

Introduction: Reading Williams

Raymond Williams was a revolutionary. He believed that fundamental shifts in the distribution of political and economic power were necessary in order to change decisively the terms and trajectory of social development to the advantage of the great majority of people in society. However, he was not a Jacobin or a Bolshevik; there was to be no Year Zero. No severance between past, present, and future was contemplated. Recognition of the importance of both continuity and change lay at the heart of his creative enterprise. It was an enterprise in which, as a teacher, critic, novelist, and political activist, he focused upon the mediations between the ordinary commitments of everyday life and the wider relationships in which they take place. Consequently, his investigations did not attempt to employ reason and historical study to dissolve tradition, nor did he attempt to restore, conserve or perpetuate existing traditions of discussion on culture. On the contrary, he used historical study and criticism to ratify what he regarded as positive traditions or continuities to which each new generation shaped its own creative response.

His attempt to discern and analyse these responses emerged from his work as a teacher and literary critic in the late nineteen forties and continued for the next forty years. Initially, he combined teaching and literary criticism with writing drafts of what later became his first novel.¹ Very quickly, however, in 1952 or 1953² he began to develop the thoughts concerning politics and literature, first articulated in *Politics and Letters* (1947a), into a mode of cultural criticism, which would by the late fifties take him well beyond the confines and protocols of both the academy and of established schools of literary criticism.

¹ *Border Country* (1960a). All references in round brackets are to works by Raymond Williams unless otherwise stated.

² See 'Film as a Tutorial Subject' (1953b); 'The Idea of Culture', (1953a); *Preface to Film* (1954b). It was also during these years that Williams was doing preparatory work on *Culture and Society*, which he finished in 1956 and published in 1958.

His early critical innovation — the structure of feeling, his rejection of phrases like ‘the masses’ and ‘bourgeois culture’, together with his insistence upon the materiality of culture and language, and his abolition of the hierarchical distinction between base and superstructure — were aimed at keeping the passes to the socialist future open. Whilst firmly rejecting modes of literary and cultural criticism associated with the Communist Party he constantly strived to find means of identifying and evaluating literary and artistic works that could express particular historical processes and alternative ways of seeing existing social relationships.

His overriding goal — popular and direct *participating democracy* — gave rise to the need for means of evaluating the complicity of any particular artist and their work in the exploitation and cultural domination of labouring people. A corollary of this was Williams’s desire to devise ways of determining whether particular works of art — the feelings expressed, the emotions evoked — were consistent with the dignity and capacities of the working class.

Williams pursued these critical objectives with care. He did not seek simply to read class predilections off the page as if class ‘motives’ and ‘interests’ were in some automatic way given by the origin or politics of the artists or by the subjects that they chose. He was much more interested in nuance and tone than he was in resolution and clarity, precisely because he thought that social experience was rarely singular and never unmediated or without inflection. However, whether he was discussing traditions of pastoral in seventeenth and eighteenth century poetry, novels by Jane Austen or George Eliot, plays by T. S. Eliot, essays by Virginia Woolf or reportage by Orwell, Williams’s criticism assesses these works, their impulses and feelings, their social tone, for what they can tell us about prevailing attitudes to working people and the preoccupations and prejudices of the propertied or the well-to-do towards the *direct producers*. This procedure was at times extended to a concern to locate and analyse the profound hostility towards co-operative values and community contained within the processes of artistic creation in capitalist society.

For Williams the political register of artists’ social assumptions was central to consideration of their creative achievement. He also believed that a crucial aspect in the evaluation of novels,

plays and poems written after 1870, or thereabouts — after the emergence of modernism — was the degree to which they successfully depicted the blockages and frustrations of bourgeois life, or the extent to which they or their creators presented experiences inimical to socialism: experiences hostile to the interests of ordinary life.

Entwined with these concerns Williams sought to discover, often in the same authors, the resources embedded in the traditions of dissent, cultural analysis and social criticism constitutive of bourgeois society that were available to those seeking revolutionary change. He knew that what he might regard as negative forces and positive values not only might exist side by side in the works of the same artist, but might actually shape or constitute each other forming mixed works that expressed something entirely true and contradictory concerning the feelings being lived and relived in the work. He knew too that ‘It is better to recognize social reality, which in our own time as in others has produced good and even great reactionary writers, as well as all the others whom we may prefer, for different reasons, to honour and remember’ (1980e: 81).³

He was also concerned to move beyond the range of activities designated as ‘high’ art and to move beyond the canon established within the arts by elitist schools of criticism. His insistence that ‘culture’ was ‘ordinary’ and his interest in the everyday experience of *ordinary* people led Williams to attempt to develop ways of extending the range of professional criticism to include film, television, and popular entertainments. This was, of course, a key democratic impulse and one closely associated with the idea of stimulating a lively and articulate engagement with the arts and, by extension, widespread reflection upon the development of society throughout all the communities that made up British life. In this way he hoped a vision of the desirable elements of a free society, and some insight to the way ahead for those who welcomed it, could be hammered out without recourse to utopian narratives.

