necessary murder’ to ‘fact of murder’ (Mendleson 1977: 424-425). But this alteration is not exactly the one suggested and to draw attention to it would have complicated the issue and blunted his anti-Orwell point.

This is a procedure that alerts the careful reader to the ellipsis and its function in the original citation.²⁶ What did Williams cut out between the end of Auden’s line ‘the necessary murder’ and Orwell’s ‘. . . It could only be written by a person to whom murder is at most a *word*’? Here are the missing lines:

The conscious acceptance of guilt in the necessary murder;

Today the expending of powers

On the flat ephemeral pamphlet and the boring meeting.

The second stanza is intended as a sort of thumbnail sketch of a day in the life of a “good party man”. In the morning a couple of political murders, a ten-minutes’ interlude to stifle ‘bourgeois’ remorse, and then a hurried luncheon and a busy afternoon and evening chalking walls and distributing leaflets. All very edifying. But notice the phrase ‘necessary murder’. *It could only be written by a person to whom murder is at most a word.*

[Lines quoted by Williams are italicised]

After this Orwell continues:

²⁶ In *Modern Tragedy*, completed in 1964 and published in 1966, Williams does not give a source for Orwell’s quotation of Auden. Consequently, I have cited the 1940 edition of Orwell’s essay, *Inside the Whale*. In the 1970 edition the relevant pages are pp.565-6 in Vol. I, *George Orwell: The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books in association with Secker & Warburg.

Personally I would not speak so lightly of murder. It so happens that I have seen the bodies of numbers of murdered men — I don't mean killed in battle, I mean murdered. Therefore I have some conception of what murder means — the terror, the hatred, the howling relatives, the post-mortems, the blood, the smells. To me, murder is something to be avoided. So it is to any ordinary person. The Hitlers and Stalins find murder necessary, but they don't advertise their callousness, and they don't speak of it as murder; it is 'liquidation', 'elimination' or some other soothing phrase. Mr Auden's brand of amoralism is only possible if you are the kind of person who is always somewhere else when the trigger is pulled. So much of left-wing thought is a kind of playing with fire by people who don't even know that fire is hot.

(Orwell 1940c: 169-170)

Williams was clear enough in extending the fact of political murders to 'the general fact of political violence', but his desire to accuse both Auden and Orwell of a certain liberal incoherence or inconsistency evidently got the better of him; compelling him to glide over the particularities of Orwell's text. Orwell was not writing about deaths in battle or casualties in bombardments, Orwell was talking about murders committed in the furtherance of political terror as an integral component of party and state policy. These were political means that in the years 1939 and 1940 and 1941, in relation to the Soviet state and the Comintern, Williams had been, by political affiliation and activity, in some sense prepared to support. It is true that these were the actions of a very young man, but in the light of such past commitments ellipsis at such points in a cited text, and the inevitable shifts in emphasis which result, should have been avoided. However, they could not be avoided. For they are demanded by the critical strategy which attempted to decentre Orwell's anti-communism and to view his work as the product of a constellation of paradoxes circling around the central paradox of exile.

The 'Paradox' of Social Democracy

There were more visible 'paradoxes' to hand: a socialist who believed that neither the Russian Revolution nor the Soviet Union had anything whatsoever to do with socialism; a socialist who hated communism and loved England; a socialist who had no belief in the revolutionary potential of the working class; a socialist who hated most of the socialists of his day. That Williams thought of these Orwellian verities as 'paradoxes' required some explicit reckoning with his own historical circumstance and political outlook. However, the trope of exile would either not permit this, or simply concealed its necessity. Orwell's socialism, because of its absolute refusal of Marxism, because of its visceral hatred of communists and their 'fellow travellers', and because of its profound scepticism regarding an emancipatory role for the working class, had to be grasped by Williams through the paradox of exile. It was a paradox that had two possible explanations. Firstly, there was Eric Blair's individual problem of identity in which he felt compelled, against his whole education and consciousness, to find a new social identity as George Orwell. It worked, through the rootlessness that formed Orwell, to produce what Keats had written of as 'negative capability'; a capability that had, during the nineteen-thirties, become a class psychology. It was, Williams argued, a 'class psychology' that Orwell shared with 'Aldous Huxley, W. H. Auden, Graham Greene, and Christopher Isherwood, who for all their differences' shared 'a characteristic coldness, and an inability to realise the full life of another' (1971b: 89). Secondly, there was Orwell's counter position of 'democracy' to both fascism and communism as if 'democracy' had some existence independent of its capitalist incarnation in the West. Williams explained it thus:

