

Chapter Eight: *The Country and the City* and the Nineteenth Century Novel

Modernism as Rupture

The ‘Knowable Community’ was introduced by Williams to give ‘the structure of feeling’ a specific purchase on the novel in a group of writings published between 1969 and 1973: ‘The Knowable Community in George Eliot’s Novels’, *The English Novel from Dickens to Lawrence*, and *The Country and the City*.¹ These works express in an acute manner the difficulty that Williams experienced when attempting to incorporate Modernism into figures and conceptions that had primarily been conceived with regard to the development of theatrical conventions, or innovations in the English novel during the mid-nineteenth century. Their introduction in these essays and books provides insight regarding Williams’s attitude to history, to progress, to nineteenth century meliorism and to modern liberalism, and to his belief in ‘the indissoluble unity of individual and social experience’ (1979b: 252). Above all, the deployment of ‘the knowable community’ revealed the difficulties inherent in attempting to figure the development of an international Modernist culture in the great metropolises of the capitalist world as an ‘interregnum’² or as ‘a parting of the ways’ in which the sociality

¹ A case could also be made for including other works in this group, for example: ‘Notes on English Prose: 1780-1950’ (1969b); ‘Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory’ (1973b); ‘Lucien Goldmann and Marxism’s Alternative Tradition’ (1972c).

² This period, covering roughly the last quarter of the nineteenth century and the first two decades of the twentieth century had been introduced as early as 1958 in *Culture and Society*. Initially it had a more descriptive role, but the features associated with ‘a parting of the ways’ in the *English Novel* are already present: ‘To the young Englishman in the 1920s, this break was the emergence of the modern spirit, and so we have tended to go on thinking. But now, from the 1950s, the bearings look different. The break comes no longer in the generation of Butler, Shaw, Wilde, who are already period figures. For us, our contemporaries, our moods, appear in effect after the war of 1914-1918. D. H. Lawrence is a contemporary, in mood, in a way that Butler and Shaw are clearly not. As a result, we tend to look at the period 1880-1914 as a kind of interregnum. It is not the period of the masters, of Coleridge or of George Eliot. Nor yet is it the period of our contemporaries, of writers who address themselves, in our kind of language, to the common problems that we can recognize.’ (1958a: 161)

of the past gave way to a world in which the social was held crucially to reside within the individual, within the body.

This rupture — a parting of the ways — necessitated the long break posited by Williams between *Jude the Obscure* (1895) and *Sons and Lovers* (1913) in the canon for the *English Novel*. It was in this creative hiatus that Williams placed Henry James, conceiving of him as a writer of stories situated, spiritually, if not literally, in English country houses. It was a hiatus, a parting of the ways, brought about by a conception of history in which capitalism was not merely thought of as entering a particularly decadent phase, but as a system that had always blocked human freedom and human progress.

Without explicitly discussing or analysing the period as the ‘epoch of imperialism, the epoch of wars and revolutions’ Williams identified the period in which Modernism arose as one of acute crisis. Marxists more broadly identified it as a period in which the frantic drive for profits expressed itself in new forms and intensities of global domination, resulting in inter-imperialist rivalry that in turn led to the sclerotic degeneration of capitalism into a monopolistic phase characterised by permanent crisis. Modernism was, in ways Williams was never really able to clearly identify, an expression of this crisis.³ Consequently, despite aspirations to the contrary, in its celebration of atomisation, self-absorption and self-consciousness, Modernism tended towards the coldness, the abstraction, and the inhumanity of capitalism.⁴

³ Frederic Jameson is perhaps more successful in this respect in his essay ‘Modernism and Imperialism’ (Jameson 1988: 43-66).

⁴ Williams could also, at times, hold views which implicitly contradicted negative observations concerning the ‘break’, ‘split’, ‘parting of the ways’, inaugurated during the last quarter of the nineteenth century. See the 1963 conclusion to the revised edition of *Drama from Ibsen to Eliot*: ‘The division goes back to a critical period in European culture, beginning in the last generation of the last century. At this time, in many fields of art and thought, a minority of the dominant middle class broke away from its own class habits. There had been individual breaks before, but now the break was substantial enough to emerge in new institutions: the ‘free’ or ‘independent’ theatres which spread across Europe and reached England in the 1890s. Since that time, the development of drama as an art has been in the hands of the free theatres. Their work has only ever been a small percentage of the plays actually written and acted, but with rare exceptions it has been the only work that could be taken seriously beyond its own place and generation.’ (1964a: 296-7)

Williams further developed this analysis during the 1980s in a scatter of articles on Modernism in which he attempted to move the debate on Modernism from formal analysis to an examination of Modernism as a social formation. These articles were collected by Tony Pinkney and published together in 1989 as *The Politics of Modernism: Against the New Conformists*, and they sustain Williams's view that Modernism was, despite the complexity of its claims and the diversity of the aspirations and affiliations of its practitioners, essentially a bourgeois phenomenon destined to contribute fully to the post-1945 reconciliation where the *enfant terribles* of yesteryear coalesced into a new conformist cultural mix. As Williams expressed it in 'The Politics of the Avant-Garde':

With the same vigour and confidence as the first bourgeois generations, who had fought state and aristocratic monopolies and privileges, a new generation, still in majority by practice and inheritance bourgeois, fought, on the same principle of the sovereign individual, against the monopoly and privilege of marriage and family. It is true that this was most vigorous at relatively young ages, in the break-out to new directions and new identities. But in many respects a main element of modernism was that it was an authentic avant-garde, in personal desires and relationships, of the successful and evolving bourgeoisie itself. The desperate challenges and deep shocks of the first phase were to become the statistics and even the conventions of a later phase of the same order.

(1988: 56)

So, despite the challenges posed by Modernist artists to older forms and conventions they and their creations were, by and large, to be treated with caution because, their radical pretensions notwithstanding, in their celebration of the sovereign individual they revealed their irretrievably bourgeois nature. As Tony Pinkney enthusiastically explained:

It is here above all that Williams's cultural materialism is turned to good account. Locating the social basis of the avant-gardes in the dissident bourgeoisie, Williams can show both how precarious the overlap of social revolution and the 'revolution of the word' always was and how, in

some ways, the avant-garde actually anticipated the new post-1945 capitalist order.

(Pinkney 1989: 18)

Both in their tone and in their intention these late essays form part of the analysis set out in the ‘knowable community’ writings in which Williams resolutely questions the authenticity and value of many of the radical innovations pioneered by artists during the forty years 1880-1920; the years which saw the rapid thickening of capitalist relations of production on a world scale and led Williams to deny ever more emphatically the capacity of capitalism to inaugurate or sustain genuine human progress.

The Country and the City

The Country and the City was in one sense the product of Williams’s distinctive and difficult approach toward history and historiography, and in another, perhaps more noticeable sense, a product of his visceral hatred of capitalism. Consequently, it is important in any assessment of the work to develop an understanding of these two impulses and the manner in which they both advanced the book’s analysis, and set parameters, which limited its capacity to discern fully the nature of contemporary developments.