The spirit of Williams’s socialism was infused with that of a diverse radicalism in which fulsome denunciation of contempor-

³ All references in round brackets are to works by Raymond Williams unless otherwise stated.

ary conditions and developments were coupled with a confidence that the evils identified could not last and ‘that something radically new must come’ (1983d: 58). In acknowledging that Cobbett and Blake, Shelley and Carlyle, faced very different circumstances from those which he faced Williams stressed that:

[. . .] what we can not reasonably do is miss the community of situation: an old order breaking up; uncertainty and restlessness, but in these men radical convictions, that certain new things must happen; definitions of these new things in the only available vocabulary — that of the already known and imagined. We are not facing the same world but we have the same kind of problem. This helps us to understand how they really stood, before a future projected, imagined, exhorted but still quite radically unknown. It may also help us to realise how we now really stand. (1983d: 59)

Here was an opaque future could be given shape by hope. The future for socialists in 1950 or 1980 was just as radically unknown as it had been for nineteenth century radicals. But the ideas and convictions of socialists could inform and shape the future.

In his fiction, always firmly rooted in his home place in Wales, just on the border with England, or with Welsh people living in England, he explored the manner in which people and communities are entangled in relationships over which they have little control, but whom always possess the potential for reflection, and the development of self-understanding; a self understanding in which other kinds of relationships and other kinds of commitments — commitments to solidarity and common sharing are always present and can be derived from the lives under consideration.

These ideas: social solidarity, common sharing, useful work, and the cultural achievements and potential of the working class, constituted the scale against which Williams judged artworks, cultural developments, institutions, political ideas and political projects. More than grounded in his socialism, *they constituted it*. Consequently they were not open to question. He could evaluate particular claims within the parameters of his aesthetic; he was capable of judging whether a particular selection was valuable,

illuminating or appropriate, but only from the point of view that he termed *human values*, the values of solidarity and community. These values were self-evidently good, and equally self-evidently, could only be given free play by the abolition of capitalist social relations.

These prior commitments enabled Williams to register insights inaccessible to more conservative critics, but they also tended to undermine his capacity to look at many texts within their own terms. Williams did, of course, reflect at length upon the vicissitudes of socialist politics and upon his own responses to them. However, in these reflections he never questioned the necessity of socialism or the virtues of community and common sharing. To put the point more precisely, Williams did not expose the axioms of his socialism to investigation. Yet they were the authority against which he measured and assessed all cultural production.

However, in his employment of unexamined ideas, or prejudices, Williams was not alone. Many of his immediate predecessors and his contemporaries in the field of literary criticism were confined by what Williams regarded as extremely conservative, not to say, reactionary social prejudices: F. R. Leavis's defence of minority culture — his liberal condescension towards the working class; Cyril Connolly's commitment to America and the 'free world'; T. S. Eliot's Christian pessimism; Orwell's figuration of the working class as gullible animals or as merely submissive 'proles' — his pansy-baiting. It was in opposition to sentiments like these, sentiments he thought inimical to the interests of working people, that Williams deployed his faith in his own settled convictions.

However, critics drawn from within this range were, unlike Williams, more likely to be satisfied by conceptions of tradition that were not tied to assumptions about the need for the creation of a new dispensation. Even Orwell, who wanted radical social change in the late thirties, confined himself in the forties to hoping for a well-directed social democracy led firmly by the middle class. By and large, these writers accepted a restricted view of what they took to be their role as critics; this was limited to reshaping and rethinking various aspects of the literary critical tradition. They tended to think of tradition as the product of accretion and conceived of their contribution to it as merely a continuation of the process of sedimentation in which new

insights and novel analyses were laid down in order to conserve, strengthen and defend tradition by enriching their understanding of the past and clarifying their experience of the present.

In contrast, Williams's aspirations and prejudices were informed by an attitude towards hope and to the future that, for all its practical moderation, was essentially utopian. To be sure, he did not believe in the establishment of model communities and he did not engage in the creation of detailed fictions depicting the ideal relations to be found in ideal communities. His outlook was not that of a chiliast working for the 'dawning of the day'. Rather, there was a Manichean element in his thought: the perpetual struggle between the individual and the social, between the person and the community. He did not foresee a time in which this tension between the individual and the social would disappear, but he believed that co-operative relations would bring that tension to its most sustainable, creative, and valuable expression. His journey of hope⁴ was sustained by the prospect of this future.

That this future failed is now fairly evident: the shift away from economic determinism and statism canvassed by Williams did not enable him to sustain the popularity of his kind of socialism or strengthen demands for the democratic and participatory management of economic life. Of course, it was not his failure alone, but an assessment of his particular contribution will form an important part of any wider analysis of the failure of the socialist enterprise during the second half of the twentieth century.