If the only effective social contrast was between 'democracy' and 'communism', then some sort of accommodation with capitalism—that capitalism which was 'on the point of' becoming a social democracy—was at first temporarily and then habitually conceivable. Having made this accommodation, and the corresponding identification of 'communism' as the sole threat, it became harder to see and to admit what capitalist imperialism was

still capable of doing: what, in the years since Orwell died, it has done again and again, in repression and in war.

This is the knot that was tied in the middle 1940s. And Orwell, indeed, helped to tie it. Then in his last fiction he discarded the apparently positive element of the illusion—the belief in the imminence of social democracy—and was left with only its negative effects. He could see only authoritarian communism in the future, with no alternative or countervailing social forces.

(1971b: 93)

It is at this point that the fictionality that Williams ascribes to the person of Orwell unavoidably comes face to face with the vicissitudes of Williams's own political conduct. For it must be remembered that Tank Commander Williams fought against fascism with the forces of the British Empire under the supreme command of American imperialist, General Eisenhower. His Communist Party membership had lapsed on his entry into the army and it is safe to assert that he, like Orwell, broadly welcomed the Labour victory in 1945, and continued to hope that some permanent advance might possibly come from the direction of the Labour Party. Indeed, Williams appears to have harboured the Orwellian illusion in the social democratic potential of the Labour Party, and its political environs, until at least 1966 or 1967.²⁷

Colluding with Dystopia

The aspirational structure of Williams's politics led him to suppose that he had, in the leading role of the working class, some social force that could avert the totalitarian nightmare. And, the fictionality that he attributed to the person of Orwell led him to confuse Winston Smith with his creator. Hence Winston Smith's profound isolation, his sense of exile, his dismal speculation on the potential of the Proles to overthrow the rule of the One Party is conflated with Orwell's own outlook. In fact, matters are worse than this when we read:

²⁷ Williams resigned from the Labour Party in July 1966 (1979a: 15) and had a complicated if not unique view of the place of the party in the British working class movement. See Williams (1965). See pages 60-1 *above*; see also (Hall 1967) and Williams (1968b); Williams (1981b).

Orwell's 1984 is no more plausible than Morris's 2003, but its naturalized subjunctive is more profoundly exclusive, more dogmatically repressive of struggle and possibility, than anything within the utopian tradition. It is also, more sourly and more fiercely than in Huxley, a collusion, in the state warned against and satirized—the repression of autonomy, the cancellation of variations and alternatives—is built into the fictional form which is nominally its opponent, converting all opposition into agencies of the repression, imposing, within its excluding totality, the inevitability and the hopelessness which it assumes as a result.

(1978b: 208)

In *Nineteen Eighty-Four* Orwell was *colluding* with the suppression of dissent. So, by extension we can see that Orwell is not merely Winston Smith he is also and necessarily, O'Brien. The striking thing about Williams's point here is that it cannot be understood unless one extends the conflation of Orwell with Winston Smith, to O'Brien, and thence, through successive personalities, to Senator McCarthy and the Devil Himself. Williams understood *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as a 'negative present' from which countervailing or mitigating factors are simply excluded.²⁸

Orwell's cautionary tale was written as a warning to the middle class intelligentsia of the dangers of compromising or fellow travelling with what he regarded as totalitarian ideologies. It is importantly a vision of the destruction of *middle class* life and of the critical intelligence and capacity for positive leadership that Orwell evidently associated with this strand of society.²⁹ It is this belief—the belief in the potential of the English middle class—that was not grasped by Williams as a possible socialist position. He knew that Orwell believed in the English middle class as a

²⁸ See Williams's 'The Tenses of Imagination' (1978c 1985: 266). In regard to his 'Afterword: *Nineteen Eighty-Four* in 1984' in the Second Edition of his *Orwell* it is surprising that Williams did not appear to be aware of the work of William Steinhoff (Steinhoff 1975).

