

## Chapter Nine: Modernism and the Unknowable Community

### The Unknowable Community

The idea of ‘structure of feeling’ was developed as a figure to express and identify the emergent changes that could be detected by innovations in theatrical convention. Consequently, its use in *The Country and the City*, largely in relation to poetry, where interest in changes in poetic form and convention are subordinate to the manifest content and subjects of the works cited, is not entirely successful. And, the focus upon the novel, and the figure of the knowable community, centred as it is in the nineteenth century, adds to the difficulties of synthesis between Williams’s figures and his particular dialectical conception of historical movement. When this conception was applied to largely urban society these synthetic difficulties become considerable, but he is characteristically bold in attempting to deal with them: he introduced the idea of the unknowable community.

Williams recognised that the task of rendering society present in the novel became a tense and profoundly difficult artistic process as the social changes inaugurated by industrialism and urbanisation took hold; it was an artistic process that was not at all easy to sustain. As Alan O’Connor has noted the ‘possibility of an overview of the whole of society’ was in Williams’s view ‘subject to radical doubt’. The phrase knowable community had ‘a kind of irony’ because what was being shown was how much of the society was ‘deeply unknowable.’ (O’Connor 1989a: 69)<sup>1</sup>

Williams believed that the idea that individuals were in some sense unknowable was associated with the belief that society was not composed of knowable relationships. He thought that this had resulted, towards the end of the nineteenth century, in an increasing scepticism concerning the possibility of understanding society as a whole:

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<sup>1</sup> As Williams expressed it: ‘The contrary notion of the unknowable community is very important for the argument of the book *The English Novel*, since the idea of the knowable community alone might suggest that novels could not be written, except in very special circumstances, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.’ (1979b: 247)

An important split takes place between knowable relationships and an unknown, unknowable, overwhelming society. The full seriousness of this split and of its eventual consequences for the novel can be traced only towards the end of the century. . . . We can see its obvious relation to the very rapidly increasing size and scale and complexity of communities: in the growth of towns and especially of cities and of a metropolis; in the increasing division and complexity of labour; in the altered and critical relations between and within social classes. In these simple and general senses, any assumption of a knowable community — a whole community, wholly knowable — becomes harder and harder to sustain.

(1970a: 15-16)

To be sure, this now seems a perfectly sensible and unexceptional observation. However, Williams was not simply alluding to the growing technical complexity and scale of society. The ‘split’ emerging in the 1870s between ‘knowable relationships and an unknown, unknowable, overwhelming society’ was signalled, Williams thought, by the full development of the British Empire and the maturation of the ‘*English* middle class’ which could now be said to have arrived, been ‘housed’ and ‘settled in’. The profound disturbance between the 1830s and the 1870s, which had produced, the ‘continuously impressive: the English, specifically English, novel’ gave way to a period roughly from 1870 to 1914 in which ‘modernism’ arose and *English* letters, specifically *English* letters are represented by H. G. Wells, Arnold Bennett and John Galsworthy.<sup>2</sup> There was also a parting of the ways between ““individual” or “psychological” fiction on the one hand and “social” and “sociological” fiction on the other’ (1970a: 119-120). It was a time ‘especially in the novel that people tried to talk of “social” and “personal” as separable processes, separate realms’ (1970a: 132). Thomas Hardy, the last representative of the earlier, creative period, stopped writing novels with the publication of *Jude the Obscure* in 1895. There

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<sup>2</sup> Gissing who published *Demos* (1886), *The Nether World* (1889), and *New Grub Street* (1891) is discussed by Williams elsewhere and is not admitted into this period of the eighteen-seventies to 1914 because the period doesn’t take on its most defined aspect until the years 1895-1914.

was then, for the *English*, a decline into a narrow upholstered materialism. English culture which was, Williams thought, in science superb and had, before the classic period of imperialism, been truly great in the process of writing novels:

It was in imagination and ideas, from Blake to Hardy and from Coleridge to Morris, that the specific greatness of something identifiably English — and English of the period after the Industrial Revolution, carrying on what was already a major imaginative and intellectual culture — was founded. But weak, problematic, at that particular time and that particular place: the last decades of the nineteenth century, the first decade of our own.

(1970a: 123)

It is interesting that the years that saw the invention of the telephone, the phonograph, cinematography, refrigerated ships and freight wagons, the motorcar, the aeroplane, wireless telegraphy, the headline and the popular press, old age pensions, labour exchanges, the Labour Party, the development of the theory of relativity and the foundation of the Women's Social and Political Union, should provoke Williams in *The English Novel* to focus upon the solid establishment of the English middle class, the Empire and the major imaginative work produced by 'other nationalities', 'immigrants', and 'outsiders'. This was plainly a time of crisis for the knowable community in the life of society and in the process of writing novels. Furthermore, this period was not overcome by the late arrival of D. H. Lawrence who 'somehow' became irretrievably muddled up with the modernists; modernists enmeshed with the profound dislocation, or even with the dissolution, of the knowable community in modes of writing that focused increasingly on the life and experience of the bourgeois or even the petit-bourgeois individual at the expense of more variable and more sociable interests. This time of crisis for the knowable community represented a theoretical problem for Williams in which the knowable positives of Thomas Hardy were left stranded by the mediocrity and bounce of Mr Polly on the one hand and the emergence of modernism on the other. He situated H. G. Wells at the point in which the roads diverged:

And nostalgic always, cosily nostalgic: an adolescent nostalgia, a whole world away from the bitter and tearing — yet then profoundly connecting — adult memories of George Eliot or Hardy or Lawrence. Of course we all wish there were a little pub by the river, where we could live and let live. We wish it when we're tired, or when general change is too hard or too disturbing. It's the appealing side, the nice side, of the petit bourgeois; with the emphasis on the small man, the little human peninsula, trying to forget what the high bourgeois mainland is like (and in that turning away there's some genuine warmth).