For Williams the dialectic constituted a circle in which *historical realities* impacted upon *literary facts*, which were also themselves, like *perceptions*, *perspectives* and *impressions* also, *historical realities* which impacted upon and informed *general ideas*, which like the more structured, *ideology*, entered the lists as *historical realities*. *Real history*, therefore, had to be measured against experience and perspective. There was nothing incoherent or sketchy about this view, indeed it issued logically from his rejection of the distinction between base and superstructure and his insistence upon the materiality of language and culture.

However, while perceptions may be related to history and history to perceptions, Williams did not appear to have had any way of working on the perceptions of history. He did not develop a systematic account of historical writing or a discrete critique of the formation of particular approaches to the writing of history. Indeed, he rarely discussed history in his work as a literary enterprise, it appears always in the guise of a record to be con-

sulted, it may have been a sound record or one of doubtful provenance, but it was usually consulted as a record, rarely as a literary fact.

This had the effect of lending a metaphysical tone to his dialectical thinking, which he would have regarded as most unwelcome, because his was an outlook that rested its opposition to metaphysics upon a rejection of 'idealism' and of 'God' as a cause of anything independent of human faith and belief. Yet, impressions, ideas, perspectives, literary facts, constituted the historical record; they constituted what he habitually referred to as historical reality, or real history, as significantly as economic, technical, scientific and political facts. This meant that there was no ground upon which to rest his analysis, apart from our whole way of life and our perception of it, what was insisted upon as materialist, embraced every impulse, thought, perspective, and motive. As he argued:

At every point we need to put these ideas to the historical realities: at times to be confirmed, at times denied. But also, as we see the whole process, we need to put the historical realities to the ideas, for at times these express, not only in disguise and displacement but in effective mediation or in offered and sometimes effective transcendence, human interests and purposes for which there is no other immediately available vocabulary.

(1973c: 291)

The dialectic offered here represented an enormous challenge, a prospectus for a life's work, or several lives' work, and certainly not one that could be met by one three hundred page book. Yet, at the outset of the book Williams had been undaunted:

Old England, settlement, the rural virtues — all these, in fact, mean different things at different times, and quite different values are being brought to question. We shall need precise analysis of each kind of retrospect, as it comes. We shall see successive stages of the criticism which the retrospect supports: religious, humanist, political, cultural. Each of these stages is worth examination in itself. And then, within each of these questions, but

returning us to a formidable and central question, there is a different consideration.

The witnesses we have summoned raise questions of historical fact and perspective, but they raise questions, also, of literary fact and perspective. The things they are saying are not all in the same mode. They range, as facts, from a speech in a play and a passage in a novel to an argument in an essay and a note in a journal. When the facts are poems, they are also, and perhaps crucially, poems of different kinds. We can only analyse these important structures of feeling if we make, from the beginning, these critical discriminations.

(1973c: 12)

Understandably, this task, on a canvas as enormous as *The Country and The City*, demanded swift movement, from Hesiod, in the ninth century before Christ, to Theocritus, in the third century BC, to Virgil, in the first century BC, in the space of two pages. It involved a consideration of texts that did not include any of the works of the great agricultural innovators or improvers, or any works about them.⁵ Nor did this procedure permit a consideration of the Physiocrats, or of the great works of political economy, which analysed, advertised and promoted the achievements of agrarian and industrial capitalism over the period

⁵ There were two passing references to the *Annals of Agriculture* and just over seven pages on 'the morality of improvement' where the observations of Defoe, William Marshall, and Arthur Young are briefly discussed. But any observations that do not focus upon raising rents, and the immiseration of those who lost access to common land, do not attract or hold Williams's attention. He concludes this chapter with the observation:

When Young saw the full social results of the changes he had fought for, he was not alone in second thoughts and in new kinds of questioning:

I had rather that all the commons of England were sunk in the sea, than that the poor should in future be treated on enclosing as they have been hitherto.

(1973c: 67)

The unparalleled improvements in the productivity of the rural labourers between 1700 and 1850, and of the land, crops and animals upon which they worked, enabled Williams to note the progress of capitalist relations but not to acknowledge progress in any more general sense. Williams gave the outline of a more subtle account of economic and social development in England in his book *Cobbett* (1983d: 59-62).

covered by the book. He does not discuss the growth of the rural population afforded by vast increases in the productivity of agriculture. For example (and with reference to the work of J. D. Chambers and G. E. Mingay, both cited by Williams in the bibliography to *The Country and the City*), the historian Eric Richards, explained the process of enclosures in the following manner:

The lowest strata of rural English society — the cottagers and squatters — lost most by enclosure. They lost residual rights of access to commons and waste land on which much of their existence had depended. The actual implementation of enclosure did not diminish the demand for labour, and the new agriculture required, in absolute terms, larger amounts of labour than before. The number of families engaged in agriculture continued to increase throughout the period of enclosure 1760-1815. The census figures, notwithstanding Cobbett's infamous disbelief, allow no doubt on this question. Of itself enclosure did not cause unemployment and depopulation. Much more fundamental in determining the parallel drift from the land and the creation of the urban and industrial proletariat was the demographic trend: there was, after 1750, a general increase in population which neither the old nor the new agriculture could accommodate. The evidence on this question is unequivocal; as J. D. Chambers put it, 'the effect of population growth in both open and closed villages was to create a surplus of rural labour that agriculture, although expanding, could not absorb; it was from this surplus that the industrial labour force grew.' Moreover, in terms of efficiency and the national economy, enclosures 'meant more food for the growing population, more land under cultivation and, on balance, more employment in the countryside; and enclosed farms provided the framework for the new advances of the nineteenth century'.

(Richards 2000: 56-7)⁶

⁶ The work cited in this quotation and listed by Williams (1973c: 327) is 'J. D. Chambers and G. E. Mingay, *The Agricultural Revolution, 1750-1880* (London, 1966), Chapter 4.' (Richards 2000: 65n.14)

As Eric Richards notes in tones that Williams would have welcomed, ‘Popular landlords are as rare as hen’s teeth. Their functions and utility to society rarely seem commensurate with their rent extractions, command of local resources and local authority’ (Richards: 2000: 11). However, enclosure was clearly a process of great complexity that Williams was unable to address in *The Country and the City*.

There was, perhaps surprisingly, no engagement with Marx’s *Capital*, which Williams explained later in the following manner:

Why do I discuss a minor 18th-century poet in more detail than I do Marx? Because this is where a really reactionary social consciousness is being continually reproduced, and to till your own alternative garden to it is not enough. In fact, it would be a trap for me. There would be a good many people in English cultural circles who would be delighted if I spent the rest of my time clearing up some questions of Marxist literary theory. I don’t propose to give them the satisfaction.

(1979b: 317)

But, Marx and Engels were upbraided for their attitudes towards the peasantry and towards ‘rural idiocy’, and capitalism was figured as a mode of production characterised, not by generalised commodity production and wage labour, but by commerce, ‘minority’ ownership and by the concentration of ownership:

It is then often difficult, past this continuing process which contains the substance of so much of our lives, to recognise, adequately, the specific character of the capitalist mode of production, which is not the use of machines or techniques of improvement, but their minority ownership. Indeed as the persistent concentration of ownership, first of the land, then of all major means of production, was built into a system and a state, with many kinds of political and cultural mediation, it was easy for the perception to diminish though the fact was increasing.