²⁹ See Orwell's comments on the passive role into which workers are forced and his faith in the middle class's capacity for leadership. 'I do agree that in almost any revolt the leaders would tend to be people who could pronounce their aitches.' *The Road to Wigan Pier* (Orwell 1937: 44-5; 45)

social force. He knew that Orwell believed that this class, if sufficiently roused and properly led could, in alliance with working class people, form a mighty bulwark against tyranny. He knew that Orwell believed that, armed with common sense, fair play, and a healthy suspicion of the deracinated enthusiasms of the left-wing intellectual of his day, this social force could create a solid foundation for democratic socialist advance. Yet, despite this knowledge, Williams felt compelled to read Orwell's stern warning in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* of the danger posed by totalitarian ideologies as a bleak projection of Orwell's personality; as a projection of his own bleak exile from his class, from the mainstream left, from his country.³⁰

An Old Etonian in Wigan

The confusion at the heart of Williams's criticism of Orwell resides in the problem of class. He traces the creation of Orwell back to his class, to his struggle to overcome his class background, and to his failure to see that democracy cannot be detached from a specific class formation or social structure. And, it is at this critical point that Williams's political assumptions about the working class (which he shared broadly with the sections of the left that Orwell hated) undermined his critical poise. The disdain of the Old Etonian for the working class intellectual could not be borne. How could Williams respond to this?

Most middle-class Socialists, however, are very unlikely to get into fights with drunken fish-porters; when they do make a genuine contact with the working class, it is usually with the working-class intelligentsia. But the working-class intelligentsia is sharply divisible into two different types. There is the type who remains working class — who goes on working as a mechanic or a dock-labourer or whatever it may be and does not bother

³⁰ Williams seems to have believed that Orwell broke from the orthodox Left in 1938. However, it is difficult to see how being the literary editor of *Tribune* during the general editorship of Aneurin Bevan is consistent with a complete 'break with the orthodox Left' (1971b: 13-14). Williams's use of the term 'orthodox left' referred to the left in and around the Communist Party and its far-flung circles.

to change his working-class accent and habits, but who ‘improves his mind’ in his spare time and works for the ILP or the Communist Party; and there is the type who does alter his way of life, at least externally, and who by means of State scholarships succeeds in climbing into the middle class. The first is one of the finest types of man we have. I can think of some I have met whom not even the most hidebound Tory could help liking and admiring. The other type, with exceptions — D. H. Lawrence, for example — is less admirable.

(Orwell 1937: 151-2)

Williams could not, of course, directly engage with this kind of position. As a scholarship boy who had clambered into the middle class intelligentsia, and as a novelist who expended considerable literary effort investigating the tensions that this kind of transition created, there was no *safe* point of contact with Orwell. This is because Williams’s interest in the transition from one class to another, from one place to another, and from one name to another, was expressed through an investigation of the various manifestations or instantiations of what he plainly regarded as the essential connections and loyalties which constitute personalities, relationships, and communities.³¹ He did not understand his own work as a trade, for polemical purposes, in fixed profiles of class. This was Orwell’s stock-in trade:

This is the kind of position which becomes a problem again in a writer like Orwell, who typically did not include in his diaries or notebooks those working-class men and women he met who were well-read, articulate, politically conscious or active in some pursuit which is conventionally not assigned to the class. If, on the other hand, he met somebody who fitted a middle-class vision of the drunken or feckless or ignorant or helpless working man,

³¹ It is surprising that Williams makes no reference, in his work on Orwell, to the issue of name changes in his own *Border Country* or the manner in which he writes about the tensions encountered by people who leave their place and situation of birth in order to make their own way of life. For a discussion of the autobiographical aspects of *Border Country* see Laura Di Michele’s essay ‘Autobiography and the “Structure of Feeling” in *Border Country*’ (Di Michele: 1993).

down it went. When he wrote *The Road to Wigan Pier*, he sought out the lowest doss-house in town, even though he'd arrived with introductions from leaders of the Unemployed Workers' Movement and trade unionists and had stayed with educated working-class socialists. He then 'proved' that socialism is just a middle-class idea. Working-class people are either just not interested or they've got more common sense or they're good-natured, thoughtless, rather childish and at times drunken people—what he represented in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as the Proles.