What it grows up into, unfortunately, is that consciousness Wells really does share with Bennett, and that's been very pervasive: a bouncing cheeky finally rampant commercialism: not Mr Polly but Northcliffe, and beyond him the *Daily Mirror* and ITV; the break-out — what's called a break-out — from Bladesover to Tono Bungay. It's because of this, I suppose, that the ghosts of Henry James and of Matthew Arnold are still so regularly summoned: an enclosed and intricate lamplit seriousness against all that cheerful bounce that so quickly becomes a mechanical thump, practically breaking your shoulder. It's a measure of our difficulty that we think it's there — only there — we've got to choose.

(1970a: 129)

Williams always wanted to refuse this choice and to insist upon two critical bearings in the novel: 'the problem of analysis', and 'the problem of that extended and still rapidly mobile society, in which the lives of a majority of our people are still for the most part ignored or at best visited' (1970a: 188). Consequently, he sought both, to acknowledge the contribution made by Modernism in the struggle to present society with the 'unknowable community', and simultaneously to challenge the claims of Modernism to universal relevance, and to question Modernist disdain for the coherence of ordinary life.

Williams's views, eschewing both radical accounts and simpler kinds of populism, were informed by a sophisticated

engagement with modernism and by atavistic feelings<sup>3</sup> for the verities and virtues of family, place and community; and, as a matter of course, for the heterosexual assumptions that accompany such feelings. These feelings appear, at times, to have disrupted his critical composure, resulting in responses that amalgamated challenges to the centred subject posed by modernism with the defence of capitalism and hostility to the interests of working people and their families. For example, when talking about cinema and socialism in 1985 he argued:

It is sometimes said that we cannot make socialist films, within any Naturalist convention, until we have socialism and can show it. Isn't the mere reproduction of an existing reality a passivity, even an acceptance of the fixed and the immobile? But, first, this is to overlook the long histories of our peoples, in which movements and struggles, particular victories and defeats, reached their own moving crises. So large a part of our histories has been appropriated and falsified by enemy artists and producers, or by the indifferent who have converted them to spectacle, that there is enough work, in that alone, for several generations of film-makers.

(Britton 1991: 117)<sup>4</sup>

In the discussion that followed a member of the audience made a suggestion for the introduction of radical themes into soap opera:

Wouldn't it be possible to introduce certain radical themes into soap opera if the right sort of people were writing it? You mentioned the miners' strike, for instance, so you could have a plot about the miner who loses his wife when she runs off with somebody else because he's

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<sup>3</sup> Williams, directly explores the long struggle, in his home or native place, of remote ancestors with each other, with technology, and the elements in the imaginative reconstructions that compose his last novel (1989; 1990).

<sup>4</sup> References to Britton 1991 are to a lecture by Williams in 1985 and to the discussion that followed it. A version of this lecture, entitled 'Cinema and Socialism', without the discussion that followed it, can be found in *The Politics of Modernism* (Williams 1985b).

in the nick, or because she doesn't agree with him coming out on strike and they're going to lose their home. . .

(Britton 1991: 127)

Williams doesn't agree, but his response is lengthy and careful. He cites the extensive use of negative or even nihilistic images of life in capitalist society and the manner in which they can be recuperated in bourgeois theatre and cinema (Britton 1991: 127-8).

All I *would* say is that those whom with some deliberateness I called enemy artists — I don't just see them as different, I see them as enemy — endlessly harp on the failure of relationships, the dislocation of communities, the defeat of noble efforts, the end of idealism. This really is the only thing with which they can defend this social order: not that it's good, but that it's inevitable. People aren't good enough to live in better ways — this is the heartland of their system. They don't any longer try and say it's better. They just say, 'We understand people, we know they're out for themselves, we know that if they try something good it fails.' And because of that there is what I called a bourgeois dissident form of art which shows all this with great power . . .

(Britton 1991: 127)

Williams's answer, both to bourgeois nihilism and bourgeois dissidence, was an assertion of the need for optimism and hope:

Everyone who has lived in this actual world already has enough doubts, has enough knowledge of weakness and of how often things fail. It may be some kind of therapy to see it endlessly replayed, but the moment when people feel the break from the possibility that at least something can move, some-thing can be got right, something can be felt . . . I think that at the moment, that kind of celebration of possibility is the most profound need.

(Britton 1991: 129)

This celebration of the possible was needed in order to avoid purely individualistic responses to the difficulties of life in capitalist society. For Williams these commitments were visceral, they informed his views on soap operas and he could not forget them when he considered Modernist works of art.