(1973c: 294)

It is worth noting, here, that the focus was not upon ‘private’ ownership, but upon ‘minority’ ownership. This was because Williams was protesting against the dispossession of copyholders, and a host of other kinds of minor private tenants and small holders possessing access to commons and woodlands which had made their micro-plots sustainable; his protest was against the transformation of these more independent country workers into landless labourers, i.e. into waged workers. Williams sustained this focus upon the minority status of capital and eschewed engagement with analysis of the commodity form set out by Marx in *Capital* in favour of a more descriptive approach:

As we perceive a total environment, and as well Register the consequences of so many abstracted and separated activities, we begin to see that all the real decisions are about modes of social interest and control. We begin to see, in fact, that the active powers of minority capital, in all its possible forms are our most active enemies, and that they will have to be not just persuaded but defeated and superseded.

(1973c: 301)

For Williams, the *social form* of the capitalist mode of production appeared not to have been the production of surplus value during the course of commodity production and its private appropriation by the owners of capital, but the *minority* character of this ownership. This was because, foremost in Williams’s arguments was always the immiseration of the direct agricultural producers and artisans as their rights in common were steadily eroded and finally swept away by the new mode of production; a mode of production in which ownership, without regard to custom or other social duties, was contractual and private; a mode of production the whole purpose of which was the realisation of profits by the sale of commodities to unknown purchasers upon regional, national and world markets.

Williams would have regarded my focus upon the distinction of stress, between ‘minority’ and ‘private’, as at best pedantic and at worst as abstract, but it was a distinction that lay at the centre of the tension between his contemporary opposition to twentieth-century capitalism and his retrospective opposition to the development of capitalism in England between 1580 and

1820. Unlike most Marxists who unreservedly accepted the development of capitalism as a progressive, if brutal, historical process, Williams was not persuaded that capitalism was ever a good thing;⁷ for him progress, which disregarded the actual conditions and welfare of most of the people in a society, was merely a violent and inhuman abstraction. In his writings precise attention to the *manner* of exploitation was subordinate to the *fact* of exploitation, and to the urgent need to end it. This meant that although Williams was well aware that commerce and wage labour were vital components of capitalism its most characteristic features were for him the domination of society by a minority of grasping *rentiers*, shareholders, factory owners, admirals, generals, state officials and well-to-do pensioners of various kinds. They were a ‘pitiless crew’:

There is no need to deny the conflicts of interest between settled owners and the newly ambitious, or between the holders of landed capital and new mercantile capital, and there was of course a political reflection of these conflicts in the formation of ‘country’, ‘court’ and ‘city’ parties. But it is hardly for the twentieth-century observer, or the ordinary humane man, to try to insert himself, as any kind of partisan, into the complicated jealousies and bitterness of that shifting and relative historical process. Whenever we encounter their proceedings in detail, the landowners, old and new, seem adequately described in the words of a modern agricultural historian: ‘a pitiless crew’. The ‘ancient stocks’, to which we are sentimentally referred, are ordinarily only those families who had been pressing and exploiting their neighbours rather longer. And the ‘intruders’, the new men, were entering and intensifying a system which was already established and which, by its internal pressures, was developing new forms of predation. If we have humanity to spare, it is better directed to the unregarded

⁷ ‘... one can acknowledge the productive capacity of bourgeois society, or its political institutions, and yet distance oneself from them as creations which not only later become, but in an important sense in the very mode of their constitution always were, blocks on human freedom or even human progress’. (1979b: 307) For a sustained development of this position, see Williams’s explication in *Politics and Letters* (1979b: 311-315).

men who were making and working the land, in any event, under the old owners and the new.
(1973c: 50)⁸

Consequently, it was Williams's visceral hatred of capitalism, not simply as the most recent and most effective form of class rule or domination, but as a form of rule antithetical to all genuinely human purposes that inspires and guides *The Country and the City*. The text moves to and fro between the centuries looking at a range of literary fragments selected for their specific illustrative value, perhaps as much as for their capacity to contribute to the development of the analysis.⁹ However, he was successful in producing a lengthy illustration of the manner in which the emergence of capitalism was expressed and reflected in a wide range of literature and he was concerned to trace its development across the best part of three centuries. For example:

⁸ In this passage Williams seems to be rejecting the very sophisticated account given by E. P. Thompson of the important analytical difference between the governing elite before 1832, known in the literature as 'Old Corruption', and the English ruling class (Thompson 1965: 48). Thompson's stricture is perhaps relevant here: 'Marxists generally seek to reduce political phenomena to their "real" class significance, and often fail, in analysis, to allow sufficient distance between the one and the other. But in fact those moments in which governing institutions appear as the direct, emphatic, and unmediated organs of a "ruling-class" are exceedingly rare, as well as transient. More often these institutions operate with a good deal of autonomy, and sometimes with distinct interests of their own, within a general context of class power which prescribes the limits beyond which this autonomy cannot with safety be stretched, and which, very generally, discloses the questions which arise for executive decision.' (Thompson 1965: 48) However, it would be wrong to assume that Williams was opposing 'the relative autonomy of the state' canvassed by E. P. Thompson, Nicos Poulantzas (1968) or Ralph Miliband (1969). Rather, Williams was refusing 'abstract' theoretical engagement at this level; he chose to focus upon what for him was the paramount question of exploitation, in preference to consideration of the theoretical niceties at stake in the relationship between the state and the ruling class. See Perry Anderson's *Arguments Within English Marxism* for a thoroughgoing reply to Thompson (Anderson 1980: *passim*). Williams's principal theoretical statements in this area: 'Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory' (1971b) and *Marxism and Literature* (1977a) are tangential to Thompson-(Althusser)-Anderson and are perhaps more usefully understood as contributions to a Williams-(Althusser)-Eagleton debate.
⁹ The discussion of this in *Politics and Letters* (1979b: 303-323) is clearly influenced by contemporary concerns regarding structuralism and also by the defence of the more orthodox Marxist position of Williams's interviewers regarding the 'objectively progressive' nature of capitalism.

The unworked-for providence of nature, that mythical or utopian image, is now, significantly, acquiring a social dimension: a 'clear and competent estate', well supplied with hired help. As in Matthew Green's

A farm some twenty miles from town
 Small, tight, salubrious and my own:
 Two maids, that never saw the town,
 A serving man not quite a clown,
 A boy to help to tread the mow,
 And drive, while t'other holds the plough. . . .

When economic reality returns, it is again absorbed into the natural vision:

And may my humble dwelling stand
 Upon some chosen spot of land. . . .
 Fit dwelling for the feather'd throng
 Who pay their quit-rents with a song.

What we can see happening, in this interesting development, is the conversion of conventional pastoral into a localised dream and then, increasingly, in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, into what can be offered as a description and thence an idealisation of actual English country life and its social and economic relations. It was against this, as well as against the conventional simplicities of literary neo-pastoral, that Crabbe was making his protest.