The failure of socialism mentioned here refers to the failure of the revolutionary socialist enterprise in Europe, Central Asia, Latin America, Southern Africa and China. Struggles between capital and labour on wages and conditions are, of course, immanent in capitalist relations. Consequently, trade union struggles and political struggles around the state's role in the regulation of health and safety, health provision, housing and welfare are inevitable. Vast trade union and social democratic

⁴ *Dyma ni yn awr ar daith ein gobaith* (Here we are now on the journey of our hope) Morgan John Rhys, *Y Cylchgrawn Cymraeg*, [*The Welsh Journal*] 1795'. This was used as an epigraph at the front of *Towards 2000*. For its association with the discovery of the Welsh Indians, descendents of Prince Madoc, on the Missouri, see 'Druids and Democrats' (Williams, Gwyn 1982).

struggles seeking to regulate relations between capital and labour in China, Brazil, South Africa and in many other societies in which capitalism is rapidly developing are not only feasible, they are probably inevitable. Similarly, movements favouring small producers and small farmers, enthusiasm for parochial or local interests, and opposition to the growth of big business and giant corporations also appear to be intrinsic features of capitalist development. However, the overthrow of capitalist relations of production or their transformation into a qualitatively different system by the accumulation of reforms is no longer on the agenda of any significant organisation or movement anywhere in the world.⁵

Although Williams did not witness the consummation of this defeat in the restoration (or introduction) of capitalism throughout the post-capitalist (or non-capitalist) states, he often acknowledged setbacks and defeats; he was certainly not guided by rosy or foolhardy optimism. But he did not contemplate the dissolution of the socialist enterprise and the hope that sustained it.

The positives of this Socialism could be registered exactly over the negative impression left by capitalism. It was an outlook in which the individuation of capitalism would be answered by the collective consciousness of socialism; the class divisions of bourgeois relations would be answered by the social solidarity that would characterise socialism; the hierarchies of power enshrined in the capitalist state would give way to the diffusion of decision-making among the plurality of communities composing socialist society. There was almost a point-for-point correspondence between what was wrong with capitalism and what was right about socialism. It was a mode of belief so compelling that it led Williams to misunderstand the actual development of society and to attempt to combat the startling material development and consolidation of capitalism in the West after 1945 by seeking adjustments in

⁵ The overthrow of capitalism is, to be sure, implicit in the outlook of many Islamic fundamentalists who dream of instituting enormous new theocracies. Detailed analysis of the relationship between the pre-capitalist elements of European socialist thought and modern Islamic anti-capitalism is no doubt urgent, but the divine ‘anti-capitalism’ of contemporary *Jihadists* is outside of the field of reference and time we are discussing here.

the realm of ideas — changing ways of writing and thinking — combating the realities of capitalist development with an ideal of social solidarity, popular democracy and common sharing.

In the hope of challenging the force and reality of capitalist development after 1950 Williams employed analysis and criticism of artworks as the key to understanding our whole way of life and of discerning emergent structures of feeling. This is why in the chapters that follow I use an analysis and description of Williams's socialism as a matrix or grid derived from his writings and within which the ambition and objectives of his criticism are discerned and described, and its quality and achievements assessed.

To approach the work in this manner, is to approach it within its own terms: respecting its ambitions, having due regard for its rhythms, and its modes of enquiry. Raymond Williams deserves to be taken at his word. And, that word cannot be taken as giving support for a buoyant optimism concerning the future or the prospects for socialism. On the contrary, there is a symbiotic relationship between hope and defeat in Williams's work. In a less gifted critic this might have given rise to special pleading or sentimentality, but for Williams it was a tough, robust, way of sustaining his commitments during times that offered few opportunities for belief in the success of a politics rooted in common sharing and solidarity. Yet, it was the generalisation of this tenacious quality of *hope in defeat* that permitted those on the left to proceed without regard to their repeated and manifest failure: it ratified the preoccupation among the leading personalities of the socialist movement with maintaining morale rather than analysing the reasons for their movement's continual failure. *Hope in Defeat* fitted well with the unending projection of success, *eventual success*, into a perpetually receding future.

Williams's outlook provides us with a unique insight into this tradition of failure: his hope was an expression of an inflexible belief in what he called the socialist analysis, by which he meant an identification of the manifest ills of capitalism together with belief in the rationality and humanity of the values of community and co-operation in all areas of life. In this sense, neither flawed perspectives, disastrous mismanagement, fratricidal sectarianism, narrow sectionalism, or bloody catastrophe could disturb belief in

the socialist analysis. Hope was inviolable. It could live very easily with defeat. For what was defeated was never the socialist analysis – the critique of capitalism and the aspiration for solidarity and common sharing – but the modes of organisation employed and the false priorities pursued by socialists entangled in outmoded conceptions.

I have intended to show that it was this *hope*, always sustaining and often productive, which presented the principal obstacle to the development by Williams of a fuller understanding of the course taken by our whole way of life in Britain during the second half of the twentieth century.