(1982b: 249-250)

The anguish expressed here is the anguish of somebody who, for all their subtlety and sophistication in other respects, does not quite understand the intractable nature of their oppression. Being well-read, or acquiring any other atypical virtue, was unlikely, during the mid twentieth century, to save any working class person from the disdain and patronage of many of those born in the English upper middle class. This failure of insight in Williams's criticism goes some way to explain why he regarded Orwell's position as both 'dominator and dominated' as, in some sense, special or peculiar. Arguably, it is nothing of the sort and may be strongly felt by anybody who attempts to alter or challenge the conditions and relationships ascribed to them at birth. In fact it could be said to define a central tension in the lives of many people, including the life of Raymond Williams.

This much is clear: Orwell had detached the future of socialism from many of the socialists of his day, he had detached it from the fate of actually existing socialism, and finally, he had detached it from the working class. Williams could only respond thus:

Indeed the contradictions, the paradox of Orwell, must be seen as paramount. Instead of flattening out the contradictions by choosing this or that tendency as the 'real' Orwell, or fragmenting them by separating this or that period or this or that genre, we ought to say that it is the paradoxes which are finally significant. No simple explanation of them will do justice to so complex a man (the more complex because he appears, on the surface, so plain). Some of the concepts we need for any full

explanation may be beyond our reach just because of what we share with Orwell: a particular kind of historical pressure, a particular structure of responses and failures to respond.

(1971b: 87)

Evidently, Williams was attempting to acknowledge the historical and political problem that he shared with Orwell. However, he could not name it, nor in any adequate sense, could he delineate it. That this problem resided in the failure of the working class or the left to defeat either fascism or Stalinism is now fairly evident. But Williams could not see it. He did, of course, acknowledge ‘confusion’ and ‘failure’ in the thirties (1968c: 9), but this did not disturb his trust in the proletariat: the capacity of the working class community to develop the means to overcome the problems bequeathed to it by Stalinism and by imperialism, in all its forms, was an article of faith for Williams. That socialism was rooted in the working class community was axiomatic for Williams. And, consequently, it was axiomatic that those cut off from such community and such connectedness could not hope to grasp the future of socialism.

Plain Men Bumping into Experience

The critical strategy adopted by Williams in relation to Orwell was not strictly-speaking psychological, and certainly not psychoanalytic. It shaped its conceptual tools and established its modalities in the course of an analysis of Orwell’s responses to the ambiguities of his social position, and an analysis of what might reasonably be expected from such a class position. No wider critical perspective or apparatus was sought. Williams’s interlocutors in the interviews with *New Left Review* in 1977 and 1978 appear to suggest to Williams a model for Orwell criticism distinct from their own views on the *objective needs of the international bourgeoisie*:

On the other hand, if you ask what was it in Orwell that allowed him to fulfil the summons of the conjuncture, so to speak, you refer to a quite separate order of determinants. Here the sort of analysis which Sartre has sought to make of Flaubert would be a relevant model: he first

tries to reconstruct the constitution of Flaubert's personality within his early family experience, and then to explore the reasons why the society of the Second Empire should have conferred such a signal if paradoxical success on *Madame Bovary*.

(1979b: 389-390)

Williams appeared to take this implicit and rather grand comparison in his stride as he continued to respond well to his questioners and to echo their profound hostility to Orwell, concluding that he could no longer even read Orwell. He did not, however, dwell on the methodological comparison with Sartre. This was wise, given that whatever Sartre did with Flaubert and the Second Empire, it is fairly clear that Williams did not do anything similar with Orwell and the 'thirties and 'forties. He did regard Orwell as having been crushed by the 'thirties and argued that:

The key question, however, is what deep structures of consciousness and pressure were producing the shifts during the thirties and forties which in Orwell's case resulted not in an isolated major individual, but what was to be a widely imitated style. The next generation received that form as wisdom, achievement and maturity, although it was false to the core. So far as Orwell himself is concerned, once the plain style goes, the centrality goes and this is the question about what was writing him.