(1973c: 25-6)

However, he was acutely aware that this procedure presented serious historical problems. The most pressing being the problem of continuity and change — the problem of how to conceptualise certain terms in all their concrete and historically specific senses without refusing their persistence in radically different historical conditions. In other words, the problem presented by the continuing need to talk about the *country* and the *city*, and their interrelations, in ways that gave full weight to the particular historical conditions in which these words were employed; Williams

stressed that ‘. . . we have to be able to explain, in related terms, both the persistence and the historicity of concepts.’
(1973c: 289)

Another example of this kind of persistence was community. And, it was in the course of attempting to furnish his analysis of the relationship between changing literary forms, the changing circumstances of social life, and the persistence of community, with a new degree of precision, that he introduced the figure of the knowable community. He first did this in 1969 with the essay, ‘The Knowable Community in George Eliot’s Novels’, with the announcement: ‘This essay will appear in slightly different form in Mr. Williams’ forthcoming book, *The Country and the City*.’ (1969f: 255fn.1)

Jane Austen and George Eliot

The expression, ‘knowable community’ was a complicated figure of thought possessing descriptive power that was deployed for both negative and affirmative purposes: affirming the central importance of community whilst simultaneously rejecting idealized evocations of the face-to-face relationships of the rural past. Perhaps more importantly, and beyond its descriptive power, the figure had a discursive role in which Williams used it to grasp the manner in which some nineteenth century novelists sought to make society more comprehensible by unravelling the ‘tangled web’ of social relationships in a rapidly changing society.

The problem with the ideal evocations of the past was obvious enough: the exclusion of large sections of the actual community. For example, when discussing Jane Austen’s ‘knowable community’ Williams tells us:

Neighbours in her novels are not the people actually living near by. They are the people living a little less near by who in social *recognition* can be visited. What she sees across the land is a network of propertied houses and families, and through this tightly drawn mesh most actual people are simply not seen.

(1970a: 24)

This failure of social recognition: the failure of working farmers, servants, labourers, and artisans to make an appearance in Jane Austen's novels led Williams to contrast them with George Eliot's where they do. Jane Austen was arraigned for depicting an actual community in a very precisely selective form while George Eliot was acknowledged for her recognition of 'other kinds of people; other kinds of country; other kinds of action on which a moral emphasis must be brought to bear.'¹⁰

This was a fruitful critical response. The contrast between the two novelists enabled him to discuss Jane Austen's achievements within her enclosed world¹¹ and he was also able to analyse the limits of George Eliot's inclusiveness. Not simply in irate discussion of the introduction to *Felix Holt: The Radical* and of 'Adam and Dinah',¹² but also in consideration of the tension that he thought arose from extending the knowable community of the novel to include profoundly conflicting social relationships. Whereas Jane Austen had been able to give her characters 'the novelist's powers of effect and precision' because author and character were 'felt to belong in the same world', George Eliot could not. This was because:

¹⁰ (1970a: 24) Williams's critical contrast between the *selective* community of the propertied class and the wider community discerned by place and settlement could, at times, obscure the refusal of recognition practised by the artisan and the labourer. His analysis could, perhaps paradoxically, award social cohesion and common social recognition to communities of settlement that they did not deserve. Even in *Middlemarch* we hear a lot more of the landed gentry and of professional men and bankers, than we do of grocers. And, although we hear very little of paupers it is considerably more than we hear of weavers and tanners. And it was, after all, 'The weavers and tanners of Middlemarch' who unlike Mr Mawmsey, the retail grocer, 'had never thought of Mr Brooke', the landlord and magistrate, 'as a neighbour, and were not more attached to him than if he had been sent in a box from London.' (Eliot 1871-2: 502)

¹¹ See discussion of the dynamic economic and social character of the world depicted by Jane Austen in *The English Novel* (1970a: 18-23). See also the interesting discussion of the manner in which Austen affirmed the values of agricultural and moral 'improvement' by attempting 'to guide people towards reconciliation of property and virtue like a supernatural lawyer'. This tension was, Williams argued, produced by her marginalized relation to her class; it was produced by both her financial dependency and by her position as a woman (1979b: 248-251).

¹² 'Adam and Dinah' is Chapter 52 of *Adam Bede*. For these irate discussions see Williams (1969f: 265-8).

. . . the very recognition of conflict, of the existence of classes, of divisions and contrasts of feeling and speaking, makes a unity of idiom impossible. George Eliot gives her own consciousness, often disguised as a personal dialect, to the characters with whom she does really feel; but the strain of the impersonation is usually evident — in Adam, Daniel, Maggie, or Felix Holt. For the rest she gives forth a kind of generalizing affection which can be extended to a generalizing sharpness (compare the Poysers with the Gleggs and Dodsons), but which cannot extend to a recognition of lives individually made from a common source; rather, as is said in a foolish mode of praise, the characters are “done”. There is a point often reached in George Eliot when the novelist is conscious that the characters she is describing are “different” from her probable readers; she then offers to know them, and to make them “knowable,” in a deeply inauthentic but socially successful way. Taking the tip from her own difficulty, she works the formula which has been so complacently powerful in English novel-writing: the “fine old,” “dear old,” quaint-talking, honest-living country characters.

(1969f: 258)

There is more than a little truth in this criticism although it does not give full weight to the thought that there were many people from what might be called ‘different walks of life’ who did share social attitudes and assumptions similar to those of George Eliot. Although fear of machine-breaking, rick burning, riots, enormous demonstrations, monster petitions, and repression had an important role, the flashing of sabres, the shackles and holds of transports to Van Diemen’s Land, and the drop of the gallows did not alone account for the substantial degree of social peace which England enjoyed throughout the nineteenth century.

For example, Hobsbawm and Rudé’s Marxist account of the great wage revolts of agricultural labourers during the years 1830-1, 1834-5 and 1843-4, gave a very mixed account of the resistance, repression, casualties and gains. Their book, *Captain Swing*, published in 1969, focused on the greatest of these: in 1830-1. The authors noted that ‘there can rarely have been a movement of the despairing poor so large and so widespread which used, or

even threatened, so little violence.’ (Hobsbawm & Rudé 1969: 17f.n.) There were few ‘signs of a new political or social ideology. On the contrary, there is evidence that the labourers still accepted the ancient symbols of ancient ideals of stable hierarchy. Their demands were just: they must be lawful. The King himself must have authorised them.’ (Hobsbawm & Rudé 1969: 18) Furthermore, Hobsbawm and Rudé noted the radical split between the farmers and magistrates who leaned towards amelioration and conciliation, and the Government who backed a rigorous policy of repression:

‘Nevertheless, the solidarity of rural society was an illusion. The insignificance of mere sympathy as a political or economic force has rarely been better illustrated than in 1830, when the bulk of the counties’ rulers agreed that the labourers’ demands were just, indeed modest, and ought to be conceded, though the government in London, full of ideology and the fear of revolution, took a different view.’