### Joyce's *Exiles* and the rejection of ordinary feeling

**M**odernist work was always the object of suspicion because of its formalism and because of its subjectivist focus on the predicament of the individual:

It is one of the tragedies of modernism, in revolt against the fixed images, the conventional flows and sequences, of orthodox bourgeois art, that it was pressured and tempted, by the very isolation that was its condition, into an assertion of its own autonomous and then primarily subjectivist and formalist world; a world of autonomous art.

(Britton 1991: 119)

This 'isolation that was its condition' was isolation from real engagement with the central relationships that compose society and from the lives of the great majority of the people.<sup>5</sup> This isolation was, Williams thought, exile: literal or metaphorical, imposed or self-imposed. It was a thought that infused and inflected much of his criticism, determining his view of figures as diverse as Solzhenitsyn and Orwell, and leading to elision damaging to his critical procedure. For example, when discussing sexuality in *Exiles* by James Joyce he says:

In one sense, destruction of this isolation is achieved through sexual union. When Robert rhapsodizes, in his florid fashion, on physical love as an acknowledgement of the beauty of women —

A kiss is an act of homage

Richard replies sharply

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<sup>5</sup> See Williams in discussion at the NFT (Britton 1991: 116-7).

It is an act of union between man and woman.

But this involves, in Joyce's view, not only union, but loss, a synthesis by destruction of the units — a death of the spirit.

(1968a: 155)

The phrase 'a death of spirit' does indeed occur in the third act of *Exiles*:

RICHARD Then?

ROBERT Then I went to a certain nightclub. There were men there — and also women. At least, they looked like women. I danced with one of them. She asked me to see her home. Shall I go on?

RICHARD Yes.

ROBERT I saw her home in a cab. She lives near Donnybrook. In the cab took place what the subtle Duns Scotus calls a death of the spirit. Shall I go on?

RICHARD Yes.

ROBERT She wept. She told me she was the divorced wife of a barrister. I offered her a sovereign as she told me she was short of money. She would not take it and wept very much . . . .

(Joyce 1914: 435-6; Act 3)

So, we have a witticism concerning sex in a cab (accompanied by the offer of a sovereign) between a distressed woman and Robert, whom we know thinks of a kissable woman as a work of nature: 'like a stone or a flower or a bird' (Joyce 1914: 389; Act 1). We are not dealing here with some general proposition — a death of the spirit — concerning 'union', 'loss', or a destructive 'synthesis'. Indeed, Joyce's play is about exile, literal and metaphorical. It is about Richard Rowan's rejection by his mother and by Mother Ireland. It is about the necessary pain of freedom in relationships: fraternal, sororal, paternal, maternal, matrimonial, national, and sexual, and the deep need for that freedom in all its instantiations.

Whether or not it is a good play is not at issue. But, by attempting to make it tell his own story Williams disrupts his

reading of Joyce's play. He leaves out of his account Richard and Robert's exchange concerning passion:

ROBERT (*rapidly*) Those moments of sheer madness when we feel an intense passion for a woman. We see nothing. We think of nothing. Only to possess her. Call it brutal, bestial, what you will

RICHARD (*a little timidly*) I am afraid that that longing to possess a woman is not love.

(Joyce 1914: 404; Act 2)

And starts where he can characterise Richard doubts concerning sexual passion and love as a rejection of ordinary feeling:

The failure of the *Exiles* is that the incident is left to stand alone. The only accessible means of communication would have been through some kind of conventional language. But Joyce keeps strictly to the canons of representational speech. At one level, that of simple statement, this is pointed and adequate:

ROBERT: No man ever yet lived on this earth who did not long to possess — I mean to possess in the flesh — the woman he loves. It is nature's law.

RICHARD: What is that to me? Did I vote it?

But this, characteristically, is a rejection of ordinary feeling. That is the interest of the failure, for it has become (though not by imitation) characteristic. A deep detachment from relationships and a rejection of ordinary communication are expressed, in a clipped brittle poise, through conventions of representation which assume their importance and reality. It is what Joyce later mocked: 'writing the mystery of himself in furniture'. But it is an important and difficult phase in the evolution of naturalism: a split between an objective intention and a secretive commitment. It is there in the two meanings of 'detachment', which are crucial in this period: the

objective artistic discipline, which sets itself to represent the reality of others; and the imitation of this manner, to deprive others of reality in the apparent act of giving it to them — a detachment from any reality but the process of self-observation rendered as outward observation.

(1968a: 159)

By leaving out the first part of this exchange in the dialogue between the two old friends — the part where Richard expresses doubts concerning the connection between sexual passion and love — Williams is able to focus the reader's attention upon a 'characteristic rejection of ordinary feeling' as a preliminary to his determination to find Joyce engaged in disguising his detached concern with self-observation as objective intention.

### **Modernism and the Attenuation of *Social* Consciousness**

Williams accepted the excitement and achievement of Modernism. He saw that Modernist responses arose in relation to powerful forces that demanded striking innovation and sharp ruptures in convention.<sup>6</sup> He also understood the manner in which problems of perception had become inseparable from problems of personal identity, and that in a sense claims of universality (claims of universality that would turn out to be specious) were embedded in these experiences. This was a development that he saw as quintessentially urban, gathering pace throughout the nineteenth century, and expressing a heightened sense of crises at the beginning of the twentieth century, expressing despair, excitement, and possibility:

This experience of urban movement has been used, at all levels of seriousness and of play, to express a gamut of feelings from despair to delight. The single vision of Eliot's characteristic imagery, of smoke, scraps, grime, dinginess, has been very powerful but not overwhelming. We can see this most clearly if we look at Joyce's *Ulysses*, which is the most extended and memorable

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<sup>6</sup> See 'The metropolis and the emergence of Modernism' (1985c: 23).

realisation in our literature of these fundamentally altered modes of perception and identity.