(1979b: 389)

Williams, perhaps unwittingly, was drawing attention of the limitations of his strategy. His approach to Orwell took him nowhere near the deep structures of consciousness which he thought had produced shifts during the 'thirties and 'forties. On the contrary he appears to have extended beyond breaking point the sort of observations he made about Orwell concerning a certain externality of observation, and a certain coldness of touch, to Auden, Isherwood, and others.

Earlier in the interview Williams had explained his procedure in his book *Orwell* as follows:

The part of the book I am most satisfied with is the attempt to define the peculiar question of the plain style of Orwell's prose, which has been extraordinarily influential as a convention well beyond literature. It has become a reportorial format and a television style. I share with my friends the modernists a profound suspicion of anything that appears so natural. The chapter that I would not have missed writing was the one where I discuss the creation of a character called Orwell who is very different from the writer called Orwell — the successful impersonation of the plain man who bumps into experience in an unmediated way and is simply telling the truth about it.

(1979b: 384-5)

This fond memory of the book's definition of the 'plain style of Orwell's prose' was evidently sharper in Williams's mind than it is in the book that can now be read. And, it should be noted that this 'bumping into experience' is a paraphrase of Orwell's description of the left's blundering from one dismaying confrontation with reality after another:

Moreover, the Left had inherited from Liberalism certain distinctly questionable beliefs, such as the belief that the truth will prevail and persecution defeats itself, or that man is naturally good and is only corrupted by his environment. This perfectionist ideology has persisted in nearly all of us, and it is in the name of it that we protest when (for instance) a Labour government votes huge incomes to the King's daughters or shows hesitation about nationalizing steel. But we have also accumulated in our minds a whole series of unadmitted contradictions, as a result of successive bumps against reality.

The first big bump was the Russian Revolution. For somewhat complex reasons, nearly the whole of the English Left has been driven to accept the Russian régime as 'Socialist', while silently recognising that its spirit and practice are quite alien to anything that is meant by 'Socialism' in this country. Hence there has arisen a sort of schizophrenic manner of thinking, in which words like 'democracy' can bear two irreconcilable meanings, and

such things as concentration camps and mass deportations can be right and wrong simultaneously.

(Orwell 1948b: 465-6)

‘Bumps against reality’ of this sort did not stop in the ‘thirties. For Williams they occasioned the defence of forced labour policies introduced under the Maoist Cultural Revolution in China,³² and of the Khmer Rouge’s evacuation of the entire population of Phnom Penh at gunpoint. As Williams explained in the late seventies:

Many people draw back at the spectacle of forceful repatriation to the countryside and the very brutal discipline employed to enforce it, although it could be argued that these were a consequence imposed by a revolutionary seizure of power in a situation made so exposed by the previous history. The tragedy of a revolution is not at all insurrection or the use of force against enemies — although it can be a tragic experience in another sense to be confronted with a bitter and cruel enemy aided by outside intervention, like the Chilean junta. The real tragedy occurs at those dreadful moments when the revolutionary impetus is so nearly lost, or so heavily threatened, that the revolutionary movement has to impose the harshest discipline on itself and over *relatively* innocent people in order not to be broken down and defeated. That kind of hardness, although it shifted around in the complicated politics of the USSR in the twenties, was in different ways taken up by everybody in the Soviet Party. Those who withdrew from the notion of a hard line — hard yet flexible — did stop believing in the revolution. That has been the main block in the minds of most people thinking about the Russian Revolution in another sort of society ever since. [My Emphasis]

³² ‘When I heard pathetic stories about professors being taken from their libraries and laboratories and sent to help bring in the harvest I felt totally on the side of the revolutionaries. If people are genuinely ill it is a different matter, but I do not see why an ordinary healthy man or woman should not participate in manual labour. A socialist movement will have nothing to offer to the working class unless it stands by that.’ (1979b: 404)

(1979b: 395)