(Hobsbawm & Rudé 1969: 17)

It was in circumstances similar to these, where there was discussion and dispute among the propertied classes concerning the best policy to adopt towards the labouring poor that the meliorism of Charles Dickens, Mrs Gaskell, George Eliot and Disraeli had wide currency. And, it is probable that not a few working farmers and Tory magistrates, and a fair number of artisans and labourers scattered amongst the radical shoemakers and shopkeepers of rural England, believed, along with Adam, Seth, Dinah, Felix and Mr Lyons, that patience and measured self-improvement were virtues that promised redemption if not the eventual achievement of justice and prosperity.

However, Williams’s point concerning George Eliot’s fractured voice remained substantial:

There are then three idioms uneasily combined: the full analytic, often ironic power; the compromise between this and either disturbed, intense feeling or a position of moral strength; and the self-consciously generalizing, honest rustic background.

(1969f: 259)

This was much more suggestive of *Adam Bede* than any of Eliot's other novels, but perhaps Williams was correct when suggesting the *uneasy* nature of the synthesis because if one accepts the presence of the three distinct idioms, it is clear that the different elements are combined in very different proportions in each of her works.

Discourse and *The Great Tradition*

More important, however, than the descriptive power of 'the knowable community' analysis, was the *discursive* role of the figure. Williams's lively sense that what was *knowable* about a community was not merely the function of describing objects or relationships, or of what there was there to be known:

It is also the function of subjects, of observers — of what is desired and what needs to be known. A knowable community, that is to say, is a matter of consciousness as well as of evident fact. Indeed it is to just this problem of knowing a community — of finding a position, a position convincingly experienced, from which community can begin to be known — that one of the major phases in the development of the novel must be related.

(1970a: 17)

This is not Michel Foucault's conception of discourse because a firm contrast was maintained between 'evident fact' (what Williams referred to as 'real history' or 'historical realities') and 'consciousness'.¹³ Nevertheless, the discursive element in Williams's thought was of key importance in understanding the way he thought about the development of prose in general and the novel in particular. It also revealed the manner in which the figure of the knowable community is interfused with the 'structure of feeling' and the power of literature to bring society fully into our

¹³ For interesting comments on Foucault's conception of power-knowledge and its bearing on William's discursive ideas see *Raymond Williams: Writing, Culture, Politics* (O'Connor 1989a: 72-3). See also *Commissioned Spirits: The Shaping of Social Motion in Dickens, Carlyle, Melville, and Hawthorne* (Arac 1979).

presence: ‘society is not complete, not fully and immediately present, until the literature has been written’, because, for Williams, the writing of literature had a necessary and equal status with our ordinary experience of living in the formation of our consciousness of society (1969a: 24). Indeed, the creative power of literature was a function of art in general.¹⁴

It was this view that enabled him to discern the tradition of the English novel in the work of Charles Dickens, Charlotte and Emily Brontë, George Eliot, Thomas Hardy, Joseph Conrad and D. H. Lawrence. He argued that during the years from the late eighteen-forties to 1920 or thereabouts these novelists played a vital part in the struggle to make English society known to itself. It was this thought, focusing upon the struggle which the important novels had undertaken to make society self-aware, that was deployed by Williams in the late nineteen-sixties against F. R. Leavis’s authoritative and well-established thesis of *The Great Tradition*.

The Great Tradition promoted what might be called the *narrative of influence* with which Leavis described and analysed the work and development of the three novelists — George Eliot, Henry James, Joseph Conrad — that he thought constituted (along with Jane Austen and D. H. Lawrence) ‘the great tradition’. It was a story in which significant creative achievement was recognised not only in the luminous articulation by the great novelists of the possibilities of life, but also the manner in which their formal innovations influenced subsequent writers, changing what could be done with the novel. This could include the work of writers who were not themselves ‘great’, but who had influenced those who were.¹⁵

There were qualifications, exceptions, asides, minor traditions; writers of genius like Emily Brontë, and writers exerting considerable influence like James Joyce. But, F. R. Leavis was emphatic, the thread of influence ran: Jane Austen, George Eliot, Henry James, Joseph Conrad and D. H. Lawrence. Charles Dickens’s work was separated off from the main tradition; Charlotte Brontë ‘had a permanent interest of a minor

¹⁴ See *The Long Revolution* (1961a: 315).

¹⁵ ‘Fielding made Jane Austen possible by opening the central tradition of English fiction. In fact, to say that the English novel began with him is as reasonable as such propositions ever are.’
(Leavis, F. R. 1948: 11)

kind'; Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* was 'astonishing' but *sui generis*; Thomas Hardy was 'clumsy' but 'charming'. Above all, it was in the work of the five great authors, in the influence of their formal innovations and in their moral seriousness, and in the depth of their interest in life, that the great tradition of the English novel was to be found.

The register and tone of *The Great Tradition* thesis developed by F. R. Leavis was centred, Williams felt, on refinement of feeling and its civilised articulation in a manner that validated a narrowing attention to those circles of society in which sensitivity and high culture were inseparable from higher education at ancient institutions and the enjoyment of considerable leisure.¹⁶ And, it rested upon an idealised history in which industrialisation and urbanisation was said to have destroyed a 'common culture' and created circumstances in which the highly educated minority had to defend cultural standards from the threats posed by mass elementary education, and the popular press and mass entertainments to which it had to some extent led. To be sure, there were other objections, but Williams's focus was upon the kind of social selection and the resulting critical blindness that he thought these views sponsored.¹⁷

¹⁶ It is also worth noting that it was very important for F. R. Leavis to distinguish his concern for refinement from aestheticism and from any hint of decadent sensuality by emphasis on moral action and by reference to L. H. Myers's warning that 'amused superiority' and 'triviality and boredom' is the soil from which evil comes (F. R. Leavis 1948: 23 f.n.2). See also *Prince Jali*, volume II of *The Root and the Flower* (Myers 1935: 223-394).

¹⁷ Perry Anderson noted that Rene Wellek had as early as 1937 'pointed out the constancy with which certain key formulations and epithets — 'healthy', 'vital', 'plain vulgar living', 'actual' and others — recurred in Leavis's writings, forming the systematic substructure of his works. The most important, and notorious, of these was the idea of 'life' which was central to Leavis's thought. His book on Lawrence, his most important intellectual statement, exemplifies with particular clarity the logical paradox of an insistent metaphysical vocabulary combined with a positivist methodology.' (Anderson 1968: 51). Echoing Anderson, Francis Mulhern, pointed out that for Leavis "'Life" was not so much *essence* as *plenitude*; not an abstraction, but a totality whose compass was such as to dwarf even the most audacious theoretical system.' (Mulhern 1979: 170) Mulhern also cites Martin Greenberg's observation in his article, 'The Influence of Mr Leavis' (Greenberg 1949), that Leavis's lack of a theoretical approach capable of directing his criticism resulted in a mode of criticism that simply absorbed any order that it could be said to possess from the texts that it was purporting to study (Mulhern 1979: 171).