Wordsworth, near the beginning, had lost his familiar bearings:

All laws of acting, thinking, speaking man  
Went from me, neither knowing me nor  
known.

But as the experience was prolonged it became clear that for 'laws' we must read 'conventions'. Generations of men and women learned to see in new ways, though it needed the genius of Joyce to take these new ways into the deep substance of literary method itself. In Joyce, the laws and the conventions of traditional observation and communication have apparently disappeared. The consequent awareness is intense and fragmentary, subjective primarily, yet in the very form of its subjectivity including others who are now with the buildings, the noises, the sights and smells of the city, parts of this single and racing consciousness . . . . The forces of the action have become internal and in a way there is no longer a city, there is only a man walking through it.

(1973c: 242-3)

But, this was a fragile perception constantly in danger of disintegration. It could go too far. Indeed, it could reach beyond the expressions of community's knowability, or even its unknowability, towards the dissolution of any consciousness of collectivity. Of Dublin in *Ulysses* Williams says:

The history is not in this city but in the loss of a city, the loss of relationships. The only knowable community is in the need, the desire of the racing and separated forms of consciousness.

Yet what must also be said, as we see this new structure, is that the most deeply known human community is language itself. It is a paradox that in *Ulysses*, through its patterns of loss and frustration, there is not only search but discovery: of an ordinary language, heard more clearly than anywhere in the realist novel before it; a positive flow of that wider human speech which had been

screened and strained by the prevailing social conventions: conventions of separation and reduction, in the actual history. The greatness of *Ulysses* is this community of speech. That is its difference from *Finnegans Wake* in which a single voice — a voice offering to speak for everyone and everything, ‘Here Comes Everybody’ — carries the dissolution to a change of quality in which the strains already evident in the later sections of *Ulysses* (before the last monologue) have increased so greatly that the interchange of voices — public and private, the voices of a city heard and overheard — has given way to a surrogate, a universal isolated language. Where *Ulysses* was the climax, *Finnegans Wake* is the crisis of the development we have been tracing: of the novel and the city; the novel of ‘acting, thinking, speaking’ man.

But this development has another significance. It takes us back to Hardy’s observation of London, where each individual is conscious of *himself*, but nobody conscious of themselves collectively.

The intense self-consciousness, the perceptual subjectivity, was, as we have seen, very powerfully developed, as a literary mode.

(1973c: 245)

Williams believed that the intense self-consciousness he associated with Modernism resulted in the internalisation of collective consciousness, which in turn resulted in the elaboration of a metaphysical or psychological ‘community’; a form of community which because of its abstract character could assume an ahistorical and universal status beside which actual societies, actual communities, were regarded as superficial, contingent and secondary. Williams thought that the consequences of this development were severe:

Thus a loss of social recognition and consciousness is in a way made into a virtue: as a condition of understanding and insight. A direct connection is then forged between intense subjectivity and a timeless reality: one is a means to the other and alternative terms are no more than distractions. The historically variable problem of ‘the individual and society’ acquires a sharp and particular

definition, in that ‘society’ becomes an abstraction, and the collective flows only through the most inward channels. Not only the ordinary experiences of apparent isolation, but a whole range of techniques of self-isolation, are then gathered to sustain the paradoxical experience of an ultimate collectivity which is beyond and above community. Social versions of community are seen as variants of the ‘myth’ — the encoded meaning — which in one or other of its forms is the only accessible collective consciousness. There is a language of the mind — often, more strictly, of the body — and there is this assumed universal language. Between them, as things, as signs, as material, as agents, are cities, towns, villages: actual human societies.

(1973c: 246)

So, for Williams the tension remained between the need to recognise not only the manifest achievements of Modernist artists in presenting the unknowability of modern experience, and the need to see ‘actual human societies’ as knowable entities pregnant with ‘a collective consciousness which could see not only individuals but also their altered and altering relationships, and in seeing the relationships and their social causes find social means of change’ (1973c: 247).

It was this tension between the radical achievements of Modernism and what he saw as its profoundly *anti-social* aspect that Williams insisted upon. It sustained his objection to the assertion of permanent and universal relevance which the theft, or appropriation, by Modernists, of the word ‘modern’ implied, and his much more important suspicions concerning the class and political affiliations of Modernist artists.<sup>7</sup> These tensions led him to question the claims to a certain radicalism made by many Modernist artists in England. He did this by framing radical Modernist milieus with the idea of bourgeois dissidence.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> ‘This is, by the way, a key distinction between modernism and the modern. Modernism, not so much in practice but as a set of ideas, really does reduce all past experience in this way: the contemporary becomes the universal, even the eternal.’ (1987c: 3)

<sup>8</sup> Williams was not alone in this association of Modernism with ‘bourgeois dissidence’: Sartre had characterised the surrealists as ‘turbulent young bourgeois’ who ‘wanted to ruin culture because they were cultivated’ (Sartre 1948:133).