Such passages give some insight into the manner in which conceptions of discipline and necessity separated the radical socialism of Williams from the liberal and *lawful* socialism of Orwell. It was not that Orwell was opposed to martial virtues, physical violence, or to measured social discipline. On the contrary he was active in his support of such things, including helping the Special Branch to keep tabs on Stalin's allies in Britain. However, he did not grasp the need for secret police, rule by decree, state terror, or organised and institutionalised lying. And, he was unequivocal in his belief that they had no part to play in the establishment of socialism. Williams, however, was not. He was prepared to countenance terrible and exceptional measures if they could be shown to be necessary for the establishment or security of revolutionary socialist forces. Williams throughout all the phases of his political development represented a tradition of thinking and feeling about social commitments and the struggle to alter economic and political relationships quite foreign to Orwell. His idea that Orwell was in some sense 'alien' is profoundly important. Williams simply could not believe that England was a 'family with the wrong members in control' (Orwell 1941a: *passim*). And, he believed, probably with good reason that only a person alienated from the structural realities of capitalist social relations could believe so.

Animal Farm: Anti-Communism and Collective Failure

These aspects of Williams's outlook go some way to revealing the reason for the failure of his critical strategy for reading Orwell. Because he insisted on displacing Orwell's social, political, and aesthetic posture, with an analysis centred upon the dissection of a peculiar personal development he was unable to consider with any degree of clarity or determination the role, the extent, and the texture of Orwell's anti-communism, his conception of capitalist society, and of contemporary social relationships. Consequently, the role of these diverse and complex elements in the formation of Orwell's novels, essays, and criticism, eluded him. Williams's strategy narrowed his critical repertoire to a remarkable degree. One consequence was that Winston Smith, Flory, Dorothy, Comstock,

and Bowling, were all in some sense said to be George Orwell, and even that the collective failure of the animals on the farm in the face of Mr Jones and the Pigs was also George Orwell in the guise and personality of 'collective failure'. For all Williams's critical sophistication he was reduced to these meagre resources by his need to find a crushing pessimism and denial of the human spirit in the work of Orwell:

Orwell is opposing here more than the Soviet or Stalinist experience. In a profound way, both the consciousness of the workers and the possibility of authentic revolution are denied.

These denials, I would say, are inhuman. But it is part of the paradox of Orwell that from this despairing base he is able to generate an immediate and practical humanity: the comradeship of the suffering, which he feels very deeply, and also, more actively, the critical scepticism of the exploited, an unexpected kind of consciousness which informs the story. I have said that *Animal Farm* is unique among Orwell's books because it contains no Orwell figure, no isolated man who breaks from conformity but is then defeated and reabsorbed. This figure is, rather, projected into a collective action: this is what happens to the animals who free themselves and then, through violence and fraud, are again enslaved.

(1971b: 73)

However, despite this tortuous attempt to link his criticism of *Animal Farm* to the rest of his criticism of Orwell, Williams could not withhold his fulsome praise. He evidently thought of *Animal Farm* as an integrated and successful piece of work.

The collective projection has a further effect. What happens is a common rather than an isolated experience, for all its bitterness. The whine of ragged nerves, the despair of a lonely trajectory, are replaced by an active communication which is the tone of the critical narrative. A paradoxical confidence, an assured and active and laughing intelligence, is manifested in the very penetration and exposure of the experience of defeat.

(1971b: 73-4)

The manner in which this appreciation of *Animal Farm* is ringed round with wholesale expressions of hostility for Orwell's work and outlook gives some indication of a prior commitment or a predisposition to find Orwell's work grievously flawed and destructive in its tone and register. Williams's animus is clearly expressed in the course of his conversations with *New Left Review*; it is never far from the surface and is expressed in asides as well as in sustained criticism.

The reason for this hostility is fairly evident. Orwell was the foremost socialist in English letters from the publication of *Animal Farm* in 1945 until the decay and disappearance of the socialist movement during the course of the nineteen-eighties. Raymond Williams, on the other hand, was striving in different ways throughout this period to sustain and develop an active socialist commitment against the pessimism, demoralisation, and accommodation with the Western capitalist democracies that appeared to be sanctioned and advocated by Orwell's most powerful work. Williams was particularly concerned to undermine the appeal of the deceptive lucidity and simplicity of Orwell's style and to disrupt the appeal of his wretched social patriotism. Williams was essentially engaged in policing the reception of Orwell among successive cohorts of young readers. Inevitably, this was a critical relationship riven with political rivalry and active animosities that could neither be contained nor concealed by the ingenious creation of Orwell as exile.