F. R. Leavis was indeed entirely at ease with paying very close attention to the refinements of bourgeois life. Of Henry James he wrote:

His registration of sophisticated human consciousness is one of the classical creative achievements: it *added* something as only genius can Even *The Awkward Age*, in which the extremely developed subtlety of treatment is not as remote as one would wish from the hypertrophy that finally overcame him, seems to me a classic; in no other work can we find anything like that astonishing — in so astonishing a measure successful — use of sophisticated ‘society’ dialogue.

(Leavis 1948: 27)

Williams found the social assumptions he thought implicit in this kind of approach repellent, but it was the fact that they rested upon false historical assumptions that he sought to address through deployment of the idea of ‘the knowable community’ in both the country and the city. Williams was seeking to counter a critical pattern in which even a pioneering adult educator, like Denys Thompson, when discussing the decay of modern reading could write:

The supply of reading matter is now almost entirely a matter of commerce; to pay it must sell widely, and there is therefore a tendency for a writer to appeal to the cheapest thoughts and feelings. Much of the reading matter in wide circulation is thus rather worse than useless.

With this state of affairs we may contrast, say, the eighteenth century, when even the illiterate, but not ill-educated, peasant acquired a training for a satisfactory life from the traditional rural order he was born into, despite poverty, injustice and brutality. For those who could read, the books in common circulation were for the most part good; the trade for catering for taste at a low level had not been invented. An education could be acquired as a child learns to walk, for good taste was normal: Dr. Johnson could praise a book by citing the approval of the common reader, and almost any building of the period shows grace and good manners.

(Thompson 1934: 11-12)¹⁸

What Williams, whose mother had been a farm servant and whose grandfather had been a landless labourer in a 'traditional rural order', felt when he read this might well be imagined. It illustrates why he was not able to trust a historical account that implicitly opposed the virtues of communal concord in the past to the discordant populism of contemporary media.

Placing Thomas Hardy

Williams thought that an outlook, like F. R. Leavis or Denys Thompson's, which looked back beyond industrialisation for signs of general excellence, would only be able to recognise value in the modern world in the life of the refined bourgeois individual. There was, he argued, an historical affinity between George Eliot's idealisations of life before the railway, the artistic route taken by Henry James, and the critical trajectory recommended by Leavis in *The Great Tradition*:

This is the structure on which we must fix our attention, for it connects crucially with George Eliot's development. A valuing society, the common condition of a knowable community, belongs ideally in the past. It can be recreated there for a widely ranging moral action. But the real step that has been taken is the withdrawal from any full response to an existing society; value is in the past, as a general condition, and is in the present only as a particular and private sensibility, the individual moral action.

The combination of these two conclusions has been very powerful; it has shaped and trained a whole literary tradition. And this is the meaning of George Eliot's Wessex in the only novel set in her own actual period: a narrowing of range and people to those capable, in traditional terms, of an individual moral action; the fading-out

¹⁸ See also *Culture and Environment* (F. R. Leavis and Thompson 1933: 78-98); L. C. Knights's *Drama & Society in the Age of Jonson* (Knights 1937: 140-168).

of all others, as most country people had been faded out in that view from the box-seat in the introduction to *Felix Holt: The Radical*; the recreation, after all the earlier emphasis of want, of a country-house England, a class England in which only certain histories matter, and to which the sensibility — the bitter and frank sensibility — of the isolated moral observer can be made appropriate. She is able to narrow her range because the wide-ranging community, the daily emphasis of want, is past and gone with old England; what is left now is a set of personal relationships and of intellectual and moral insights, in a history that for all valuing purposes has, disastrously, ended.

We can then see why Mr. Leavis, who is the most distinguished twentieth-century exponent of just this structure of feeling, should go on, in outlining the great tradition, from George Eliot to Henry James. It is from that final country-house England of *Daniel Deronda* (of course with Continental extensions and with ideas, like *Deronda*'s Zionism, about everywhere) to the country-house England of James. But the development that matters in the English novel is not to James; it is within that same Wessex, in the return of a general history, to the novels of Hardy.

(1969f: 268)¹⁹

Williams's recommendation of Hardy is, of course, consistent with his entire outlook: the great English novelists wrestled with the difficulty of creating knowable communities consonant with

¹⁹ It is surprising that Williams should, like Leavis, choose to ignore the Jewish family and characters in *Daniel Deronda*. Williams's abstract reference to 'Deronda's Zionism, about everywhere', assumes a more careful tone in the brief comment in *The English Novel* where the allusion is to 'the transcendence of customary communities' and the 'discovery of new loyalties' (1970a: 87). However, it is difficult to account for Williams's critical elision of Eliot's portrayal of the lives of Jewish shopkeepers and artisans. That Williams should ignore 'The Philosophers' club, held at the *Hand and Banner* in Holborn, where Jewish workingmen met for intellectual discussion and argument, is particularly surprising. (Eliot 1876: 444-460) There is no trace of anti-Semitism in Williams's life or work so the explanation for this omission must be that to include it would disrupt the progress of his argument about country houses and the disappearance of a concern for want from Eliot's work.

the troubling and discordant development of capitalist society. Consequently, the succession was not from Eliot to James, but from Eliot's oeuvre (before *Daniel Deronda*) to Hardy.

He respected Hardy because of his refusal to produce an idealisation of rural life or even a stock presentation of village life. He notes Hardy's observation that Tess spoke two languages, the local dialect at home and more or less 'ordinary English' that she had learned in the National School for more public purposes and for speaking 'to persons of quality' (1970a: 102). Williams also noted that Tess was not a 'peasant' or a victim of the squire's whim, but 'the daughter of a lifeholder and small dealer who is seduced by the son of a retired manufacturer' (1970a: 114).

It was true that Hardy could, on occasions surrender to 'fatalism' that 'in the decadent thought of his time' was all too available, but this was rare (1970a: 115-6). Hardy was, like Williams himself, able to work beyond defeat:

Vitality — and it is his difference from Lawrence, as we shall see; a difference of generation and of history but also of character — Hardy does not celebrate isolation and separation. He mourns them, and yet always with the courage to look them steadily in the face. The losses are real and heartbreaking because the desires were real, the shared work was real, the unsatisfied impulses were real. Work and desire are very deeply connected in his whole imagination. That the critical emotional decisions by Tess are taken while she is working — as in the ache and dust of the threshing-machine where she sees Alec again — is no accident of plot; it is how this kind of living connects.

(1970a: 117)

Williams's passionate advocacy of Hardy was intended as a rebuttal of F. R. Leavis's sneering and superior tone (which was in turn an echo of Henry James's sneering and superior tone):

On Hardy (who owes enormously to George Eliot) the appropriately sympathetic note is struck by Henry James: 'The good little Thomas Hardy has scored a great success with *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, which is chock-full of faults and falsity, and yet has a singular charm.' This

concedes by implication all that properly can be conceded — unless we claim more for *Jude the Obscure*, which, of all Hardy's works of a major philosophic-tragic ambition, comes nearer to sustaining it, and, in its clumsy way — which hasn't the rightness with which the great novelists show their profound sureness of their essential purpose — is impressive. It is all the same a little comic that Hardy, should have been taken in the early nineteen-twenties — the Chekhov period — as pre-eminently the representative of the 'modern consciousness' or the modern 'sense of the human situation'.