### Bloomsbury and Bourgeois Dissidence

Williams's suspicion of Modernist artists resulted in a sophisticated analysis of the processes at work within the English upper classes during the opening decades of the twentieth century. However, the subtlety of his analysis was strained through his deep class hostility to those conservative or liberal artists and intellectuals able to live on 'unearned' incomes. And, nowhere is this range of feeling and capacity for cogent analysis better demonstrated than in his writing on the Bloomsbury Group.<sup>9</sup>

But, of course, even here, when discussing the work of a principal member of the group, the idea of the propertied withholding recognition from the non-propertied is deployed with damaging effect to his criticism:

We could argue that here the facts of an observable world and of common experience have been properly subordinated to an imaginative flow and recreation. But though the subordination will not be doubted, the problem of value cannot be settled *a priori*. What is quite evident in Virginia Woolf's prose is a particular relation to objects and people (the people, below a certain class line, not really very different from objects) which makes any simple abstraction of 'imagination' impossible. This is a way of seeing the world from a precise social position: the rhythms and the language follow from what is really an uncertainty, a wonder, that depends on quite other certainties and in particular the writer's isolation from the very general natural human processes which must then be not so much described as evoked.

(1969b: 115-116)

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<sup>9</sup> For Williams bourgeois dissidence was not, of course, restricted to England: the dangers of recuperation that it ran could even encompass radical works like Brecht's *The Threepenny Opera* (Britton 1991: 127-8).

The cleaners in the passage from *To the Lighthouse*, Mrs McNab and Mrs Bast, ‘groan’ and ‘creak’ on their stiff old legs a bit like the creaking hinges and the screeching bolts to which the builders are attending, but they are not referred to in the passage cited by Williams as objects like tea sets or fire irons:

If the feather had fallen, if it had tipped the scale downwards, the whole house would have plunged to the depths to lie upon the sands of oblivion. But there was a force working; something not highly conscious; something that leered, something that lurched; something not inspired to go about its work with dignified ritual or solemn chanting. Mrs McNab groaned; Mrs Bast creaked. They were old; they were stiff; their legs ached. They came with their brooms and pails at last; they got to work. All of a sudden, would Mrs McNab see that the house was ready, one of the young ladies wrote: would she get this done; would she get that done; all in a hurry. They might be coming for the summer; had left everything to the last; expected to find things as they had left them. Slowly and painfully, with broom and pail, mopping, scouring, Mrs McNab, Mrs Bast stayed the corruption and the rot; rescued from the pool of Time that was fast closing over them now a basin, now a cupboard; fetched up from oblivion all the Waverley novels and a tea-set one morning; in the afternoon restored to sun and air a brass fender and a set of steel fire-irons. George, Mrs Bast’s son, caught the rats, and cut the grass. They had the builders. Attended with creaking of hinges and the screeching of bolts, the slamming and banging of damp-swollen woodwork, some rusty laborious birth seemed to be taking place, as the women, stooping, rising, groaning, singing, slapped and slammed, upstairs now, now down in the cellars. Oh, they said, the work!

(1969b: 115)

The people here — cleaners, builders, a helpful son — far from being ordinary objects are agents — a force working — in the battle against the tendency of all things to decay. Their *thingness* lies directly in their low level of consciousness, their

leering and lurching, their lack of inspiration, their lack of dignity. Objectification is not the problem here. The difficulty is to set the quality of the description — Woolf's evident horror of the performance of work, any kind of work, without inspiration or dignity — against relations that exist between the cleaners and the young ladies who might be coming for the summer. Perhaps, Williams's assertion concerning the objectification of the lower orders is merely a bad tempered aside, Williams's principal point having been Woolf's isolation 'from the very general and natural and human processes' of cleaning and other manual work. But, if this is so it is a form of isolation she apparently shared with Joyce and it was not in any event, Williams conceded, 'an unfruitful situation' (1969b: 116).

However, in his article of 1980, 'The Bloomsbury Fraction',<sup>10</sup> Williams was able to demonstrate how this group of upper class intellectuals, with their concern for the 'underdog' and their hatred of the myopic stupidity of much of the ruling class from which they had sprung, was able to have a positive effect as a '(civilizing) fraction of their class'. When Williams used the phrase 'concern for the underdog' and the word 'civilizing' in parenthesis he was evidently holding his nose. He didn't like these people or anything about them but on this occasion his visceral hatred of social superiority and class privilege did not get the better of his critical sense:

The different positions which the Bloomsbury Group assembled, and which they effectively disseminated as the contents of the mind of a modern, educated, civilized individual, are all in effect *alternatives* to a general theory. We do not need to ask, while this impression holds, whether Freud's generalizations on aggression are compatible with single-minded work for the League of Nations, or whether his generalizations on art are compatible with Bell's 'significant form' and 'aesthetic ecstasy', or whether Keynes's ideas of public intervention in the market are compatible with the deep assumption of society as a group of friends and relations. We do not need to ask because the effective integration has already taken place, at the level of the 'civilized individual', the

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<sup>10</sup> This article was based on a lecture given at Canterbury in 1978 (1980a: ix).

singular definition of all the best people, secure in their autonomy but turning their free attention this way and that, as occasion requires. And the governing object of all the public interventions is to secure this kind of autonomy, by finding ways of diminishing pressures and conflicts, and of avoiding disasters. The social conscience, in the end, is to protect the private consciousness.