(F. R. Leavis 1948: 34)

It is easy to find passages like this in Leavis's work. And, they certainly do appear to support Williams's contentions concerning the limitations both of Leavis's work and of the critics who regularly contributed to *Scrutiny*.²⁰

F. R. Leavis and Dickens

Although Williams was prepared to acknowledge that F. R. Leavis's criticism supported a complicated range of responses²¹ he preferred to focus on the negative views he thought issued from the standpoint of 'the great tradition' thesis:

By the standards of one kind of novel, which in England has been emphasised as the great tradition, Dickens's faults — what are seen as his faults — are so many and so central as to produce embarrassment. Almost every

²⁰ It is worth comparing Arnold Kettle's confident engagement with Leavis and Hardy and to note the manner in which Kettle achieved a reading of Hardy similar in many respects to that of Williams, exhibiting considerable warmth and subtlety, yet without Williams's defensive and angry tone. Kettle argued: 'I think it is important to face the problem of Hardy's naïveté squarely and not feel the need either to ignore or excuse it. It is a bit like Dickens's vulgarity, a trait to refined persons but inseparable from his strength.' (Kettle 1966: 266).

²¹ For example: 'The immense attraction of Leavis lay in his cultural radicalism, quite clearly. That may seem a problematic description today in 1979, but not at the time 1945. It was the range of Leavis's attacks on academicism, on Bloomsbury, on metropolitan literary culture, on the commercial press, on advertising, that first took me.' (1979b: 66)

criterion of that other kind of novel — characteristically, the fiction of an educated minority — works against him. His characters are not ‘rounded’ and developing but ‘flat’ and emphatic. They are not slowly revealed but directly presented. Significance is not enacted in mainly tacit and intricate ways but is often directly presented in moral address and indeed exhortation. Instead of the controlled language of analysis and comprehension he uses, directly, the language of persuasion and display. His plots depend often on arbitrary coincidences, on sudden revelations and changes of heart. He offers not the details of psychological process but the finished articles: the social and psychological products.

(1970a: 31)

Williams continued this description of ‘the great tradition’ analysis of Dickens by observing that:

Yet we get nowhere — critically nowhere — if we apply the standards of this kind of fiction to another and very different kind. We get nowhere if we try to salvage from Dickens what is compatible with that essentially alternative world, and then for the rest refer mildly and kindly to the great entertainer and to the popular tradition: not explaining but explaining away. The central case we have to make is that Dickens could write a new kind of novel — fiction uniquely capable of realising a new kind of reality — just because he shared with the new urban popular culture certain decisive experiences and responses.

(1970a: 31-2)

As a general kind of response to too much loose talk about Dickens this was probably fair comment. However, it is odd that Williams did not acknowledge a footnote added to the 1962 edition of Leavis’s *The Great Tradition* where he repudiates his own suggestion that Dickens was ‘a great entertainer’ best read aloud to children ‘of a winter’s evening.’ After attributing these ‘absurd’ comments to childhood memory Leavis says: ‘I now think that, if any one writer can be said to have created the modern novel, it is Dickens.’ (F. R. Leavis 1948: 30 n.1)

It may be that Williams simply missed the footnote.²² However, the Leavis essay on *Hard Times* should have provided grounds for caution in simply declaring ‘the great tradition’ school of thought incapable of serious engagement with Dickens. Leavis’s essay first appeared in *Scrutiny* in spring 1947. It was reprinted in *The Great Tradition* as ‘*Hard Times: An Analytic Note*’ in 1948 (and in the subsequent editions of the book), and was reprinted again as Chapter Four of *Dickens: The Novelist* under the title, ‘*Hard Times: The World of Bentham*’ (F. R. and Q. D. Leavis 1970: 11). It is an essay in which Leavis was able to stress Dickens’s achievement in confronting the ‘rugged individualism’ and utilitarianism of early Victorian society. Sissy Jupe is celebrated for ‘her sovereign and indefeasible humanity’ in contrast to the pungent irony deployed against Mr Gradgrind and his star pupil, the pallid Bitzer from whom the ‘self-same rays’ that gave Sissy her ‘deeper and more lustrous colour’ drew ‘what little colour he ever possessed’ out of him. (F. R. Leavis 1947: 261-2).

Leavis also criticised Dickens’s attitude to trades union solidarity²³ and compared the texture and tone of Dickens’s views favourably to T. S. Eliot and D. H. Lawrence:

In fact, by texture, imaginative mode, symbolic method, and the resulting concentration, *Hard Times* affects us as belonging with formally poetic works.

There is, however, more to be said about the success that attends Dickens’s symbolic intention of the Horse-riding; there is an essential quality of his genius to be emphasized. There is no Hamlet in him, and he is quite unlike Mr Eliot.

The red-eyed scavengers are creeping

²² Williams was, of course, prepared to acknowledge the difficulties inherent in the vicissitudes of his own Dickens criticism and to conclude, ‘I won’t ever get it right, somebody might.’ (1979b: 251-4; 254)

²³ The criticism of Dickens for his negative approach to trade unionism focuses upon the role he accorded to Stephen Blackpool as the victim of the agitator Slackbridge. Interestingly, Leavis places this in the context of the absence of any serious or positive consideration in *Hard Times* of religious life in the industrial districts and of the inadequacy of the description of Parliament in the novel as the ‘national dust-yard’ where ‘national dustmen’ try to ‘prove that the Good Samaritan was a bad economist’. (F. R. Leavis 1947: 279-281)

From Kentish Town and
Golders Green

— there is nothing of that in Dickens’s reaction to life. He observes with gusto the humanness of humanity as exhibited in the urban (and suburban) scene. When he sees, as he sees so readily, the common manifestations of human kindness, and the essential virtues, asserting themselves in the midst of ugliness, squalor, and banality, his warmly sympathetic response has no disgust to overcome. There is no suggestion, for instance, of recoil — or of distance-keeping — from the game-eyed, brandy-soaked, flabby-surfaced Mr Sleary, who is successfully made to figure for us a humane, anti-Utilitarian positive. This is not sentimentality in Dickens, but genius, and a genius that should be found peculiarly worth attention in an age when, as D. H. Lawrence (with, as I remember, Wyndham Lewis immediately in view) says, ‘My God! they stink’ tends to be an insuperable and final reaction.

(F. R. Leavis 1947: 267-8)²⁴

But, for all this, Williams was substantially correct, Leavis did think, in 1947, of Dickens as ‘a great popular entertainer’ who had in *Hard Times* given us his ‘full critical vision’ in a work Leavis plainly regarded as exceptional:

The inspiration is what is given in the grim clinch of the title, *Hard Times*. Ordinarily Dickens’s criticisms of the world he lives in are casual and incidental — a matter of including among the ingredients of a book some indignant treatment of a particular abuse. But in *Hard Times* he is for once possessed by a comprehensive vision, one in which the inhumanities of Victorian civilization are seen as fostered and sanctioned by a hard philosophy, the aggressive formulation of an inhumane spirit.

(F. R. Leavis 1947: 259)

²⁴ See the similar affirmation of Dickens’s faith in humanity and the rejection of the view that this can be ‘written off as sentimentality’ (1970a: 53).

Williams did not regard *Hard Times* as Dickens's most exceptional or significant work — for him this was *Dombey and Son*. Indeed, in his discussion of *Hard Times* in *Culture and Society* he was severe: 'As a whole response, *Hard Times* is more a symptom of the confusion of industrial society than an understanding of it, but it is a symptom that is significant and continuing.' (1958a: 96-7)

However, where Leavis saw Dickens being 'casual and incidental' Williams saw him hurling 'random ideas' about. Where Leavis saw Dickens adding indignation at some 'particular abuse' to the other ingredients of a book Williams saw 'the profoundly selective character of the moral action'. Williams's rhetoric and tone is different from Leavis but they are saying similar things:

The good are *our* people, even when other people are different only because they are minor characters. Money corrupts, but it does not corrupt Sol Gills. The house of Dombey deserves to fall, but Walter can re-establish it. There are very many examples of this kind. The hurling of random ideas and the profoundly selective character of the moral action have certainly to be recognised. They are the problems of translation, but also the probable accompaniments of so single, intense, compulsive and self-involving a vision: the characteristic weaknesses where we have already recognised the strengths.

(1970a 58)

Both Leavis and Williams also concurred in the view that *Dombey and Son* was 'radically innovating'.²⁵ However, in a move Williams would have thought typical of 'the great tradition' critics, Leavis claimed Dickens, and his kind of popularity, as being in the great tradition of the English language, the English people, and of Shakespeare himself:

When it was that Shakespeare ceased to be a popular institution I do not know; he was certainly that in Dickens's formative period. Looking at the characteristics

²⁵ See 'The First Major Novel: *Dombey and Son*' (F. R. Leavis 1962: 21-56) and *The English Novel* (1970a: 9).

of form and method of the novel as Dickens was aspiring to create it in *Dombey and Son*, we can see that the influence of the sentimental and melodramatic theatre was not the only dramatic influence that counted, or the most profound.

One cannot, then, rest happily on the formula that Dickens's genius was that of a great popular entertainer: the account is not unequivocal enough.

(F. R. Leavis 1962: 55)

So, despite many similarities between Leavis and Williams in their assessment of Dickens concerning his humanism and his expression of the vitality of Victorian popular culture, 'the great tradition' thesis did not permit a move away from a narrative that emphasised continuity at the expense of change. As a result Leavis did not succeed in incorporating Dickens effectively into the line of succession and influence: Jane Austen, George Eliot, Henry James, Joseph Conrad, D. H. Lawrence. He could only do this by a kind of chauvinistic peroration at the close of his 1962 essay in which, for the want of any more specific or precise formal reasons for integrating Dickens into the tradition, he was compelled to raise the parallel with Shakespeare, that other 'great national artist', and to denounce the Francophile conventions of 'Bloomsbury'.²⁶

Leavis: Entrapped by Tradition

Leavis's strategy suffered from a dogged commitment to discernment of formal continuity and innovation that insisted that the primary development in the novel took place between Jane Austen and George Eliot; it was a commitment that pushed out Charlotte and Emily Brontë and made the insertion of Dickens into the account extremely difficult, necessitating the reprinting of his essay on *Hard Times* as a sort of 'after word' to *The Great Tradition*. Similarly, in order to impose a fixed succession between *Daniel Deronda* and *Portrait of a Lady* Leavis had to exclude from consideration not only Daniel's exploration of his relationship with Judaism and with Jewish

²⁶ See 'The First Major Novel: *Dombey and Son*' (F. R. Leavis 1962: 54-6).

people in *Daniel Deronda*, but also all the novels of Thomas Hardy.

By comparison with Leavis's critical strategies Williams's idea of the knowable community was much more effective, not only in integrating Dickens into the mainstream practice of novel writing in nineteenth-century England, but in exploring in a more coherent manner the relationship between the work of major writers and the enormous changes that were rapidly transforming all the social relationships of which society was composed. Rather than seeking to impose a fixed succession derived entirely from the formal and moral properties and innovations said to be operating within the great tradition, Williams, with the figure of the knowable community, attempted to discern the relationship not simply between the important novelists and their predecessors, but between them, their predecessors, and their wider struggle to realise fully the nature of the profound changes taking place in the relationships which composed both urban and rural communities.

This can be most clearly seen in the evolution of Williams's reading of *Hard Times*, which in *Culture and Society* had been an essay in confusion:

‘As a response, *Hard Times* is more a symptom of the confusion of industrial society than an understanding of it, but it is a symptom that is significant and continuing.’

(1958a: 96-7)

This sharp conclusion (composed in 1956) had by 1983 grown into an excellent analysis of the novel's ‘unmistakeable contradictions and incompatibilities’. By extending his analysis to the recognition and examination of the ideal reader Dickens had placed within the text Williams was able to deepen his understanding of the novel's manifest contradictions.

Dickens, as we saw, described Coketown systematically, and then described its inhabitants — ‘equally like one another’ — in its terms. There is thus, so to say, a ‘Coketowner’, who is ideally present before the effective individual variations are introduced. Reflecting on this, seeing its partial but imperfect truth, may we find our-

selves also reflecting on another ideal presence, equally related to a system, who has at least as much to do with the text though he is only present in address? ‘Dear reader! It rests with you and me, whether, in our two fields of action, similar things shall be or not.’ ‘Similar things’: narrated events and consequences like these. ‘Our two fields of action’: not our separate and variable, thus multiple, fields, but *two* fields, of which only one, the writer’s is fully defined. For it is surely not as ‘reader’, reader only, that such responsibility can be exercised. Or is it? This is the real question behind the ideal presence. While the second field is only that of the ‘reader’, a certain coherence is assured. The writer has written; the reader has only to read, for then the thing is done.

(1983f: 172-3)

Williams continued by revealing that this ideal reader was in danger of dissolving among the great variety of actual contemporary readers. The real reader could of course be anybody from a poor worker to a prosperous capitalist. Consequently, Dickens had no way of determining, beyond his text, what ‘similar things shall be or not’ in the readers ‘field of action’. He felt compelled therefore to employ his address to ‘dear reader’ as a means of imposing coherence upon the reader.

But then these inevitable differentials, of human desire and social intention, quite as much as of capacity, are *textually* overridden and composed. A necessary ‘dear reader’, composed in specific ways, is implicit in and completes the text; is indeed, by a whole strategy of composition, *produced by*, intended to be produced by, the text.

(1983f: 173)

In this way, Williams was able to demonstrate the manner in which Dickens sought to impose coherence and to maintain control over both the knowable and unknowable aspects of the ‘generalized unease’ provoked by industrialisation. Such observations could not be made available by a mode of criticism that was dependent upon continuity and tradition as the principal

means of figuring innovation and accomplishment. Williams was free, in a way that Leavis was not, to grasp both the scale of Dickens's difficulty and the depth of his achievement.