(1978d: 167)

Williams, with reference to Leonard and Virginia Woolf, to Clive Bell and others, was able to identify Bloomsbury as a group of and for the notion of free individuals. It is true that he found it 'ironic' that the attitudes and assumptions of this special group should 'have become naturalized . . . in all the later phases of English culture.' But he feels compelled to acknowledge that the group functioned as a civilizing fraction of their class. Williams's use of 'civilizing', has a normative ring when associated with what Bloomsbury might be said to have seen as their *mission*. They clearly intended to set the standard for civilized attitudes, assumptions, and conduct, as much for *hoi polloi* as for the ruling elite composed of their friends, acquaintances, and relations:

Society can do something . . . because it can increase liberty . . . Even politicians can do something. They can repeal censorious laws and abolish restrictions on freedom of thought and speech and conduct. They can protect minorities. They can defend originality from the hatred of the mediocre mob.<sup>11</sup>

For Williams this disdain for the mob, whether figured as an undeserving and philistine lower-middle-class or as lower class victims, was appalling. His understanding of the Bloomsbury Group's struggle as a struggle waged from within the dominant class was extremely fertile. It enabled him to identify both the positive thrust of their contribution and to recognise them as the mortal enemies of his own emancipatory goals. His bitter hostility did not overwhelm his critical judgment. They were the enlightened promoters of an outlook that was an anathema to the

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<sup>11</sup> C. Bell, *Art* (London, 1914), pp.274-5, cited by Williams (1978d: 168).

communal solidarities and collective actions that constituted the key cultural achievements of the working class. Society was to be civilized not by a self-organizing subordinate class — an idea which was ‘not so much rejected as never taken seriously’ by Bloomsbury (1978d: 156) — but by the proliferation of appropriately civilized individuals:

Bloomsbury was carrying the classical values of bourgeois enlightenment. It was against cant, superstition, hypocrisy, pretension and public show. It was also against ignorance, poverty, sexual and racial discrimination, militarism and imperialism. But it was against all these things in a specific moment of the development of liberal thought. What it appealed to, against all these evils, was not any alternative idea of a whole society. Instead it appealed to the supreme value of the civilized *individual*, whose pluralization, as more and more civilized individuals, was itself the only acceptable social direction.

(1978d: 165)

It is possible here, within the subtlety of this analysis, to recognise the echoes of his distrust of the meliorism of Dickens and George Eliot, and his hostility towards the middle class leadership, which George Orwell had assumed necessary for the emancipation of the ‘proles’ from both the excesses of capitalism and the ravages of Stalinism. Williams distrusted the good intentions of those with money and power and he placed all his trust and hope in collective solutions to society’s problems, which were to be pursued through the self-activity and self-organisation of working people in their families, working places and communities.

### **1968: Changing Times**

Williams’s distrust of liberalism and what might be called the ‘Bloomsbury agenda’ reached a particular crisis in the decade in which he was writing *The Country and the City*, *The English Novel* and responding directly to the issues that they raised. The years roughly between 1965 and 1975 saw the Seamen’s Strike, the publication of the White

Paper on trade union reform: *In Place of Strife*, struggle in the docks and on the coalfields. The defeat of the Industrial Relations Act and the Heath government at the hands of organised labour. The Vietnam War reached its height following the Tet Offensive in 1968 and ended seven years later with the spectacle of imperialist soldiers, sailors, and airmen hurriedly throwing surplus helicopters from the decks of overcrowded aircraft carriers in their desperation to escape the wrath of insurgent peasant soldiers. These things were not imaginary, any more than was the massacre at My Lai ('Pinkville'), or the general strike that rocked France in 1968 or the struggles of students and workers in Prague. Numbers at demonstrations on the streets of London frequently exceeded a hundred thousand people and on occasions topped two hundred thousand. Trade union membership was buoyant and militant in the context of the decay of working class involvement in the Labour Party,<sup>12</sup> and leftist students, although always outnumbered on British university campuses by the Christian Union and the sporting societies, were able to engage very large numbers of more moderate students in political discussion and to mobilise them in popular political actions.

It was in this political atmosphere that Williams sharpened his analysis of capitalist society and posited a future for agriculture that would at last be free of the 'pitiless crew'. He was able to legitimate and sustain a new tone of bitterness and class anger in his 'knowable community' writings<sup>13</sup> in keeping with the temper of the times and with the outlook of considerable numbers of students and young academics recruited from families of working people from the lesser salaried occupations, engaged in technical or clerical work, where neither parent had received any higher education and who a decade earlier would not have been able to send their children to university.<sup>14</sup> To this new

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<sup>12</sup> See 'Working Class Politics' a review by Williams of E. M. Leventhal, *Respectable Radical: George Howell and Victorian Working Class Politics*, and Barry Hindess, *The Decline of Working Class Politics* (1971d: 7). See also Malcolm Dean's series of four articles published under the title 'Is Labour Dying?' (Dean 1971).

<sup>13</sup> 'The Knowable Community in George Eliot's Novels' (1969f), *The English Novel* (1970a), and *The Country and the City* (1973c).

<sup>14</sup> 'In fact, not until the 1960s was it undeniable that students had become, both socially and politically, a far more important force than ever before, for in 1968 the worldwide uprisings of student radicalism spoke louder than

generation of 'working class' urban intellectuals he boldly argued the case of the landless poor, exploited and oppressed since time immemorial. He argued that agriculture could be developed without recourse to capitalist methods, without enclosures, evictions or clearances:

It could be done, and is elsewhere being done, in quite different ways. And the urgency of its doing, in ways that break with capitalism, is linked with that other complementary aspect of the crisis: the condition and the future of the cities and of industry. One of the real merits of some rural writers, often not seen because other elements are present, is an insistence on the complexity of the living natural environment. Now that the dangers to this environment have come more clearly into view, our ideas, once again, have to shift. Some of the darkest images of the city have to be faced as quite literal futures. An insane over-confidence in the specialised powers of metropolitan industrialism has brought us to the point where however we precisely assess it the risk to human survival is becoming evident, or if we survive, as I think we shall, there is the clear impossibility of continuing as we are.

(1973c: 300-1)

From reading this in the opening years of the twenty-first century it is easy to be struck by Williams's prescience on 'Green' issues, until one returns to the opening sentence: 'It could be done, and is elsewhere being done, in quite different ways.' What does this sentence refer to? It certainly did not refer to the collectivisation of agriculture in the Soviet Union, which Williams regarded with horror.<sup>15</sup> Instead, it referred to China and Cuba (and perhaps to Tanzania), where apparently the development of agriculture without the dislocation and immiseration

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statistics.' In Europe the number of students tripled between 1960 and 1980 (Hobsbawm 1994: 296).

<sup>15</sup> Williams was opposed to the ideas for industrialisation which had been put forward in 1927 in the Trotskyite 'Platform of the Left Opposition' and he thought that 'Stalin carried through very much that programme, on a scale and with a brutality which made that 'victory' over the peasants one of the most terrible phases in the whole history of rural society.' (1973c: 302-3)

inherent in capitalist society was occurring ‘in quite different ways’:

This difficulty of relations between town and country worked itself through, in a surprising way, in our own century. Revolutions came not in the ‘developed’ but in the ‘undeveloped’ countries. The Chinese revolution, defeated in the cities, went to the country and gained its ultimate strength. The Cuban Revolution went from the city to the country, where its force was formed. In a whole epoch of national and social liberation struggles, the exploited rural and colonial populations became the main sources of continued revolt. In the famous Chinese phrase about world revolution, the ‘countryside’ was surrounding the ‘cities’. Thus the ‘rural idiots’ and the ‘barbarians and semi-barbarians’ have been for the last forty years, the main revolutionary force in the world.

(1973c: 304)

History was taking its revenge upon Marx and Engels’s anti-rural rhetoric and upon the sophisticated disdain of the metropolitan intellectuals. The dreams of utopian socialists were once again being awarded a new practical edge:

The utopian socialists had made many proposals for new kinds of balanced communities and societies; William Morris, as we saw, continued to think in this way. But under many pressures, in the twentieth century, from the sheer physical drive of developing capitalism and imperialism to the class habits of thought of metropolitan socialist intellectuals, this extraordinary emphasis was virtually lost. Its phrases were remembered, but as an old, impractical, childish dream. Yet it is an emphasis that is now being revived. It has been stated as a direction of policy in the Chinese Revolution. And it has been significantly revived, among Western revolutionary socialists, as a response to the crisis of industrial civilisation and what is seen as megalopolis.

(1973c: 304)

This untimely invocation of William Morris in relation to the Chinese Revolution should not be allowed to obscure the

Revolution's solid achievements which had nothing to do with *News From Nowhere* and everything to do with the struggle to develop, *at all costs*, a modern industrial economy, and the social conditions necessary for its consolidation, an economy capable of producing everything from jet fighters to medical instruments. The long struggle for women's rights,<sup>16</sup> the attainment of National unification in 1949 after decades of war, the battle for literacy and rural education, were all remarkable achievements. Under the leadership of Chairman Mao Zedong the economy grew on average by six percent per annum.<sup>17</sup> Life expectancy rose from 40 years in 1953 to 69 years in 1990, and in the same period infant mortality fell to 35 per thousand live births (Nathan 1990: 118).

But this real China with at least 20 million dead in the famine of 1959-61,<sup>18</sup> suffering the vast and cruel dislocations occasioned by the vicissitudes of the Chairman's doomed struggles with those taking the 'Capitalist Road', did not warrant close inspection by the British left. Williams's disavowal of caution, a caution that might have seemed prudent given the Soviet experience, was of a piece with the nebulous desire on the left for the success of a form of socialism with tumultuous popular and revolutionary justice rather than Moscow's Byzantine yet staid etiquette of confessions and liquidations. The appeal of the Chinese Revolution for Williams, and for the Western European left more generally, lay in its potential to chart a course beyond the centralised bureaucratic regime devised by Stalin's party; it was a course symbolised by the 'direct democracy' of the Communes in contrast to the Five Year Plan, the Quota, and the Collective Farm.

Consequently, without detailed knowledge of conditions in China, Williams welcomed the re-examination of the 'opposition of city and country' and 'industry and agriculture' and the prospect of ending 'the separation between mental and manual

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<sup>16</sup> For an account of the early struggles for women's rights in the Chinese Revolution see Christina Gilmartin's *Engendering the Chinese revolution* (Gilmartin 1995: *passim*).

<sup>17</sup> 'State Statistic Bureau, *Statistical Yearbook of China* 1983 (Hong Kong: Economic Information and Agency, 1983), p. 23. Six percent is the figure for average annual increase in national income from 1953 to 1982.' (Nathan 1990: 222-3)

<sup>18</sup> See Penny Kane's *Famine in China* (Kane 1988: *passim*), and Dali L. Yang's *Calamity and Reform in China* (Yang 1996: *passim*).

labour, between administration and operation, between politics and social life':

The theoretical if not practical confidence of defenders of the existing system has gone. The position in ideas is again quite open, ironically at the very time when the practical pressures are almost overwhelming.

This change of basic ideas and questions, especially in the socialist and revolutionary movements, has been for me the connection which I have been seeking for so long, through the local forms of a particular and personal crisis, and through the extended inquiry which has taken many forms but which has come through as this inquiry into the country and the city. They are the many questions that were a single question, that once moved like light: a personal experience, for the reasons I described, but now also a social experience, which connects me, increasingly, with so many others. This is the position, the sense of shape, for which I have worked. Yet it is still, even now, only beginning to form. It is what is being done and is to do, rather than anything that has been finally done.

(1973c: 305)

Looking beyond the surreptitious *hubris* of this embarrassing passage, and employing the wisdom that those who come later always have, it is possible to see that the relationship between Williams's critical strategies and the trajectory of his social thinking would always threaten his capacity to discern the actual development of the whole way of life in which he lived.<sup>19</sup> Williams's commitment to what I have called the aesthetic of emancipation distorted and disfigured his understanding of the development of agriculture during the eighteenth century, the meliorism pursued by many English people during the nineteenth century, the liberalism of much of the twentieth century intelligentsia in Britain, and the radical challenges posed by

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<sup>19</sup> Although it must be noted that Williams's analysis has been productively applied, albeit with critical caution, to the double articulation of the city and the country in postcolonial situations. For example see the essay 'Country and City in a Postcolonial Landscape' by Julie Skurski and Fernando Coronil (Skurski and Coronil 1993: 231-259).

Modernism. When the knowable community met the twentieth century and the struggle to bring the unknowable community into our presence commenced Williams could only dream of a return to the verities of the commune, the locality and the neighbourhood. This was surprising given his radical understanding of tradition:

It isn't something handed to us, handed down. What's handed down with some weight is an establishment, and in every creative generation one of the first jobs is getting rid of those connections and then of course finding others. Any important tradition is selective, not only the usual bulk-sorting but selective in the precise sense that we take the meanings — and not only the achieved meanings; also if we are serious the difficulties — that we feel and discover we need.

(1970a: 185-6)

Despite this understanding he appeared to be unable to give much thought to the 'difficulty' that perhaps the *English* novel, the specifically *English* novel, had lost its utility as a mode of discourse for organising and selecting and analysing the response of novelists, their novels and their readers to the society in which twentieth century people actually lived. The emergence of modernism and the onset of the century-long process which broke down the Englishness of the English and the Englishness of England, left Williams hesitating at what he called the 'parting of the ways', or 'the interregnum' — that point at which the knowable community was dissolving — projecting his communitarian aspirations onto economic and propaganda campaigns promoted by the party-state in China or Cuba rather than closely analysing the new developments ushered in by a capitalist society he clearly recognised as dynamic and highly mobile.

Williams's figure of the knowable community was shaped very closely in response to Leavis's 'great tradition'.<sup>20</sup> Consequently, in his attempt to rebut and reject what was narrow in Leavis's idea of tradition, Williams appears to have unwittingly

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<sup>20</sup> Williams's interlocutors in *Politics and Letters* make a similar point when comparing the structure of *The English Novel* with *The Great Tradition* although they do not take the comparison and contrast beyond a purely descriptive observation (1979b: 244-5).

accepted the national parameters of the argument, so that even his extremely productive idea of the knowable community failed when confronted with the full development of capitalist relations.

Williams's identification with the workingman and the labourer, his resolute commitment to the struggles of the oppressed, clearly enabled him to read Thomas Hardy with extraordinary insight; it enabled him to understand the quality and character of the innovations made by Dickens, George Eliot and D. H. Lawrence. These commitments even made possible his acute analysis of the difference between the personal freedom and free expression canvassed by Virginia Woolf or Clive Bell and what he regarded as genuinely emancipatory goals. But, it was these same solidarities and fore conceptions that disfigured or disrupted his reading of Henry James or T. S. Eliot or George Orwell. The fore conceptions that enabled him to identify what was wrong with the Denys Thompson or F. R. Leavis's idea of the organic community provoked the articulation of his own emancipatory aspirations, sustained his own conception of community, and consequently, led to the failure of his critical resources in relation to much artistic production during the twentieth century, and to a misrecognition of the processes at work in the development of our whole way of life in the years following the Second World War.